

# Iranian Identity in the West: A Discursive Approach

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How would the proponents of Iranian identity in Western countries be defined today? Is it limited to those living within the “nation-state” called Iran, or does it also encompass extra implications? Considering that the identity of Iranians in the civilized countries is not well explained for a number of reasons such as less information and poor theoretical frameworks, how could we understand the proponents of Iranian identity (with regard to its deep historical roots) in the West, i.e. Europe and the U.S.?

Identity has played a pivotal role in social movements. In sociology and political science, the notion of “social identity” is defined as the way that individuals label themselves as members of particular groups (e.g., nation, social class, subculture, ethnicity, gender, etc.). It is in this sense that sociologists and historians speak of the national identity of a particular country, and feminist theorists speak of gender identity. Identity, here, is regarded as a social phenomenon, not as a philosophical one.<sup>1</sup> Symbolic Interactionism (SI) attempts to show how identity can influence, and be influenced by, social reality at large.<sup>2</sup> Every identity is unfixed and in flux, and Iranian identity in Western countries with its components (Iranian or national/Islamic/liberal and socialist) has faced crisis. The relative weight to be given to each of these, partially overlapping, elements in defining the Iranian national identity has generated much controversy among the successive generations of modern intellectuals in Iran, particularly since the last decades of the nineteenth century when the question of national identity moved to the center stage of political discourse. Secular intellectuals have relied on a romantic conception of nationhood that considers language as the hallmark of the community and the source of national identity. Whilst the duality of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), p 410.

<sup>2</sup> SI has two schools of thought: the Iowa School and the Chicago School. SI researchers in the Chicago School argue that social reality is emergent and is constructed from personal, "situated" interaction, i.e., from the process of impression management. To observe identity scientifically, the Chicago school opts for ethnomethodology and qualitative observation techniques. Iowa School researchers attempt to show that personal and social identities are representations of, or are otherwise connected to, social structures, and tend to use quantitative surveys. For example, McCall and Simmons make use of the notion of role-identity, and Sheldon Stryker's theory of structural interactionism explains identity in terms of interaction density and interaction opportunities. Of particular concern to sociologists who subscribe to the theories of Émile Durkheim is the question of how social phenomena such as mass anomie relate to the identity formation strategies.

Iranian/Islamic is rooted in the emergence of the Islamic empire and its expansion to other parts of the world, the triple concept of Iranian/Islamic/modern (including liberal and socialist) dates back to the Constitutional Movement (*mashrūteh*) of ۱۹۰۵.

Iranian identity crisis originates from some historical paradoxes. First, the ۲۵۰۰ year old Iranian culture has a dual influence: a deep national heritage which shapes a social imaginary on the one hand, and an authoritarian and political culture on the other. Secondly, Islamic culture was merged into an Iranian one, but in practice there were a lot of difficulties. The Safavid dynasty (۱۵۰۲- ۱۷۳۶) offered Shi-ite Islam as the main pillar of Iranians' collective identity. Thirdly, liberal ideology as the hegemonic discourse in Europe and the U.S. penetrated into Iranian culture especially in recent centuries. It goes without saying that this factor is more influential for Iranians residing in Western countries. Finally and most importantly, socialist culture from the communist countries, especially from the Soviet Union, affected the non-harmonized Iranian culture. This new culture transferred new signifiers, like the notion of *revolution*, into the traditional and religious culture of Iranians. The left, i.e. the socialist, signifiers made Iranian culture more complicated, specifically when these signifiers transferred to Islamism as a new discourse in ۱۹۶۰s. The Soviet Union collapsed in ۱۹۸۹, however, it had already left its influence on political Islam in Iran, at least in the reading of 'Ali Shari'ati and MKO<sup>۷</sup>. Although the Islamic government in Iran has defined its principles on political Islam, Iranians incline towards cultural Islam.<sup>۸</sup> Establishing Islamic government is considered the principal goal of political Islam (Islamism), while Iranians live with their religion as a "culture". The Revolution in ۱۹۷۹, influenced by the socialist discourse, tried to intensify Islamic aspects of the Iranian culture and to marginalize modern ones. Michel Foucault called the Islamic revolution a postmodern one, and he was right when he called it an anti-modern movement. However, it can not be considered a postmodern one since it returned to Islamic and pre-modern principles. The more Iranians (in the West) are distanced from ۱۹۷۹, the more their identity becomes complicated. The Islamic Revolution brought cultural preoccupations to the forefront of deliberations among scholars of Iranian studies. Motahhari's view on the collaboration between Iran and Islam<sup>۹</sup> on the one hand,

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<sup>۷</sup> MKO is the abbreviation of Mujaheddin-e-Khalq Organization.

<sup>۸</sup> For a comparison between political Islam and cultural Islam, see: Bassam Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics*, (Palgrave Macmillan, ۲۰۰۱).

<sup>۹</sup> Mortaza Motahhari, *Khadamat Motaqabel Iran va Islam (Cooperation between Iran and Islam)*, (Qom: Daftar Entesharat Eslami, ۱۹۸۳).

and Doustar's *dīn-khūī*<sup>3</sup> (religious temperament) on the other hand demonstrate diverse and insufficient endeavor to identify Iranian identity. Significantly, these deliberations not only lack harmony in themselves but produce a chasm between the four mentioned proponents of contesting views of Iranian national identity.

It is argued here that discourse as a method can explain the characteristics of Iranians in first world countries. Identity is shaped based on *the other*. But who is the other of Iranian identity in the west? The point is that Iranian Identity crisis originates from different sources of the self and their *other*. They do not know exactly if their other is non-Iranian, non-Muslim, non-Shii-te, or non-political Islam. Because I have addressed "Iranian Identity" in general in an earlier work,<sup>4</sup> in this essay I will concentrate on the identity crisis of Iranians in Western countries. To discuss Iranian identity, this article draws on the insights of discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The post-modernists render problematic the traditional model of history as the "study of the past as it was." Meanwhile, Eric J. Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson argue that nation is neither natural nor eternal; that national identity is an assortment of "invented traditions"; that nationalism is nothing more than a cultural artifact, that is invented by collective imagination; and that nationality is more rooted in subjective beliefs than objective realities.<sup>5</sup> They argue that the basic assumptions historians make about the past are more often than not ideological constructions; that historians are bounded within their own cultural identities; that the nature of history is discontinuous; and that historical "knowledge" is a form of discourse. Moreover, they claim that subjective identity is itself a myth, a construct of language and society. In other words, national identity and consciousness neither is inbred biologically nor transcendent but rather manufactured.<sup>6</sup> According to Bayat-Philipp: "The different expressions of

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<sup>3</sup> Aramesh Doustar, *Derakhshesh-ha-ye Tireh* ("Dark Brightness") (Paris, Khavaran, ۱۹۹۸).

