BORDER AND TTERRITORIAL IDENTITY: PERSIAN IDENTITY MAKES IRAN AN EMPIRE OF THE MIND

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INTRODUCTION

To a mind not trained in academic subjects like political geography or international law, there are little differences among the terms *border*, *frontier* and *boundary*. Fascinated by impressive lip forward in information technology of recent decades some seem to have gone so far in their socio-political philosophizing of spatial concepts related to matters of *state* and *territory* as to declare the end of all that is related to *state*, *territory*, *boundary*, and geography much the same way as Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history in the q1990s

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(Fukuyama, 1992). Some seem to have gone even further in their fascination of these developments as confusing themselves between actual meanings of the concepts related to human space and thinking of human, economic, political and spatial *barriers* in terms of geographical *border*. The political geographer however, cannot be too careful in his use of geographical concepts. To him/her the terms *border*, *boundary* and *frontier* constitute for a three-dimensional spatial concept that deals with the task of defining peripheries of the territories of a given state. In a recent slogan advertised in CNN network (February 2011) individuals of varying ethnic/national background appear to invite viewers to '*go beyond borders*'. But listening to their reasoning no doubt remains that they mean to encourage their viewers to cross human, economic, political, and geographical barriers. Otherwise not even CNN can invite its international viewers to cross US boundaries or borders to its headquarters in Washington without obtaining proper visa permission from US border authorities.

When the peripheral line separating the realm of one state from that of others is concerned, *boundary* is the core of the discussion. This line of separation can at the same time be described as a line in space drawn to manifest the ultimate peripheries of the state and/or a line in space to show the ultimate limitations of the territory.

Whereas in the ancient world, people were preoccupiedwith the idea of establishingthe *frontiers* of their realms, the main concern of modern peoples regarding the peripheries of their dominions is to define their*boundaries*. *Boundary* in the modern sense of the word did not exist until the nineteenth century. Ancient peoples considered the end of their conquest as the *frontier*.*Frontier* is, therefore, ancient and *boundary* is new (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2002), but what might look more

current in a multi-disciplinary approach to the concept is that the idea is represented by the term *border*, which gives more socially oriented meaning to the concept.

Moreover, this concept, just as ubiquitous as the terms, also manifests in many different ways and has many different functions and roles. Scholars have, for instance, argued the case for the term *border* as being a peripheral line or zone of separation between states in the form of a socially constructed phenomena in order to distinguish between the internal society – people of a given territoriality – and those outside its borders, eventually culminating in the concept of separation, that is, the notion of 'us' (our society) separate from 'them' (their society). People living inside bounded territories who may collectively represent some form of nationhood are consequently spatially socialised as members of the territorial entity they live in.

Endeavouring to distinguish frontiers from boundaries, geographers have used various etymologies.Peter J. Taylor (1989) quotes Kristof (1959) that the etymology of each term derives their essential difference and that while*frontier* comes from the notion of *in front* as the 'spearhead of the civilisation'; boundary comes from `bounds' implying territorial limits. Taylor then observes that 'frontier is therefore outward-oriented and boundary inward-oriented' and 'whereas a boundary is a definite line of separation, a frontier is a zone of contact.'

As mentioned above, political geographers have variously described the term boundary as a line in space drawn to manifest the ultimate peripheries of the state and/or a line in space to show the ultimate limitations of territory (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2005, 51-58). The terms frontier and border normally represent two variations in

defining the same concept. While the term frontier represents the notion of 'in front' of the peripheral line of limitation of a territory, the term border normally refers to a strip of land around that line of territorial limitation and is normally used in association with term 'area'. Hence, one can state that it is within the framework of this kind of conceptualization that the term border area normally describes the land area as a distinct territorial identity surrounded by the peripheral line of boundary that separates it from "others", especially in terms of culture and civilization, whereas the term frontier represents a zone of contact between two states (Kristof, 1959).

While the etymology of each of the three terms can be explored further, in this study, the term *border* will be adopted to represent a combination of all of the three interrelated concepts explaining the line of separation between states. Prominence will be given in this chapter to the study of the idea of *territorial identity* within well-defined boundaries in association with the concepts of *state* and *territory*.

Today's movements towards regional or even continental integration and the formation of bloc identities such as EU, NAFTA, and MERCOSUR,are concurrent with the globalization of the market economy and the triumphant advance/march of cyberspace; the political map of the world has, as Anssi Paasi reminds us, undergone significant changes (Paasi, 2005). Many boundaries have become more permeable for people, goods, capital, and a revolutionised information technology that recognises no boundary limitation. This rapid movement in border functions has encouraged some scholars specialising in economy and information sciences to argue their case for a unified world of geopolitics by using phrases like 'borderless world'andpolitical "deterritorialization". In response, David Newman

(2006) argues from a geographer's point of view that despite these trends, human activities continue to take place within well-defined territories. He furthermore points out that the notion of a 'borderless world'has been coined by the West, specifically by a Western European perspective in which the permeability of borders is currently being actively promoted. Nevertheless, this trend has not gained ground around the globe. For example,in the post-9/11 era, borders are being re-erected or reinforced in many places. Hence, the current political situation in the world characterised by the prevalence of fear of terrorism can be interpreted as a sign for a *deterritorialization* rather than a *deterritorialization* of the world.

