Iran: the Empire of the Mind

Facts about emergence and evolution of the concepts of state, territory, and boundary in ancient Iran

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Abstract

Many political geographers treat the concept of vertical organization of *state* with *territory* as its horizontal feature defined within the concept *borders* as a product of the peace treaty of Westphalia in 1648 (Glassner and de Blij, 1989, 46-59). While this may be true in the case of *state* within the modern sense of the term in Europe, certainly the concept of *state* as a vertically organized political structure with its territorial identity is much older than any idea of *nation state* when measured with Gottmann's *iconography* (Jean Gottmann, 1964). This is in deed old with its foundation rooted in more ancient civilizations.

There are indications that ancient civilizations were familiar with the notion of *state*. Ancient texts reveal that this basic principle existed in ancient Persian literature. 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'. On the other hand, considering that 'justice' formed the foundation on which the idea of *Iran* emerged and her territorial identity began to take shape, the idea that 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. This is to say that the Iranian tradition of statehood, flourished on the basis of justice enshrined in its socially oriented territorial identity might have contributed to the emergence of the notion of *nation state* in the West that emerged in the political evolution of space after Westphalia.

Keywords: Border, Territorial identity, Ferdosi, Persian civilization, Achaemenids, Sassanids, Justice, Democracy, The West, Shiite Islam.

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Introduction

To a mind not trained in academic subjects such as political geography or international law there are little differences between the terms *border*, *frontier* and *boundary*. To the political geographer however, these constitute for a three-dimensional concept that deals with the task of defining the peripheries of the territorial features of a given state.

When the peripheral line separating realms of a state from those of the 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 man was preoccupied, in the ancient world, with the idea of establishing *frontiers* of his realm, the modern man's main concern regarding the peripheries of his dominion is to define its *boundaries* Boundary in the modern sense of the word did not exist until the nineteenth century. Ancient man considered the end of his 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, just as ubiquitous are the terms, the conception also manifest in many different ways and have many different functions and roles. Scholars have, for instance, argued the case for the term *border* as being 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 of the notion of 'us' (our society) from 'them' (their society). People living inside bounded territories who may collectively represent some form of nationhood are consequently being spatially socialised as members of the territorial entity they live in.

Endeavouring to distinguish frontiers from the boundaries, geographers have used various etymologies. Having quoted Kristof

(1959) that the etymology of each term derives their essential difference; while frontier comes from the notion of *in front* as the 'spearhead of the civilisation', boundary comes from `bounds' implying territorial limits, Peter J. Taylor (1989) observes that: *frontier is therefore outward-oriented and boundary inward-oriented.* And that: *whereas a boundary is a definite line of separation, a frontier is a zone of contact.*

Political geographers have variedly 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 other two terms: *frontier* and *border* normally represent two other 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 the "others", specially in terms of culture and civilization, whereas the term *frontier* represents a zone of contact between two states (Kristof, 1959).

While etymology of each of the three terms can be explored further, the term *border* will be adopted in this study 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*.

In today's movements towards regional or even continental integration, and formation of bloc identities such as EU, NAFTA, and MERCOSUR etc. which is concurrent with globalization of market economy and triumphant procession of cyberspace, the political map of the world has, as Anssi Passi reminds us, undergone significant changes (Anssi, 2005). Many boundaries have become more permeable for people, goods, capital etc. 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"* and political *"deterritorialization"*. In response, David Newman (2006) argues from a geographer's point of view that despite these trends human activities are continuing to take place within well defined territories. He furthermore points out that the notion of a *"borderless world"* is coined by the West, specifically by a Western European perspective where the permeability of borders is currently being actively promoted. Nevertheless, this trend has not gained ground around the globe. For example: with the post-9/11 era borders are becoming re-erected or reinforced in many places. Hence, the current political situation in the world which is coined by the prevalence of fear from terrorism can be interpreted as a sign for a *reterritorialization* rather than a *deterritorialization* of the world.