<sup>4</sup> S. Sadegh Haghghat, "Iranian Identity: a Discursive Analysis" (in Persian), ۳<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Human Rights, Mofid University, ۲۰۰۰.

<sup>5</sup> See: Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, ۱۹۸۳).

<sup>6</sup> Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Contesting Nationalist Constructions of Iranian Identity", Published in Critique: *Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, no. ۱۲ (Spring ۱۹۹۸); reprinted in Persian in *Kiyan*, no. ۴۷ (June-July ۱۹۹۹), pp ۴۴-۵۲.

Iranian national consciousness today, be they secular or religious, reveal a similar tendency to conceive the present as insubstantial and imperfect in comparison with the past.”<sup>11</sup>

## Discourse as a Method

Every theory may engage some methods.<sup>11</sup> In their book, Jorgensen and Phillips talk about *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Methods*.<sup>12</sup> According to them, “Discourse analysis” as a method is the analysis of patterns identified in discourse as a theory. While Norman Fairclough made a bridge between social studies and linguistics in his discursive analysis, Laclau and Mouffe attempted to employ Foucault’s genealogy in politico-social issues. In this article, I try to show the relationship between text and context as Fairclough does. Furthermore, I will use some statistics to confirm the idea developed here. As David Howarth puts it, we can utilize discourse theory as a method: “Laclau and Mouffe oppose traditional conceptions of social conflict in which *antagonisms* are understood as the clash of social agents with fully constituted identities and interests. *Hegemonic* practices are important to Laclau and Mouffe’s political theory of discourse, as they are an exemplary form of political practice, which involves the linking together of different identities and political forces into a common project, and the creation of new social orders from a variety of dispersed elements. Their aim is thus to affirm the meaningfulness of all objects and practices; to show that all social meaning is *contingent*, contextual and relational; and to argue that any system of meaning relies upon a discursive exterior that partially constitutes it. They challenge the *closure* of the linguistic model, which reduces all *elements* to the internal *moments* of a system. This implies that every social action simply repeats an already existing system of meanings and practices, in which case there is no possibility of constructing new *nodal points* that partially fix meaning, which is the chief characteristic of an *articulatory practice*”.<sup>13</sup>

Laclau and Mouffe call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality

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<sup>11</sup> Mangol Bayat-Philipp, “A Phoenix Too Frequent: The Concept of Historical Continuity in Modern Iranian Thought,” *Asian and African Studies*, no. 12 (1978), p 202.

<sup>12</sup> David Marsh (and Jerry Stocker), *Theory and Methods in political Science*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> M.Jorgensen (and L. Phillips), *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, (London, Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> David Howarth, *Discourse*, (Open University Press, 2000), pp 102, 109, 113.

resulting from the articulatory practice, they call *discourse*.<sup>14</sup> In the terms of their theory, the discourse establishes a *closure*, a temporary stop to the fluctuations in the meaning of the signs.<sup>15</sup> Foucault writes: “I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures.”<sup>16</sup>

One of the best employments of discourse as a theory and method is Edward Said’s analysis of colonialism. At times he emphasizes a linguistic analysis as a methodology, the type similar to that found in linguistic departments. His *Orientalism*, broadly speaking, is a critical analysis of colonial ideology in Western literary texts. Said’s unimaginably deep knowledge of literary texts, colonial history, geopolitics, his powerful and yet accurate language, and most importantly his critical reading of classic literary texts have made it an influential scholarly book which impacts not only contemporary studies on the Middle East but it sets a framework for critical works in post structuralism, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism. Having a broad notion of CDA as an approach, “Orientalism” can be classified as a “CDA study” in deconstructing and analyzing how a macro ideology – Orientalism - has been incorporated into literary texts. Said, of course, considers the crucial element in the proliferation of the ideology differently from what is referred to as “discourse” among CDA researchers. He considers language as one element of such hegemonic characterization. He argues that; “Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imaginary, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.”<sup>17</sup>

In short, discourse analysis can explain Iranian identity very well, since it is formed by Iranian/Islamic/liberal and socialist discourses based on non-essentialism. Being influenced by different sources, the identity of Iranians has changed during time. Therefore there is no unique identity for them.

## Discourse and Identity

Based on the formal and relational theory of language that Saussure advocates, the *identity* of any element is a product of the *differences* and *oppositions* established by the elements of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ernesto Laclau (and Chantal Moufee), *Hegemony and Social Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, p 100.

<sup>15</sup> Jorgensen (and Phillips), *Ibid*, pp 26-28.

<sup>16</sup> . Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p 216.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York, Vintage, 1979), pp 0, 230-237.

linguistic system. He charts this conception at the levels of signification - the relationships between signifiers and signified - and with respect to the values of linguistic terms such as words.<sup>1^</sup> Essentialism alludes to a strong identity politics, without which there can be no basis for political calculation and action. But that essentialism is only strategic - that is it points, at the very moment of its constitution, to its own contingency and its own limits.<sup>1^</sup>

As discourses are relational entities whose identities depend on their differentiation from other discourses, they are themselves dependent and vulnerable to those meanings that are necessarily excluded in any discursive articulation.<sup>2^</sup> Identity according to the discourse theory is a relative and unstable phenomenon, and since there is no meta-discursive truth, every identity is produced in its discourse. For Laclau and Mouffe, collective identity or group formation is understood according to the same principles as individual identity. They reject the position that collective identity (in Marxist theory, primarily classes) is determined by economic and material factors. In such cases, the subject is *overdetermined*. That means that he or she is positioned by several conflicting discourses among which a conflict arises. For Laclau and Mouffe, the subject is always overdetermined because the discourses are always contingent; there is no objective logic that points to a single subject position. Subject positions that are not in visible conflict with other positions are the outcome of hegemonic processes. Therefore:

- The subject is fundamentally *split*, it never quite becomes itself.
- It acquires its identity by being *represented* discursively.
- Identity is thus *identification* with a subject position in a discursive structure.
- Identity is always *relationally* organized; the subject is something because it is contrasted with something that it is not.
- Identity is *changeable* just as discourses are.
- The subject is *fragmented or decentred*; it has different identities according to those discourses of which it forms part.