Indeed it seems that several factors have prompted such ideas as a 'borderless world' and 'deterritorialization' to arise. Among these factors has been the general promotion of permeable borders, the lifting of economic barriers inside the European Union (EU) by thirteen members in 1997, and the later creation of the Schengen area followed by monetary union and the creation of the Euro zone by 15 EU member states in 2002. A geographer, however, can hardly overlook the fact that, despite lifting economic barriers in the Schengen area of the European Union, legal and cultural borders are firmly in place and borders have in fact been strengthened between the Schengen area and the rest of the EU; borders have also been fortified between the European Union and various states surrounding it, especially those south of the Mediterranean.

In his *Iconography,* Jean Gottmann, the internationally respected political geographer of late 20th century,described iconography as the 'glue' which binds individuals together in order to form political societies, each related to its own portion of space (Prevelakis, no date). This triangular relationship is an exponent of the human state of

mind rather than physical expediency. Peers like W. A. Douglas Jackson (1958) refer to Jean Gottmann as the father of modern geography because he brought back political geography to the mainstream of social science after its near demise in the wake of wartime German geopolitics. Gottmann accomplished this by using his *circulation* and *iconography* to put the main emphasis on the territorial identity of the state and has stated:

To be distinct from its surroundings, a region needs much more than a mountain or a valley, a given language or certain skills: it needs essentially a strong belief based on some religious creed, some social viewpoint, or some pattern of political memories, and often a combination of all three….. The most stubborn facts are those of the spirit, not those of physical world…. And while history shows how stubborn are the facts of the spirit, geography demonstrates that the main partitions observed in the space accessible to man are not those in the topography or in the vegetation, but those that are in the minds of the people (Gottmann 1964).

Gottmann's earlier statement that "…to be different from all others and proud of one's special features is an inborn trait of man," tells us that as long as humans are concerned with their own identities independent of all others, borders will remain in place to proclaim the human desire for independence, and as long as humans want to be independent in their spheres of life, human nature needs that line in space called *border* to separate one group of humans from others. Thus, *border* is a human state of mind that cannot be marred by material desires to allow notions like *borderless world*, *global village* and/or *deterritorialization* of human's political life to exceed the bounds of virtual reality.

In an historical approach, it is hard to confine our thoughts to the

idea that the emergence of the interrelated notions of *state*, *territory* and *boundary* date back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 overlooking the fact that these modern notions are rooted in periods prior to the emergence in Europe of nation-states. There are indications that ancient civilizations were familiar with the notion of *state* in connection with the concepts of territory and boundary. Early texts reveal that this basic principle existed in ancient Persian literature in respect of matters of state, territory, and boundary. Similarly, the likelihood exists that these Persian notions could have influenced Roman civilization.

It is widely believed that a combination of ancient Greco-Roman and Persian civilizations is a major contributor to what culturally constitutes 'West". Later in the Sassanid period, the inter-linked notions of *state*, *territory*, and *boundary* developed substantially, coming quite close to their contemporary forms. On the other hand, considering that 'justice' was the corner stone of ancient Persian political philosophy, the idea that the ancient Persian spatial arrangement might have contributed to the evolution of the concept of democracy in the West may not be too difficult to contemplate.

WHITHER IRAN?

Before engaging in the main discussion about the evolution of the *idea of Iran* and its *territorial identity*, it seems appropriate to briefly see what Iran is and what constitutesPersia and why there is variation (Kamiar 2007).

The term *Iran* has constituted the official name of the country or state known by that name at least since the emergence of the Achaeminid federative state in the 6thcentury BCE. The term first

appeared in pre-Achaeminid antiquity as *Aryana* meaning the land of the Aryan race. Later at the time of the Achaemenids, this term was simplified to *Irana* and later still became *Iran Shahr* during the Sassanid period, meaning the country of Iran. The West came to know this country as *Persia* through the Greeks of the city-states, which in the 6th century BCE, were not as yet familiar with the concept of state–cum–country. They named Iran Persia in accordance with their on-going tradition of naming places after the name of the dynasties or the ethnicities ruling them, in much the same way that Iranians – and through them, the entire Muslim world - named Greece *Yunan* in their historiography of that entity, simply because in antiquity, the Iranians first came into contact with the *Ionian* ethnicity of Greece. Thus, it is obvious why the Greeks named Iran*Persia,*which originally was and still is but a province in southern Iran where the ancient Achaeminid and Sassanid dynasties had emerged. The term *Persia,* however, became more solidly founded in Western culture when it entered biblical texts and became somewhat sanctified. Nevertheless, the term *Iran* maintained its place in Western cultural thinking in more obscure forms such as a feminine name; i.e. *Iran* in the Persian language; *Irene* in Latin, Germanic, Armenian, and other Western languages, while its prefix 'ir' representing the mysticism of*the land of Aryans*, is to be seen in country names like *Ireland*, which comes from *Éire* of Proto-Celtic origin, reflecting its Proto-Indo-European roots.In today's common and official usage of the variation, it is worth noting that while the language and literature, art and culture are all *Persian*, the civilization and the name of the country are attributed to the term *Iran*.

BORDER, AN ANCIENT IRANIAN CONCEPT

The concept of *state* seems to be much older than its contemporary variation since its modern version exists only because its legitimacyis tied to normative territorial ideas; as Alexander Murphy(2003) reminds us, "…(t)he *pattern of* modern *states reflect*s *the pattern of nations*."Hence, there is little doubt that modern concepts of *state* and *territory* developed inmedieval Europe; nevertheless, it is difficultnot to note that they are rooted in the periods prior to the emergence in Europe of nation-states. There are indications that ancient civilizations were familiar with the notion of *state* in connection with an elementary form of territoriality and its *frontier* characteristics. The Great Wall of China, the Hadrian Wall of Roman Britain, and Sadd-e Sekandar (Alexander's Wall) in northeast Iran(1) might indeed have been parts of wider peripheral zones of contact in the ancient world (Taylor 1989), yet, it is certainthat even in that capacity,these walls represented the notion of a 'line' in space designed to separate the proverbial 'us' from 'them'. Indeed, there are references in ancient Persian literature to modern-like conceptions of state, territory, and border. Similarly, when considering the extent of both belligerent and peaceful contacts between Rome and Iran, the likelihood exists that these Persian notions could have influenced Roman civilization.

A mixture of ancient Greco-Roman and Persian civilizations seems to have been a major source of contribution to what culturally constitutes *West* in our time. Taking into consideration the extent to which Greek and Roman civilizations interacted with that of ancient Iran, little doubt remains as to the validity of Jean Gottmann's assertion in his letter (1978) to this writer that:

Iran must have belonged to the 'Western' part of mankind, and I suspect that this was what Alexander the Great of Macedonia, a pupil of Aristotle, therefore, in the great Western philosophical tradition, found in Iran and that attracted him so much that he wanted to establish a harmonious, multi-national cooperation between the Iranians and Greeks within the large empire he was building.(2)

Verification of this can be sought in historical events. For example, when Alexander the Great conqueredIran, he claimed in Persepolis that he was the 'true successor to the Achaeminid Darius III'. Ferdosi (1020 AD), the famous epic poet of Iran, says of this in his *Shahnameh* (book of kings)(3) that having conquered Iran, Alexander wrote to the nobles of the country apologizing for having done away with their king. Moreover, Alexander reassured them that, "(i) *f Dara is no more, I am here and Iran will remain the same as it has always been since its beginning*." He adopted the existing political organization of space, later modified by his successors. Alexander also proclaimed 'justice' to be the goal, the attainment of which would be his mission in Iran:

بـدانـیـد کـه امـروز دارا منـم　　گر او شد نهـان آشکارا منم
همان است ایران که بود از نخست　　بباشید شادان‌دل و تندرست
جـز از نیکنـامی و فـرهنـگ و داد　　ز رفتار گیتـی مگیریـد یاد

Be informed that today Dara is me
If he has disappeared, I am to be seen
Iran is as has been from the start
Do remain healthy and happy in heart
But of good name, culture and justice
Learn not from the ways of this life

(Ferdosi, 1985, III, 330)

STATE, TERRITORIALITY AND BORDER IN ANCIENT IRAN

Although the Achaemenids waged wars and captured territories, their concept of state was more culturally orientedthan concerned about the exactness of physical space. Various satrapies were defined along the lines of cultural and ethnic divides. Indeed, eminent scholars like Will Durant (trans.1988: 412) and Pio Filippani-Ronconi (1978:67) maintain that the concept of 'state' is an original Iranian invention, which was later adopted by the West through the Romans. A.H. Nayer-Nouri, an eminent writer on ancient Persian civilization, quotes T.R. Glover on Persian civilization:

> The Persians set new ideas before mankind, ideas for the world's good government with utmost unity and cohesion combined with the largest possible freedom for the development of race and individual within the larger organization (Nayer Nouri, 1971: 196).

Ancient Greek historian-geographers like Herodotus (484? - 425 BCE) and Xenophon (430? - 355? BCE) confirm that the Achaemenids (559 - 330 BCE) founded a kind of federal state, a vast commonwealth of autonomous nations, aided by a state apparatus, thus making *state* and *federalism* central to Iran's governance from earliest times. The founder of the federation, Cyrus (*Kurosh*) the Great (559 - 529 BCE) together with his successors substantially expanded their domain and divided it into many satrapies (thirty to forty at times), each governed by a local *Satrap*, a *Khashthrapavan,* or a vassal king. This was a federation of global proportions, which included the lands of Trans-Oxania, Sind, and Trans-Caucasus as far as what are now the Republic of Moldavia, Jordan and Syria,

Macedonia and Cyprus, Egypt and Libya. This was a political system of universal aspirations ruled by a *Shahanshah* (king of kings). Thus it could also be referred to as the *Shahanshahi* system. The king of kings in that system was not a lawgiver but the defender of laws and the religions of all in the federation (Templeton, 1979:14). Moreover, T.R. Glover (ibid.) described the state created by the Achaemenids as *good government*; in accord with Cyrus's proclamation in Babylonia(4) that all were equal in his realm, ethnic and cultural groups enjoyed a large measure of independence in the practice of their language, religion, and economies. To uphold religious, cultural and political independence of the various peoples in the federation, the king of kings did not lay claim to any specific religion. Consequently, the peoples of conquered territories were free to keep their religions, laws and traditions. Having conquered Babylonia, for instance, Cyrus the Great found thousands of Jews in captivity there. His response was to free them and send them back to their place of worship. He did not proceed to conquer theirland, but his respect for their religious freedom guaranteed their good will towards the Iranians. He became their prophet and they became the voluntary citizens of his federation. Cyrus commissioned the building of their temple and their reaction was to assess his work as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (*chapter xliv*): "I am the lord…that saith of Cyrus, he is my shepherd, and shall perform my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, thou shalt be built: and to the temple, thy foundation shall be laid."(Lockhart, 1953: 326)