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<sup>1^</sup> Howarth, Ibid, p 22.

<sup>1^</sup> Laclau, Ibid, p 21.

<sup>2^</sup> Howarth, Ibid, 103.

• The subject is *overdetermined*; in principle, it always has the possibility to identify differently in specific situations. Therefore, a given identity is *contingent* - that is, possible but not necessary.<sup>١١</sup>

The system is what is required for the differential identities to be constituted, but the only thing - exclusion - which can constitute the system and thus make possible those identities, is also what subverts them. Contexts have to be internally subverted in order to become possible. The system is that which the very logic of the context requires but which is, however, impossible. It is present, if you want, through its absence. But this means two things. First, that all differential identity will be constitutively split and undecidable. Second, that although the fullness and universality of society is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence. Finally, if that impossible object - the system - cannot be represented but needs, however, to show itself within the field of representation, the means of that representation will be constitutively inadequate.<sup>١٢</sup>

## Iranian identity

The word “Iran” is derived from Ariana and means Arian’s land. The word “aria” has been used in Avesta, ancient Persian, and Sanscrit languages. The original meaning of this word is *āzādeh* (i.e. free). In works done during the Sasanid period, Iranians called their land Iran. During the medieval ages, Westerners called the Iranian’s land Persia, which is derived from the Greek word “persis”, which the name is given to the Fars province of Iran. The national identity is one of the most important issues for young generation and theorists, in the time of globalization, especially for Iranians who have one of the most influential cultures and civilizations of the world. Societies with a historical mentality are directed toward the past. In the early ١٩٦٠s, Gavin Hambly recognized this tendency among Iranian intellectuals: “almost invariably, the intellectual takes great pride in early Iranian civilization, although he may not know very much about it. It is enough for him to remember the conquests of Cyrus the Great or Darius I, and the glories of Persepolis”.<sup>١٣</sup> The role of Iran in history is highly significant; hence the German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel considered the ancient Persians to be “the first historic people” and stated thus: “In Persia first arises that light which shines itself and illuminates what is around...The principle of

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<sup>١١</sup> Jorgensen (and Phillips), op.cit, pp ٤١-٤٣.

<sup>١٢</sup> Laclau, op.cit, pp ٥٢-٥٣.

<sup>١٣</sup> Boroujerdi, op.cit.

development begins with the history of Persia; this constitutes therefore the beginning of history”.<sup>١٤</sup> And Frye adds: “Few nations in the world present more of a justification for the study of history than Iran”.<sup>١٥</sup>

The Samanid dynasty was the first fully native dynasty to rule Iran since the Muslim conquest, and led the revival of Persian culture. The first important Persian poet after the arrival of Islam, Rudaki, was born during this era and was praised by Samanid kings. Their successor, the Ghaznavids, who were of non-Iranian Turkic origin, also became instrumental in the revival of Persian. The culmination of the Persianization movement was the *Shahnameh* (۱۰۱۰ C.E), the national epic of Iran, written almost entirely in Persian by Ferdowsi.

Language plays a pivotal role within the discourse of Iranian cultural heritage. Many of Iran’s cultural historians and literary critics start with the premise that the Iranian nation is defined primarily by the Persian language. For these scholars, language is the manifestation of a nation’s thoughts, experiences, and ambitions.<sup>١٦</sup> Some suggest that the safeguarding of the Persian language is the most effective weapon that Iranians have to stop the encroachment of Western civilization. Others, such as Behruz have gone further, conceptualizing language as the reflection of the Iranian nation’s racial and mental structure.<sup>١٧</sup> Maskub, a contemporary cultural historian and translator, offers the most sophisticated view of the relationship between language and national identity. In *Iranian Nationality and Persian Language*, he contends that Iranians are different from other Muslims due to their history and language. Devoting much of his book to language, he asserts: “We maintained one nationality or, perhaps better put, our national identity, our Iranianness, through the blessing of language.” He considers the *Shahnameh*, the epic

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<sup>١٤</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, (trans.) J. Sibree, (Buffalo, ۱۹۹۱,) p.۱۷۳.

<sup>١٥</sup> Richard Nelson Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, ۱۹۶۲), p ۲۴۳.

<sup>١٦</sup> For instance, Yarshater has written the most eloquent statement of this view: “a more promising defense against the sense of anonymity that accompanies a submerged identity is a restorative and sustaining element that Persia has cherished and preserved against all odds: the shared experience of a rich and rewarding past. It finds its expression primarily through the Persian language, not simply as a medium of comprehension but also as the chief carrier of the Persian world view and Persian culture. The Persian language is a reservoir of Iranian thought, sentiment, and values, and a repository of its literary arts. It is only by loving, learning, teaching, and above all enriching this language that the Persian identity may continue to survive”: Ehsan Yarshater, “Persian Identity in Historical Perspective,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. ۲۶, nos. ۱-۲ (۱۹۹۳): pp ۱۴۱-۱۴۲.