Many have tried to attribute a 'dark side' to this early form of federative state and/or *good government*. In our time, possibly the worst imaginable characterization by those who were politically motivated, such as the former Baath Party in Iraqhas been to equate

Cyrus with a warmongering king who supported the Zionists (captive Jews in Babylonia). They condemn Cyrus for using the sole force of arms to create the vast commonwealth of the Achaemanid state. These are blatant inaccuracies since Babylonia was not an Arab state but rather an Akkadian civilization; according to Arab historians like Masudi (1977) and Maqdasi (1906), the Arabs first appeared in Mesopotamia when the Sassanid state created the vassal kingdom of Hirah; these historians have also indicated that Arab settlement of southern Mesopotamia began after the advent of Islam.Furthermore, the captive Jews in Babylonia could not possibly have hadanything to do with *Zionism because it is a phenomenon of the* 20th century. Moreover, war has always been an inherent aspect of human political behaviour. Even in the age of modernity when 'war' is detested as an act of immorality in the domain of human behaviour, there are moralists who defend the so-called *just war*. Babylonia was an Akkadian civilization ruled by tyranny according to biblical texts, thus Cyrus's war on Babylonian tyranny easily qualifies as a just war.

On the other hand, our knowledge of ancient Iran and its role in the ancient world is largely shrouded in obscurity and our information as scanty as it is, is derived from foreign sources (Iliff, 1953) who tell us thatthe decree Cyrus issued in Babylonia concerned freedom and equality for all, Babylonians and captive Jews alike; it was for this broad-minded policy that he is so praised in the biblical literatures of the West and Islam. Additionally, it was because of this broad-minded policy of the Achaeminid king that he won the allegiance of many peoples, including the Greeks of Ionian cities (Templeton 1979), Cyprus and Jerusalem who joined their federation; for these peoples to join this system of governance voluntarily rather than by force of arms,the federation must have helda certain attraction. This attraction

was the justice on which Iran's federal tradition of statehood was based and which, by the time of the Christian era, had become Iran's spirit and its territorial identity. This process turned the idea of Iran into a distinct state of mind.

JUSTICE AS THE CORNERSTONE OF THE IRANIAN STATE SYSTEM

Considering that *justice* was the cornerstone of ancient Iranian political philosophy, the idea that ancient Iranian spatial arrangements have contributed to the evolution of the concept of democracy in the West cannot be too difficult to contemplate. Some claim(5) that when Cyrus founded the federative state of many nations in what was to become known in the West as the Persian Empire, he did not invent righteousness and tolerance from his own genius but rather that he followed a deeply-rooted, age-old tradition of how an ideal king should behave. He had inherited the tradition of *good government* based on *justice*, toleration of others and respect for varying religious beliefs from the Medes whose king Deicos (Diaxus) had gathered all Iranians into one nation (Nayer-Nouri 1971: 188). Nevertheless, the earliest available evidence suggesting that *justice* formed the foundation of good governance in the ancient Iranian tradition of statehood is Cyrus's decree of *freedom* and *equality* when opening Babylonia in 539 BCE.

According to the stone inscription left for posterity at *Naghsh-e Rostam* in western Iran, Darius the Great (*Dariush I*, 521- 486 BCE) left a remarkable heritage. He organized thirty satrapies, each under an autonomous king assisted by a Satrap representing the central authority of the king of kings. He appointed army commanders and

secretaries of political affairs. He fixed the tributes of each satrapy by appointing tributecollectors and traveling inspectors called the *eyes and ears* of the great king to watch over the Satraps and army commanders. He introduced currencies of gold *darics* and silver *siglus* that facilitated trade exchange in the federation (Nayer-Nouri, 1971, 221);he also built the 2,700-kilometer-long Royal Road from Susa, northwest of the Persian Gulf, to Sardis on the Aegean Sea with branches to Persepolis and other political and commercial centres (Von Hagen,1974).To enhance the state apparatus, Darius ordered the map of this road and civilized countries alongside it to be engraved on a plate of bronze(6), which was perhaps the first detailed geographic map in history. He established a postal service with relays of men and horses at short intervals and ordered a canal to be dug in Egypt to link the Red Sea to the Nile (Arberry, 1953).

In matters of state politics, while the Athenians were busy with their peculiar version of citizenship-oriented democracy, the Achaemenids were forging a state system based on independence for cultural groups or nationalities; this federative system granted peoples of varying ethnicities the right of governing their affairs autonomously and respected their religion and cultural identity. Thus it seems quite plausible that equality and justice were the essence of governance in that ancient tradition of statehood. The administration ofjustice, however, reached its zenith in the Sassanid period in the person of Anushirvan the Just, and it might be plausible to assume that these early Iranian traditions of political philosophy have contributed to the development of modern concepts of democracy in the West. Some have suggested that the concept of *empire* is perhaps a Roman adoption of Iranian *Shahanshahi* system (Tavakoli, 1993:828-830). However, the difference between the two is that while various nations

and ethnic groups lived autonomously in the Iranian *Shahanshahi* order, peoples of varying ethnicities enjoyed no autonomy or self-rule in the *imperial* system that the Romans developed.Given this, it may not be difficult to assume that the Romans evolved their idea of *Senate* on the basis of ancient Parthian*Mehestan,* the House of the Elders, or vice versa.

EVOLUTION OF THE STATE AND TERRITORY UNDER THE SASSANIDS

The Parthians (247BCE to 224 AD), who succeeded the Macedonians in Iran, created two kinds of autonomies in the federation: the internal satrapies and the peripheral dependent states, 18 of which enjoyed greater autonomy (Vadiei, 1974: 186). This system of diffusion of power was revived by the Safavids of 16th-century Iran in the form of *ialats* and *biglarbeigis*.

About the dawn of the Christian era, the concepts of state and territoriality assumed greater sophistication with the advent of the notion of border. This was primarily the result of the greater centralization of power *vis-à-vis* new threats from powerful adversaries such as the Roman Empire to the west and the Turans to the east. The political organization of space in the Sassanid federation (224 -651 AD) was marked by the development of such concepts as inner and outer frontier-keeping states, buffer states, and boundary pillars. There are even hints in the ancient literature of a river boundary between Iran and Turan in Central Asia(7).

A look at the works of Persian literature relevant to Iran's ancient political geography like *Shahnameh* reveals that the Sassanids successfully developed the concept of *territory* within the bounds of

defined borders. They created an elaborate system of the territorial organization of state. To begin with, the founder of the dynasty revived the Achaeminid political organization of the state, but divided it into twenty autonomous countries. He initiated a government-style cabinet by assigning ministers of state like *Bozorg-Mehr the philosopher* and then revived the ancient notion of the 'Four Corners' of the world (four quarters of the federation) by creating four separate armies for the realm. He also created an advisory board of nobles by dividing the political structure into seven classes: ministers,the priesthood, supreme judges, and the four generals commanding the four armies (Masudi, 1977: 464-5). Anushirvan the Just (531 – 579 AD), whose administration of justice is widely praised by early Islamic historian-geographers, lent a more practical meaning to the Achaeminid concept of the 'four corners' of the realm by placing the twenty countries of the federation in four vast*Kusts* or *Pazgous*. Each of these divisions was ruled by a viceroy or regent called *Pazgousban* or *Padusban* and a general called an *espahbad* commanded the army of each Pazgous. In his epic *Shahnameh*, Ferdosi lists these *Kusts* or *Pazgous*: 1- *Khorasan*, including *Qom*and *Isfahan*; 2- *Azarabadegan* or Azerbaijan, including *Armanestan* (Armenia) and *Ardebil*; 3- *Pars* (Persia) and *Ahvaz* as well as territories of *Khazar* (most likely *Khuzestan*); and 4- *Iraq* and Roman territories (Syria and Anatolia) (Ferdosi, 1985: IV, 415).

The development of the concept of territory in the Sassanid era went hand in hand with the evolution of the concept of border. It is noteworthy that the term 'border' existed in ancient Iran. The Persian equivalents for territoriality and border,attributed to the Sassanid period by Ferdosi, appear synonymous with middle Persian *Marz-o Boum* – مرز و بوم literally meaning border and nativity. But in Ferdosi's

idiosyncratic manner of using these terms, together they assume the meaning of 'border that contains the native homeland'. *Marz* مرز, meaning border or frontier, however exists in Persian on its own, whereas another middle-Persian term for boundary is also in use in the form of *saman* –سامانmostly in reference to a boundary line separating houses from one another. Both concepts of border and frontier were in practical use in the Sassanid era. While appointing governors or *Padusbans* پادوسبان –for the vassal states, they appointed mayors or *shahrigs* - شهریگ for the cities. They created frontier zones in the west of their federation and border lines to its east.

In the west of their federation, the Sassanids appear to have developed two kinds of frontier-keeping states: the internal frontier-keeping states within their four *Kusts*: and the external ones, the most famous of which was the state of *Hirah* or *Manazerah* in Mesopotamia (Masudi, ibid).

On the north-western corner of the Persian Gulf, where Iranianborders met those of the Romans, the vassal kingdom of *Hirah*-حیره was created in 5th century by the Sassanids onthe river Tigris not far from their capital Ctesiphon. This frontier-keeping state, which was funded and protected by the Iranians, effectively formed a buffer state, thereby defusing pressures emanating from the Romans (Masudi, 1977:240). In a similar move, the Romans created the vassal kingdom of *Ghassan* غصانin the region now known as Syria (Masudi, 1977: 467). Moreover, it should be noted that by virtue of its struggle against Arab rule, Iran played the role of a cultural barrier throughout the Islamic era, which guaranteed Iran's cultural survival in subsequent periods. The precise location of the line of this cultural barrier can be defined somewhere around the western peripheries of the Iranian Plateau in Mesopotamia, which played the same role in the

pre-Islamic era between the Persian and Roman empires. Here, David Mitrani's theory of 'middle zone'– defined as somewhere in Central Europe, around the river Danube (Mitrani, 1950) – can be applied to the status and implications of the geographical position of Mesopotamia as a buffer between Iranand powers to her west. This geography prevented the total predominance of other cultures over the Iranian Plateau throughout history.

To their east, the Sassanids faced the Turans. Like the Romans, the Turans also engaged in numerous wars with the Iranians. But unlike their buffer-zone arrangements with the Romans in the west, the Iranians created, at least in one instance, a border line with the Turans in the east. This must have resulted from the degree to which rivaling powers to their east and west exerted pressure on their federation. While rivalries with the Romans to the West were of a geopolitical nature which evolved into a situation similar to the Anglo-Russian Great Game of the 19th century in Central Asia,rivalries with the Turans to the eastwere of an intensely strategic nature culminating in many wars, which in turn necessitated demarcation of the border lines that separated the two.