<sup>١٧</sup> See the following two works of Zabih Behruz, *Zaban-e Iran, Farsi ya Arabi?*, (Tehran, Mihr, ۱۳۱۳ [۱۹۳۴-۳۵]); and *Khat va Farhang*, second edition, (Tehran, Furuhar, ۱۳۶۳ [۱۹۸۴-۸۵]).



masterpiece of the eleventh-century Persian poet Ferdowsi, the very cornerstone of his own thinking and sense of personal identity”.<sup>۶۸</sup>

Of the various elements that constitute Iran’s cultural identity, four have traditionally been judged the most salient. These include: (۱) the country’s pre-Islamic legacy, which took shape over a period of more than a millennium, from the time of Achaemenians to the defeat of the last Persian dynasty (the Sassanids) by the invading Arab armies in the middle of the seventh century; (۲) Islam, or, more specifically, Shi-ism, the religion of over ninety percent of the country’s present-day inhabitants, with an all-encompassing impact on every facets of Iranian culture and thought; (۳) the more diffuse bonds, fictive or real, established among peoples who have inhabited roughly the same territory, with the same name, faced the same enemies, struggled under the same despotic rulers and conquerors, and otherwise shared the same historical destiny for over two millennia; and finally (۴) the Persian language, currently the mother tongue of a bare majority of the population, but long the literary and “national language” in Iran (as well as in parts of Afghanistan, Central Asia, and parts of the Indian subcontinent). The focus of the present work is on the last of the above elements - i. e. the Persian language - and its role in forming and sustaining Iranian national identity. Maskub maintains that with the political and social changes that took place in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, and with Persia’s increasing contact with the West, the three social groups on which his analysis is focused lost their significance as the principal guardians, practitioners, and promoters of the Persian language. In all these capacities they were gradually replaced by a new social group in the Iranian society, i.e., a secular intelligentsia consisting of journalists, writers, poets, etc. According to Boroujerdi, Maskub’s assertions and inferences are problematic for a number of reasons. First, his view of language - epitomized in such phrases as “refuge for the soul” and “substance of thought” - is more romantic than factual. Scholars of Iranian studies should realize that while language antedates and constructs subjectivity, it is never a “tabula rasa”. Furthermore, while overemphasizing the role of language, Maskub underestimates the function of imagination. Besides, language such previously critical factors as race, religion, and common history no longer by themselves can be considered the principal determinants of national identity. In the age of modernity, “national identity” no longer should be conceived as something essential, tangible,

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<sup>۶۸</sup> Shahrokh Maskub, *Iranian Nationality and the Persian Language*, translated by Michael C. Hillmann (Washington, DC, Mage Publishers, ۱۹۹۲), pp ۱۳, ۲۱.

integrated, settled, and fundamentally unchanging. Language, after all, is a product of social reality, and as such, the internal logic of cultural discourse must be situated within the field of social practices and relationships. Although language shapes culture, culture also shapes the development of language.<sup>٧٩</sup> It seems that Boroujerdi's view is more compatible with the idea developed here, since - based on discourse analysis - personal and collective identities are becoming more self-reflexive, ambulatory, multiple, and fragile.

Farsi, as the official language, has become *hegemonic* for the majority of Iranians. Although Persians form the majority of the population, Iran is considered an ethnically diverse country. The point is that the interethnic relations amongst minorities including Azeris, Kurds, Lurs, Arabs, Baluchis, Turkmen, Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, and Georgians are more or less harmonious. According to article ١٩ of the Iranian constitution, "All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege". In fact, it explains the mystery of the failure of projects for the separation of some provinces, like Khuzestan from Iran. Saddam Hussein had wrongly expected the Iranian Arabs to join the Arab Iraqi forces in ١٩٧٠ and win a quick victory. According to the Seymour Hersh report in April ٢٠٠٦, US troops in Iran were "recruiting local ethnic populations to encourage local tensions that could undermine the regime".<sup>٨٠</sup> Nayereh Tohidi sees the settlement between the Persian majority and the ethnic minorities under pressure, in ways that are putting the country's political future into question. First, minority politics in Iran - whether related to gender, religion or ethnicity - in an age of increasing globalization are influenced by a global-local interplay. Second, an uneven and over-centralised strategy of development in Iran has resulted in a wide socio-economic gap between the centre and the peripheries. And third, none of the guaranteed rights in Iran's constitution have been implemented.<sup>٨١</sup> Every thing is *contingent*, though, the experience of more than three decades after the victory of the Islamic Revolution reveals that the tensions mentioned above have remained potential. Most minorities who speak non-Persian languages perceive their ethnic identity as a complement to their national identity. Yet, having no substance, Iranian identity is not rigid, prearranged and predetermined.

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<sup>٧٩</sup> Boroujerdi, op.cit.

<sup>٨٠</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, the Iran Plan, *The New Yorker* (April ٢٠٠٦).

<sup>٨١</sup> Nayereh Tohidi, "Iran: regionalism, ethnicity and democracy", [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/regionalism\\_٣٦٩٥.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/regionalism_٣٦٩٥.jsp).

In brief, although the Iranian language and customs may survive by and large amongst first generation Iranians in the West, they would be weakened amongst the second generation. Children of Iranians abroad do not have enough motivation to speak Farsi or to follow Iranian customs, since they will lose their special symbolic meanings during time.

## The Duality of Iranian/Islamic

The duality of Iranian/Islamic element in Iranian identity emerged after the advent of Islam into Iran, however, it is one of our main problems nowadays too. In Reza Shah's era (۱۹۲۰-۱۹۴۰), this duality intensified by quasi-modernism and secularism. Under his reign, Iran began to modernize and to secularize politics, and the central government reasserted its authority over tribes and provinces. Stressing *dīn-khūī* (religious temperament) as the most influential factor of the Iranian identity crisis, Doustar criticizes Al-e Ahmad for advocating Islam and Arabs.<sup>۳۳</sup> Those following the Iranian approach are of the opinion that the golden age of Iran is the pre-Islamic era, and that the fall of Sassanid system was the result of the Arab invasion of Iran. They believe the Arab culture destroyed their national Iranian culture. These individuals think the main elements of Iranian identity originate from pre-Islam civilization and Iranian culture. For instance, Mirza Aqa-Khan Kermani and Akhundzadeh had a negative attitude to Arabic culture and its impact on Iran.<sup>۳۴</sup> Maskub stressed the fact that following the Arab conquest of Persia in the seventh century C.E., it took Persians well over two centuries to recover from their humiliating defeat, which entailed not only the crumbling of their political order and their subjugation to foreign rules, but also the imposition of a new religion and language on them.<sup>۳۵</sup> According to Bernard Lewis, "Iran was indeed Islamized, but it was not Arabized. Persians remained Persians. And after an interval of silence, Iran reemerged as a separate, different and distinctive element within Islam, eventually adding a new element even to Islam itself. Culturally, politically, and most remarkable of all even religiously, the Iranian contribution to this new Islamic civilization is of immense importance".<sup>۳۶</sup> Only about ۱۰٪ of Iran converted to Islam during the relatively Arab-centric Umayyad period. Beginning in the Abbasid period, with its mix of Persian as well as Arab rulers, the Muslim percentage of the population rose. As Persian Muslims consolidated their rule of the country, the

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<sup>۳۳</sup> Doustar, op. cit, p ۴۳.

<sup>۳۴</sup> Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh, *Seh Maktoub (in Persian)*, (Paris, ۱۹۸۷), p ۳۲.

<sup>۳۵</sup> Maskub, op. cit.

<sup>۳۶</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamization\\_in\\_Iran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamization_in_Iran)

Muslim population rose from approx. 40% in the mid 9th century to close to 100% by the end of 11th century. Seyyed Hossein Nasr suggests that the rapid increase in conversion was aided by the Persian nationality of the rulers. Although Persians adopted the religion of their conquerors, over the centuries they worked to protect and revive their distinctive language and culture, a process known as Persianization. Arabs and Turks participated in this attempt.<sup>٧٦</sup>

In contrast, the followers of the religious approach believe that Iran's pre-Islam history is the period of social injustice and ignorance, and it was during the post-Islamic age, especially in the Safavid period, that Iran achieved glory. They believe that the Iranian identity is based on the Islamic culture and civilization only. To demonstrate Iran-Islam cooperation, Motahhari puts less importance on some elements like race and language.<sup>٧٧</sup> Two points should be noted here. First, anti-Islamism as a project ignores some parts of history to magnify others. Second is the necessity of distinguishing Islam as Muslim behavior in history (Islam ٣) from Islam as holy texts (Islam ١) and reading of Islam (Islam ٢). The third sense of Islam does not necessarily imply any sanctity. There is no reason to justify all Muslim behavior in any case during time. Contingency and relativity of Iranian identity does not contradict the holiness of Islamic texts, because here we talk about the Iranian/Muslim identity as a social phenomenon.

From the Safavid era, Shi-ism became one of the formal components of Iranian identity. In fact, Iranian identity depends on Shi-ism rather than Islamic culture in general. Iranian identity would not be understood except with regard to the antagonism between Shi-ism and Sunnism. Shi-ite Muslims believe that the descendants from Muhammad through his daughter Fatima Zahra and his son-in-law 'Ali were the best source of knowledge of the Qur'an and Islam, the most trusted carriers and protectors of Muhammad's *sunnah* (traditions), and the most worthy of emulation. The Safavid dynasty is of importance because of establishing Shi-ism as the formal religion. Shah Ismail I initiated a religious policy to recognize Shi-ite Islam as the official religion of the Safavid Empire, and the fact that modern Iran remains an officially Shi-ite state is a direct result of Ismail's actions. He had to enforce official Shiism violently, since most of his subjects were Sunni. But it is safe to say that the majority of the population was probably genuinely Shiite by the end of the Safavid period in the 16th century, and most Iranians today are Shi-ite, although small Sunni populations do exist in that country. Following the establishment of Safavid religious

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<sup>٧٦</sup> Frye, op.cit, p ٢٤٣.

<sup>٧٧</sup> Motahhari, op.cit, pp ١٢-٢٣.

scholars (*‘ulama*) were invited to Iran. This led to a wide gap between Iran and its Sunni neighbours which has lasted to the present. Iranian identity in this period was partially shaped by the antagonism with the Ottoman empire. Since there was no essence in the identity of new government, signifiers of the Safavid discourse articulated around the nodal point of Shah, whereas the Ottoman discourse’s nodal point was the Caliph. Although the antagonism between Shi-ite and Sunnis developed in Safavid time, during the early days of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini endeavored to bridge the gap between Shi-ites and Sunnis by forbidding criticisms of the Caliphs who preceded ‘Ali – an issue that causes much animosity between the two sects. Also, he declared it permissible for Shi-ites to pray behind Sunni imams.

## The Tripartite Concept of Identity: Iranian/Islamic/Liberal

The Constitutional movement at the turn of the twentieth century was a turning point for Iranians to become familiar with modernity and liberalism. Iranian intellectuals were the carriers of new ideologies. Hajjarian categorized them into three main groups: the Non-traditionalists (from the Constitutional Movement to the ۱۹۴۰s), the revivalists of tradition (from the ۱۹۴۰s to the Islamic Revolution), and the synthesizers (in the Islamic republic era).<sup>۳۸</sup> Although his typology cannot explain all contemporary intellectual approaches, it correctly shows that the first was modernist, while second which was considered as the mainstream for political Islam was anti-modernist and traditionalist in general. Because Iranian identity was not harmonized to deal with the duality of Iran/Islam, it encountered in some ways a crisis in engaging with the triple concept of Iranian/Islamic/modern (liberal and socialist).

In the nineteenth century Malkam Khan and Freemasonry’s “social order” were based on ten principles: liberty, individual security, security of properties, equal rights, freedom to thought and religion, freedom to speech, freedom to write, and system of merits.<sup>۳۹</sup> While modernists (like Mostashar al-Dowleh) and revivalists (like Na’ini) tried to justify the Iranian Constitution, which was taken from the French , with Islamic teachings, conservatives (such as Fadlallah Nuri and S. Ali Sistani) called constitutionalism as paganism! Mostashar al-Dowleh wrote in his letter to the monarch Mozaffar al-Din Shah: “regarding new glorious progresses in Europe, Iran will *necessarily*

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<sup>۳۸</sup> Said Hajjarian, “The Intellectual Currents in contemporary Iran”, *Nameh Pazhuhesh*, no ۷ (winter ۱۹۹۸), pp ۲۳-۴۰.