It is noteworthy that not only did the Sassanids revive the Achaemanid organization of the state and territory, but they also fashioned the term *Iranshahr* ایرانشـهر (the country of Iran), which must arguably have been the first time that a state or a nation had assumed an identity embodied in a name independent of the names of its ruling dynasties (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999 *Iran va...*147-8).Ferdosi detailed Bahram's debate with a Roman emissary on the subject of varying Roman and Persian styles of*statesmanship*and*diplomacy*, he then asserted that Bahram (420 – 438AD), victorious in his campaign against the eastern Turks, commissioned construction of border pillars

between the two countries . He decided that the river Oxus (*Jeyhun*) would form a river boundary between the two sides. In Ferdosi's account of this, he says:

برآورد میلی زسنگ و ز گچ که کس را ز ایران و ترک و خلج
نبودی گذر جز به فرمان شاه همان نیز جیحـون میانجی بـه راه

Translated literally:

> *(he) constructed pillars of stones and plaster, ensuring that no one from Iran or Turkey or other nationals would pass beyond unless permitted by the Shah, who had also made Jeyhun (the river Oxus) a medium in the way (Ferdosi, 1985: III, 394).*

While earlier in his *Shahnameh*, Ferdosi referred to the issue of defining the borders of Iran in terms of the range of the bow shot by Arash the Archer from the top of the Damavand peak in the Elborz range, lands that mark the border between Iran and Turan according to the legendary beginning of Iran, in the historical part of the *Shahnameh*, he explicitly referred to the process of boundary demarcation. Thus it is Ferdosi who asserted a thousand years ago that boundary pillars had been erected six hundred years earlier, and that Iranians, Eastern Turks, and third-party nationals were prohibited from going beyond them unless permitted by the king himself. The king, victorious in his campaign against the eastern Turks, had also defined the river Oxus as part of the border (river boundary) between the two countries. This may be seen as a clear example of the creation of a border line in ancient Iran corresponding to the modern understanding of the concept. Royal permission for passing beyond the border might also be considered the initial form of a passport in today's terms.

IMPACT ON WESTERN CIVILIZATION

There is no doubt that the Athenians initially developed the concept of 'democracy'. However, their practice of democracy was limited to the various social strata of a city. A nationwide application of democracy had to wait until Alexander the Great of Macedonia conquered Iran and adopted the Persian way of organizing political space, i.e., as a quasi-federal 'state' divided into discrete territories. The Achaemenids no doubt developed the original concept of state, but the idea of a vertically organized state with distinct and clearly demarcated boundaries matured under the Sassanids and began to influence Western civilizations.

When assessing the influence of Iran on the concepts of "state" and "boundary" in medieval Europe, one might point to the biblical references to Persian statehood and its tradition of respect for the rights of varying peoples (Isaiah - chapter xliv, Esther i, I, Ezra i, I etc.). According to these testimonies, despite spearheading military campaigns against the Greek cities and the Turans, the state organization created by the Achaeminid kings was essentially culturally-based and not grounded in rigid territorial conquest. This was particularly manifested in the Achaemenids' universal aspirations of statehood and good government. By developing their own version of a 'federative state' based on the notion of justice for all, the Iranians created a commonwealth of semi-independent nations or a federation of autonomous states, and arguably laid the foundation for the idea of*state democracy* or*democratic state*. This political structure of statehood was taking shape in Iran simultaneously with the advent of the Greek version of citizenship-centered democracy. In this regard, it is important to note that Cyrus issued a charter in Babylonia (the text of which is now kept in BritishMuseum) declaring *equality* and *justice*

for individuals as well as freedom for religious-cultural 'organization'in the realm. These notions formed the political fabric of the Persian state since or because Darius the Great also frequently referred to *justice* in the stone inscriptions he bequeathed to posterity. This is to suggest that while the Athenians were concerned about the rights of individuals in society, the Persians were anxious to promote the rights of communities within their state system.

There are few other sources explaining the extent to which these ancient Persian traditions influenced the evolution of the Western concepts of *state*, *boundary*, and *democracy*, save for the works of scholars like Will Durant (Persian translation,1988). Even a philosopher as widely misrepresented as Friedrich Nietzsche, whose writings many philosophers have found difficult to take seriously, seems to have formed his view of the civilized Western citizen under the influence of the ancient Persian philosophy of life (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 1892). R. Ghirshman (1962), for instance, states that "…under Alexander, 'monarchy by divine right' of the Iranians became an institution of Hellenism and later was taken up by many European states (Nayer Nouri, 1971: 152)."

R. Levy (1953, 61), on the other hand, identifies the Arab Caliphate as an intermediate culture through which the Persian tradition of statehood influenced the modern world. Quoting early Arab and Islamic records, he argues;

… the Fakhri, an early fourteenth-century manual of politics and history, relates how the caliph, Umar, when at his wit's end to know how to distribute the spoils of war which were pouring in, sought the advice of a Persian (Iranian) who had once been employed in a government office (of the Sassanid time). His suggestion was that a divan, a register or bureau, should be instituted for controlling income

and this became the germ out of which grew the government machine that served the Caliphate some hundreds of years.