<sup>۳۹</sup> Shaul Bakhash, *Iran: Monarchy, Bureaucracy & Reform Under Qajars: ۱۸۹۶* (London, Ithaca Press, ۱۹۷۸), p ۱۹.

accept constitutionalism”.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, Na’ini was more successful in justifying Constitutionalism based on Sharia rules.<sup>41</sup> Tabataba’i calls the Constitutional Movement the end of Iranian Middle Ages.<sup>42</sup>

Based on the discursive analysis, nothing was stable, and facing the hegemonic modern discourse, the Iranian identity was in flux. Stressing “constitutionalism based on shari’a”, Nuri was hanged because of his opposition to the Constitutional Movement, while it seems that his opponents like Na’ini tried to synthesize constitutional and religious teachings! During the Constitutional Movement, some modern concepts like liberty entered into the Iranian discourse, but with some *distortion* since they could not articulate with other signifiers in the new discourse. It was the same story in the reform period between ۱۹۹۸-۲۰۰۶.

According to Laclau and Fairclough, every event (like the Constitutional Movement, here) should be understood with regard to the primacy of politics, power and language. Modernity may be recognized by a couple of characteristics like humanism, rationalism, individualism, and technology. The nodal point of liberalism, as the hegemonic discourse in the western modernity, is liberty. Facing liberal culture, Iranians in Western countries compare this modern culture with their homeland. First, they might try to synthesize the new culture with Iranian and Islamic culture. The result would be a harmonic synthesis or eclectic product. Then they might put one of the triple cultures, or some aspects of one of them, aside. It is argued here that most Iranians would somehow encounter crisis. The increasing number of migrants to Europe and the U.S.A has increased the significance of the dilemma.

“The deterioration of Iranian political thinking”, according to Tabataba’i, is rooted in a couple of tensions: between religion and culture, between Iranians and the dictator governors, between Iranians and non-Iranians (like Afghans and Turks), between national culture and foreign cultures, between the political and the economic, and between Iranians and Iran. In the last case, he points out the issue of emigration.<sup>43</sup> In fact, there has been some migration to Europe and the United States by Iranians who were studying overseas at the time of the revolution of ۱۹۷۹. The

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<sup>40</sup> Javad Tabataba’i, *Constitutionalism in Iran (in Persian)* (Tehran, Sotudeh, ۲۰۰۸), pp ۱۱, ۳۷۳.

<sup>41</sup> Mashallah Ajudani, *Iranian Constitutional Movement (in Persian)* (Tehran, Akhtaran, ۲۰۰۳), pp ۱۹۸-۱۹۹.

<sup>42</sup> Tabataba’i, op. cit. p ۳۷.

<sup>43</sup> Javad Tabataba’i, *Dibachee bar nazaree enhetat dar Iran* (“An Introduction to the Deterioration Theory in Iran”), (Tehran, Negah-e Mo’asser,) ۲۰۰۱.

community expanded predominantly in the early 1980s in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the fall of the former regime. The Iranian-American community has produced a sizable number of individuals notable in many fields, including medicine, engineering, and business. Migration and a brain drain to first world countries are due to the acquisition by Iranians of managerial careers, jobs in medicine and health, professional occupations, clerical jobs, jobs in communication, commercial jobs, university students and financial jobs.<sup>44</sup> About \$ 9,2 billion fled from Iran after the Islamic revolution. Iranian's capital abroad is estimated more than \$ 800 billion, half of it is in the U.S., \$ 40 billion in England and 42 billion Euros are in Germany. Between 0 to 6 million Iranians live overseas, 300 thousands enjoy higher education. 46% of Iranians in America have educated higher than B.A. or B.S. From every Olympiad Iranian student, 90 people live in the U.S. The brain drain has lost between \$ 8 to 11 billion. According to Moein, the education minister in Khatami's time, 100,000-180,000 educated individuals emigrate to foreign countries every year.<sup>45</sup> Statistical Overview of Iranian Foreigners show:

- The Iranian foreign born are a relatively new population whose migration to the United States was concentrated around the years of the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979).
- Between 1980 and 1990, the number of foreign born from Iran in the United States increased by 74 percent.
- The number of Iranians granted lawful permanent residence peaked in 1990.
- From 1980 to 2004, more than one out of every four Iranian immigrants was a refugee.
- There were about 280,000 Iranian born in the United States in 2000.
- Immigrants from Iran accounted for less than one percent of the total foreign-born population.
- Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Iranian foreign born increased over 74 percent.

<sup>44</sup> See Mahdiyeh Entezakheir, "Why is Iran Experiencing Migration and Brain Drain to Canada?", University of Waterloo, 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Mostafa Moein, [http://cdhriran.blogspot.com/2000\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://cdhriran.blogspot.com/2000_09_01_archive.html).

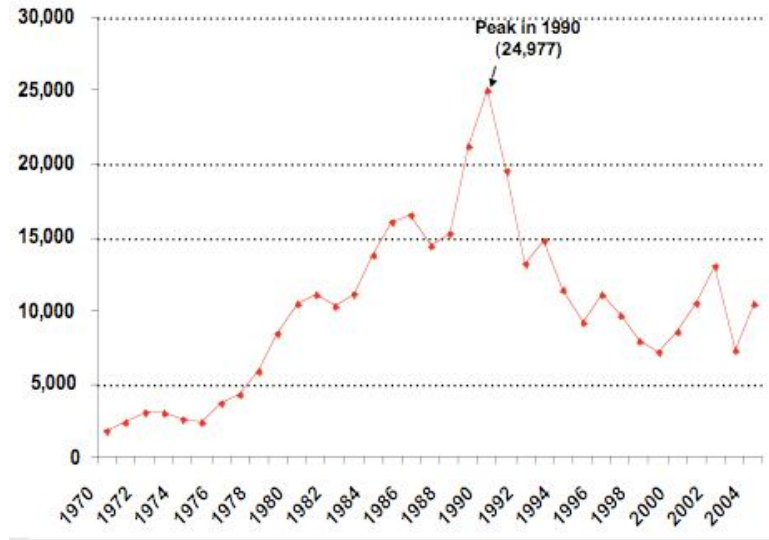


Figure 1. Iranian-Born Immigrants Admitted to the U.S., 1970-2004<sup>17</sup>

- During 2000, about 0.3% immigrant visas were issued to Iranians.
- In the last five years, the most commonly issued nonimmigrant visas for Iranian nationals have been the student (F), temporary worker (H), and foreign government representative (G) visas.

<sup>17</sup> . Source: US Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 1970-2004.



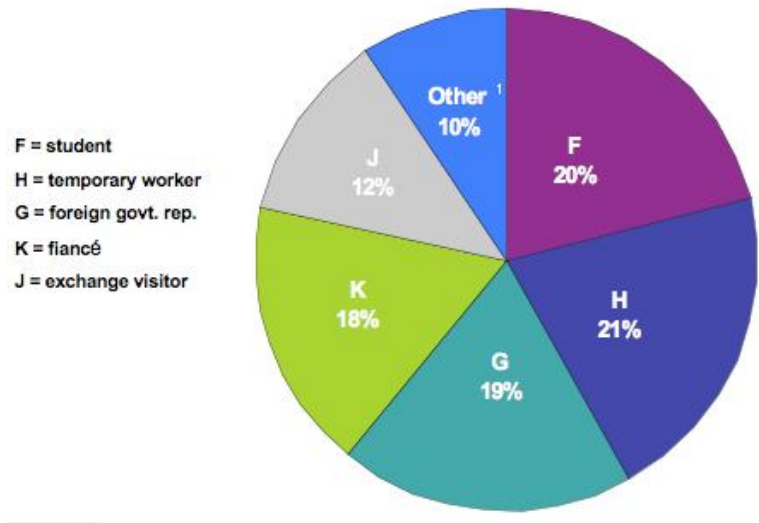


Figure 2. Nonimmigrant U.S. Visas Issued to Iranian Nationals, 2000 to 2005<sup>49</sup>

- Three in every five Iranian immigrants were naturalized US citizens.
- Over 90 percent of the Iranian foreign born spoke a language other than English at home.
- The majority of the Iranian born had a bachelor's degree or higher.
- More than half of the Iranian immigrant population was employed in management, professional, and related occupations.
- In 2000, the median income for Iranian-born males and females who were full-time, year-round workers was \$20,222 and \$26,422, respectively.<sup>48</sup>

Iranian-Americans are also prominent in academia. According to a preliminary list compiled by ISG, there are more than 200 Iranian-American professors teaching and doing research at top-ranked U.S. universities. Iranians have achieved a high level of success in the United States because unlike many immigrants, most left their homeland for social, political, or religious reasons, rather than in search of economic opportunity.

<sup>49</sup> Source: US Department of State, *Report of the Visa Office, 2000-2005*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, and Shirin Hakimzadeh (and David Dixon), "Spotlight on the Iranian Foreign Born", *Migration Policy Institute*, 2006.

The majority of Iranian refugees are upper-middle class and others are wealthy. They have comparatively liberal political opinions and westernized lifestyles due in part to American acculturation. Iranian-Americans thus tend to be moderate in their practice of religion.<sup>49</sup> Some practice Islam, however, this may diminish in the second generation. Will their dual identities as Americans and Iranian Muslims be complementary or contradictory? Will they accept or reject the Islamist program of changing the United States? More broadly, will they agree to adapt Islam to the United States? Few things are clear. It seems that Iranian identity's components in the West will not be the same. While liberal culture as a crucial factor might flourish, the Iranian and the Islamic traditions might perish, since the identity of Iranians in Western countries is a dependent variable to the Euro-American particularism, globalization and universalization. Hence Iranian identity in the West, especially for the second generation, might encounter some crisis. The new generation of Iranians abroad tends to speak English, as the international language, rather than their mother language. They might forget Farsi and Iranian culture during time due to globalization and the explosion of information. Yet, it is not necessarily a general rule. I will mention the exceptions below.

## Socialism and Political Islam

Socialism, as one of the modern ideologies, traveled to Iran during the Constitutional Movement, though, its weight was less than liberalism. Social-democrats considered themselves as the real advocates of Islam. When Akhundzadeh considers a “liberalist” a person who is free from revelation and holy texts, he does not distinguish the socio-political meaning because he advocates socialism.<sup>50</sup> As Ajudani puts it, the idea of political assassination entered Iranian culture during the Constitutional Movement.<sup>51</sup> Leftist-Islamic thought peaked in the 1960s and 1970s. The most famous intellectual to transfer and articulate socialist elements in Iranian culture was Shari'ati. He identified Abu Zar, the prophet's companion, as “the socialist theist”, Shi-ism as “the fully-fledged party”, and Islamic philosophy and history as dialectic ones. Tabataba'i believes Shari'ati along with Al-e Ahmad, as two prominent ideologists of sociology, weakened Iranian

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<sup>49</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian-American>

<sup>50</sup> Tabataba'i, op.cit, p 102.

<sup>51</sup> Ajudani, op.cit., pp 424, 431.

tradition.<sup>۵۲</sup> Political Islam in Iran cannot be identified except by recognizing *elements* transferred from socialism as new *moments*.

Conspiracy theory, as one of the notions mentioned above, has roots in the leftist ideologies which tried to form their identities in antagonism to capitalism and colonialism. Iranian nationalist intellectuals and lay people have developed an appetite for “conspiracy theories” in understanding their history and particularly their collective traumas.<sup>۵۳</sup> According to Edward Said: “‘imperialism’ means the practices, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; ‘colonialism’ which is always a consequence of imperialism, the implanting of settlements on distant territory; As Michael Doyle puts it: ‘Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.’”<sup>۵۴</sup> Political Islam in Iran has identified itself based on antagonism with Western colonialism and imperialism’ conspiracies.