Of the influence of the Iranian legacy ofstatehood and statesmanship on the Arab Caliphate, an early Islamic historical account quotes Caliph Umar as saying, *Verily have I learnt justice from Kesra* (Khosro Anushirvan the Just) (Maqdasi, 1906: 18).

In his writings on the tradition of sacred kingship in Iran, Filippani-Ronconi, basing himself on reliable Roman sources, states that;

… if we want to look into the successful diffusion in the Western world of certain institutions connected with kingship, in either the religious or the lay domain, we must go back to the Roman Empire, which was the first Western state to absorb a great deal of such outside influence, especially in its political and administrative institutions regarding the status of the Emperor.

He then proceeds to cite examples of the influence of the Iranian tradition of statehood on the Western civilization by asserting;

The heritage handed down by Iran to the West and still living in its ideological conceptions and cultural institutions is manifold. If its patterns are sometimes difficult to recognize and trace back to their origin, that is due to the fact that this legacy has been received through intermediate cultures and westernized models… The leading elements of what we could call the vertical organization' of the state are part of this age-old heritage. They were handed over to the modern world through the late Roman imperial structure and its medieval renaissance: through the institutions of chivalry and knighthood that, obscurely transmitted to European society in a Celtic-Germanic garb, were later Christianized … (Filippani-Ronconi, 1978:67).

THE POST-ISLAMIC IDENTITY

Exactly what happened to these concepts in post-Islamic Iran might be of some interest. With the arrival of Islam, Iran disappeared as a country from the political map of the time. Though the Arab Caliphate of Baghdad (Abbasid Caliphate 750 to 1258 AD) mimicked the Sassanid organization of territories almost in its entirety, the territorial identity that had evolved over the previous millennium vanished into thin air. Nevertheless, Iran as a fundamental cultural heartland remained to shape the political geography of the Islamic world for centuries to come. This was because, in the words of Professor Rice (1953, 41);

(the spirit of Iran) was not to be destroyed in a day…Persian art, Persian thought, Persian culture, all survived to flourish anew…, and impelled by a new and powerful driving force, their effect was felt in a widely extended field from the early eighth century onward....

Iran as a country disappeared and was replaced by a number of ethnic authorities of Turkic and Iranic background who ruled the Iranian plateau on the strength of what they could remember of Persian cultural and political heritage of the pre-Islamic Achaemanid and Sassanid eras. Even when Timberline's grandson Babur established the vast Mongolian empire in India, he adopted Persian as the official language of the state and by the time of Akbar the Great India became the main centre of Persian language, literature, and arts. In a similar fashion, Persian was adopted by the vast Ottoman Empire as the official language of the state for some time, which strengthens the idea that Iran had become a powerful empire of the mind in its post-Islamic experience of living out of its geographical existence. The Iranians' embrace of Shiite Islam over Sunni Islam of the Arab Caliphate was essentially a desire to revive Iran's cultural and national

identity. The ancient Persian concept of justice gained new currency by transmuting into one of the five basic principles of Shia Islam. In the following centuries, the expansion of Shiite faith in Iran merged with other notions of identity, paving the way for the eventual revival of the concepts of Iranian territoriality and statehood (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2007, p. 26).

THE PHOENIX RISES AGAIN

In *The evolution of the concept of territory*, Professor Jean Gottmann reminded his audience at the IPSA round table discussion of January 1975 held at the *Institut D' Etudes Politiques*in Paris, in reference to this author's presence among the participants, that Iran represented a good example of his '*iconography*.' In his explanation, Gottmann invoked the legend of the *phoenix* (Persian, *Samandar*) as the symbol of Iran, which has risen from its ashes so many timesin its thousand years of statehood.

Iran's re-emergence in the post-Islamic era as a vast federative *Shahanshahi* with its powerful sense of identity had to wait until the emergence on the political scene of medieval southern, central and western Asia of a 13-year-old protégé, Esmail Safavid, who led an army of ten thousand devout Shiite Sufis and at the age of sixteen proclaimed in 1501 that he had descended from the heavens to revive the *Shahanshahi* of Iran (Filippani-Ronconi, 1978). However, what the Safavids (1501-1722) revived in terms of the territorial organization of space was but a vague adaptation of the Abbasid Caliphate's interpretation of the Sassanid system of statehood, and not the original version (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1995, Introduction). This vagueness of the new state structure suggests that Iran had departed

from its own ancient traditions of statehood and border arrangements. This proved to be a powerful handicap that manifested itself later, especially in the face of the conceptual and physical onslaught of modern European versions of nationality and statehood which resulted in comprehensive territorial dismemberment. By the 1920s, no less than 14 countries, including the modern nation-state of Iran, emerged from the Safavid federative *Shahanshahi*.