Antagonism with the West, especially with the U.S., has its roots in a couple of events in Iranian history. First, during World War II, Iran was a vital oil-supply source and link in the Allied supply line for lend-lease supplies to the Soviet Union. Reza Shah’s tacit pro-German sympathies led to British and Indian forces from Iraq and Soviet forces from the north occupying Iran in August ۱۹۴۱. Secondly, in ۱۹۵۱ Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq received the vote required from the parliament to nationalize the British-owned oil industry. Despite British pressure, including an economic blockade, the nationalization continued. A military coup headed by Shah’s former minister of the Interior and retired army general Zahedi, with the active support of the intelligence services of the British (MI۶) and the U.S. (CIA) overthrew the new government. Thirdly, after the victory of the Islamic revolution, Western influences were banned, and Iran’s relations with the United States became deeply antagonistic during the revolution. On November ۴, ۱۹۷۹, Iranian students seized US embassy personnel, labeling the embassy a “den of spies”. Finally, antagonism with the West developed in the Iraq-Iran war. Tens of thousands of Iranian civilians and military personnel were killed when Iraq used chemical weapons in its warfare

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<sup>۵۲</sup> Javad Tabataba’i, “My Project”, *Iran Daily*, (۷-۹/۷/۱۳۸۲).

<sup>۵۳</sup> For an analysis of conspiracy theories in Iran, see Ahmad Ashraf, “Conspiracy Theories” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, edited by Ehsan Yarshater, vol. VI, fascicle ۲, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, ۱۹۹۲, pp ۱۳۸-۱۴۷.

<sup>۵۴</sup> Said, op.cit..

during the eight-year war. Fortman holds that: “Generally, identity politics is informed by collective memories of injustice or shared experiences of prosecution or fear of those groups that they perceive as a challenge to a way of life, heritage and set of values and beliefs unique to them. Religious identity is also boosted by similar fears, although originally it draws its edifice from the practiced and non-practiced values of a community of believers”.<sup>oo</sup> Islamism and Muslim extremism might be considered as a reaction to the colonialist attitudes.

## Conclusion

Based on non-essentialism, Iranian identity with its complex components (Iranian/Islamic/liberal/socialist) has been shaped by antagonism with the other. Since the exteriority determines the identity, it is *contingent*, *decentred* and in change. Iranian identity should be understood with regard to ancient Iranian culture dating back ۲۵۰۰ years, Islamic culture and its relationship with the first one, facing modern civilization including liberalism and socialism, political Islam (and the Islamic revolution) and the socialist influence on it, and antagonism with the West. Similarly, Shaygan considers Iranian identity as a split and juxtaposed one.<sup>ov</sup> According to Tabataba’i, because Iranians engage the “deterioration of political thinking”, they have lost their ability to present new questions.<sup>ow</sup>

Unlike the structuralist approaches to determinism, Laclau and Mouffe place great importance on the concepts of subjectivity and agency in developing their conception of discourse. They emphasize the way in which social actors acquire and live out their identities, and stress the role of agency in challenging and transforming social structures. Their perspective on the question of structure and agency has resolutely attempted to find a middle path between the two critical positions.<sup>ow</sup> Since Iranian identity in the West consists of four diverse elements, they face not only opportunity, but threat. If the components are harmonized, Iranians might put all the positive aspects of different cultures together, because tradition, comprising religion, and modernity seem compatible. They need to rethink their tradition critically, recognize modernity with its positive and negative aspects, adapt it to their tradition and condition, and synthesize

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<sup>oo</sup> Bas de Gaay Fortman, "Islam and the West: the Sacred Realm, Domain of New Threats and Challenges", The ۵th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs, Egypt, ۱۱-۱۵- November ۲۰۰۶.

<sup>ov</sup> Daryush Shaygan, *Afsunzadegi Jadid (Ex Occidente Lux)*, Trans: F. Valiani, (Tehran, Farzan, ۲۰۰۱).

<sup>ow</sup> Javad Tabatabaee, *Zaval Andisheh Siasi dar Iran* (“The Deterioration of Political Thought in Iran”), (Tehran, Kavir, ۱۹۹۴).

<sup>ow</sup> Howarth, op.cit, pp ۱۰۸, ۱۲۱.

opposite issues. Otherwise, if they try to choose the components arbitrarily or hastily the result might be eclecticism and identity crisis. In this case, Iranians in Western countries may need to develop a coordinated approach to tradition and modern civilization. The difference between Iranians and westerners is that the latter experienced modernity along with its foundations unconsciously, while Iranians want to practice it intentionally without its foundations. Laclau and Mouffe hold that “the logic of hegemony, as a logic of articulation and contingency, has come to determine the very identity of the hegemonic subjects. Unfixity has become the condition of every social identity. There is no logical and necessary relation between socialist objectives and the positions of social agents in the relations of production; and that the articulation between them is external and does not proceed from any natural movement of each to unite with the other. In other words, their articulation must be regarded as a hegemonic relation”.<sup>99</sup> Iranians in the west should be aware of their Iranian identity, Islamic culture and modernity. Not all history before Islam was an era of darkness and thus should be discarded, nor was Islam a foreign, Arabic, imposed faith.<sup>100</sup>

The question of Iranian identity in Western countries, especially of the second generation, has to be problematized in accordance with the axioms and imperatives of the age of modernity on the one hand and with Islam and political Islam on the other. Iranian secular intellectuals insist on nationhood and modernity, while Islamists stress Islamic notions. “If Iranian intellectuals in general, and scholars of Iranian studies in particular, are to seek the correct answers to the question of national identity, they must not imprison themselves in the torturous labyrinth of arcane problematics, antediluvian ideas, ruminations of the past, mnemonic conjecturing, and esoteric altercations. They need to realize that aversion to new theoretical approaches, fetishization of the past, pompous bravado about ancestors, conspiratorial and chiliastic views of history, and cult of patriotism are futile strategies”.<sup>101</sup> Political Islam has divided Iranians overseas and at home into two groups: radicals who believe in Islamic government based on Shari’a, and masses who live with cultural Islam. Feeling nostalgia, like other Muslims, some Iranians might tend to Iranian traditions or extremist groups. While Iranian/Islamic components (of Iranian

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<sup>99</sup> Laclau, op.cit, pp ٨٧-٨٨.

<sup>100</sup> Paolo Bassi, “The Iranian Identity Crisis: Islam v. Iranian Identity”, March ٢٠٠٦:  
<http://www.marzeporgohar.org/index.p...cat=&artid=٨٦٩>

<sup>101</sup> Boroujerdi, op.cit.

identity in the West) vs. the liberal one might be weakened in future, Islamism and fundamentalism may possibly strengthened in some exceptional cases.