IRANIAN IDENTITY IN THE ERA OF MODERNITY

By the late nineteenth century,Iran was among the first nations in Asia to undergo a major revolution to adopt modern ideas of constitutionalism and democracy. Adoption of western-style democracy has proved to be a painful experience throughout the twentieth century but considerable progress has been made towards a home-grown democracy which has been preceded by a number of adjustments in its national and territorial identities. These occurred in two different movements.The first move for modernism was made by Reza Shah Pahlavi, who established the Pahlavi dynasty in 1924 and successfully sacked regionalism of a separatist nature as well as put an end to the old and decadent federative system that had, by the turn of the twentieth century,been reduced to mere *feudalism*, which was the cause of the country's territorial dismemberment Reza Shah Pahlavi also laid the foundation for the growth of a modern and industrial Iran and constructed/designed/crafted/founded a modern nation-state based on the former feudal state's core areas with tangible Iranian territorial identity. His great emphasis on pre-Islamic ideas of Iran left some with the thought that Reza Shah's emphatic reliance on pre-Islamic Iranian identity resulted in fundamental neglect of the country's

millennial Islamic identity. An Islamic revolution thus took place in 1979 to address that shortcoming, but its complete reversal of emphasis was aimed at denying Iran's pre-Islamic existence. The Islamists first started to construct a state of Islamic *Ummah* in the lands of Iranian territorial identity. This was an ideological approach based on the notion of the *universality of Islam*that defies ideas any idea of border and territorial identity. However, twentieth-century realities have fundamentally modified this approach so that the Islamic Republic of Iran has successfully translated itself into a territorial identity within the confines of a nation-state.

The national awakening in Iran today has motivated demands for democracy throughout the society. Today the elite, along with ordinary citizens, speak the same political language with the same purpose. Both the elite and ordinary citizens demand the kind of reforms that are fundamental and far-reaching, the kind of reforms that could address the problems that prevent or at least delay the implementation of democracy in Iran. The demand for democracy has gained ground in Iran at the grassroots level and by the national election of 1997, passed the point of no return. The tree of democracy in Irannow appears to be growing with its roots firmly placed in its home culture, fed by the values that form the Iranian identity.

Today, the Iranians seem to have awakened to the realities and challenges of the globalized 21stcentury world. They seem to have set in motion all the mechanisms needed for progress towards democracy. When the mechanism of political supply and demand begins to move, italso sets in motionthe mechanism of the clash of political views that is essential for striking a balance of power in society. This in turn gives birth to the dialogue necessary among the forces shaping political events.

Iranian society is presently experiencing this clash of views and opinions among political forces which have begun a far-reaching dialogue. Two main groups have emerged, the traditionalists and the reformists. The emergence of real and effective political parties has been delayed, however, because it seems that the political elite have not as yet awakened to the reality that, without the functioning of real and well developed political parties, democracy cannot function in the true sense of the word. At the same time, the Iranians are working hard to strike a balance between their pre-Islamic territorial identity and their post-Islamic cultural pride as well as their desire for a home-grown democracy. This balance is being challenged both internally and externally, including recent threats of war and economic sanctions by an axis of US, EU and Israel for concerns over Iran's nuclear energy ambitions and the occasional expression of Arab territorial ambitions against Iran. If the balance is achieved, it will undoubtedly be Iran's secret to a successful future and, allow the Iranians to build on their national dialogue for democracy, a dialogue badly needed for the settlement of the strong revolutionary fervor nurtured by these foreign threats and challenges. Such a balance will provide for Iran's domestic piece of mind as well as an improved sense of stability in its neighbourhood. ❖

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NOTES:

1. This wall was built at the time of the Parthian civilization (247 BCE to 224 AD) in Iran to separate that civilization from the Turans of the East.

2. Professor Jean Gottmann, whose student this author was at OxfordUniversity in late 1970s, authorized this quotation from the said letter, in a separate note dated 19th May 1992.

3. *Shahnameh* (book of kings) of Abul-Qassem Ferdosi (d. 1020 AD) is widely praised as the only reliable source in Persian literature that studies the pre-Islamic history of Iran and its association with other ancient political entities, but hitherto little attention has been paid to the way it describes political relations in association with the political organization of space in the ancient world. Popularly regarded as an epic account of ancient Persian history, especially of the Sassanid period (224 – 651 AD), the *Shahnameh* provides a remarkable description of the development of the concept of state in ancient Iran. It carefully describes how the idea of a vertically organized state evolved in ancient Iran with clearly demarcated boundaries, which influenced such western political conceptions as 'state', 'territory', 'boundary', and 'democracy'. Ferdosi's description of the political geography of the ancient world bears a remarkable resemblance to the modern concepts of political geography that evolved in post-Westphalia Europe. Is it, however, possible that he, who lived a thousand years ago, well before the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, had learnt these ideas from modern Europe or is it rather that what Ferdosi described in terms of the evolution of political thought and geography in ancient Persia influenced medieval Europe? This is certainly a fascinating question deserving further exploration with the help of the reliable analysis of the socio-political developments in the ancient world.

4. The text of this proclamation is in cuneiform Acadian (Akkadian), inscribed on a clay cylinder now in the BritishMuseum's Persian section.

5. A plate of bronze or other metals is called *jam* in Persian. Similarly a goblet of

metal or crystal is *jam*. On the other hand, Ferdosi's *Shahnameh* speaks of legendary Jamshid Shah, the founder of Iran, who had a *jam* showing the world. From this concept comes the mystical crystal ballin almost all cultures, yet this author is of the opinion that Jamshid Shah was none other than Darius the Great who had the bronze disc *jam* showing the map of the civilized world. A discussion of further evidence supporting this theory goes beyond the scope of this article.

6. Turan is a term used by Ferdosi (d. AD 1020) in his *Shahnameh*, the greatest piece of epic literature in the Persian language, in reference to the Turkic peoples originating on the eastern fringes of Iran. What now constitutes 'Central Asia' was 'Greater Khorasan' in most post-Islamic Iranian geography; prior to that, Turan formed the easternmost boundary.

7. On Anushirvan's administration of justice, see many early Arab and Islamic works of history and geography including:

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