In deed it seems that promotion of permeability of borders and lifting of economic barriers inside European Union by 13 member states in 1997 and creation of the Schengen area which was followed by monetary union and creation of the Euro zone in 2002 of 15 member states, has been the main source of encouragement for the elevation of such ideas as *borderless world* and *deterritorialization*. 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 Schengen area and the rest of EU, as well as being fortified between 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 that concept 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 man's state of mind rather

than his physical expediency. Jean Gottmann, who in the words of his pears like W. A. Douglas Jackson (1958), has brought back political geography to the mainstream of social science after its near demise in the wake of wartime German geopolitics, by putting the main emphasis on territorial identity of the state through his *circulation* and *iconography*, and/thus can arguably be described as the *father of modern political geography*, 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: *to be different from all others and proud of one's special features is an inborn trait of man*, tell us that as long as man is concerned with his own identity independent of all others, borders will remain in place to pronounce his desire for independence, and as long as man wants to be independent in his sphere of life, by his nature he needs that line in space called *border* to separate him from the others. Thus, *border* is a state of mind for man that cannot be marred by his material desires to allow notions like *borderless world, global village* and/or *deterriotialization* of man's political life to exceed the bounds of virtual reality.

In a historical approach it is hard to contain our thoughts within the idea that the emergence of the interrelated notions of *state*, *territory* and *boundary* date back to Westphalia treaty of 1648 and overlook 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. Ancient 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 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.

Wither Iran

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

The term *Iran* has constituted as the official name of the country or state known by that name, at least since the emergence of the Achaeminid federative state in 6th century BC. The term first appeared in pre-Achaeminid antiquity as *Aryana* meaning the land of Aryan race. Later this term was simplified at the time of the Achaeminids as *Irana*, and later still became *Iran Shahr* during the Sassanids, 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 BC, was not as yet familiar with the concept of state–cum–country. They named Iran as Persia in accordance with their on-going tradition of naming places after the name of the dynasties or the ethnicities ruling them, much the same way that Iranians – and through them the entire Muslim world - named

Greece as *Yunan* in their historiography of that entity, simply because the Iranians came into contact first with the *Ionian* ethnicity of Greece in the antiquity. Thus, it is obvious why the Greeks named Iran as *Persia* which originally has always been and still is but a province in southern Iran where the ancient dynasties; Achaeminid and Sassanid had emerged. The term *Persia* however, became more solidly founded in the Western man's culture when it entered biblical texts and somewhat sanctified. Nevertheless, the term Iran saved its place in Western man's cultural thinking in more obscure forms such as a name for female persons; i.e. *Iran* in Persian language; *Irene* in Latin, Germanic, Armenian and other Western languages, while its prefix 'IR' representing mysticism of *land of Aryans*, is to be seen in country names like *Ireland*, Which comes from *Éire* of a Proto-Celtic origin, that is a reflex of its Proto-Indo-European roots. In today's common and official usage of the variation, it is of consequence to note that while the language and literatures, 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* seem to be much older than its contemporary variety as its modern version exists only with its legitimacy being tied to the normative territorial ideas, and as Alexander Murphy (2003) reminds us; the *pattern of* modern *states reflect*s *the pattern of nations*. Hence, little doubt that modern concepts of *state* and *territory* developed in medieval Europe; nevertheless it is hard not to heed 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 ancient world (Taylor 1989). Yet, it is inevitable that even in that capacity they represented the notion of a 'line' in space designed to

separate the proverbial 'us' from 'them'. In deed, there are references in ancient Persian literature to modern-like state, territory, and border. Similarly when considering the scale of both belligerent and peaceful contacts between Roma and Iran, the likelihood exists that these Persian notions could have influenced Roman civilization.

A mixture of ancient Greco-Roman and Persian civilizations seem 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 about 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 like when conquering Iran Alexander the Great 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: *if 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, attainment of which will be his mission in Iran;

بدانید که امروز دارا منم   گر او شد همان آشکارا منم

همان است ایران که بود از نخست   بباشید شادان دل و تندرست

جز از نیکنامی و فرهنگ و داد   ز رفتار گیتی مگیرید 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

Though the Achaemenids waged wars and captured territories, in their concept of state, they were culturally oriented more than any concern for the rigidity of physical space. Various satrapies were defined along the lines of cultural and ethnic divides. In deed, eminent scholars like Will Daurant (trans.1988: 412) and 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. Quoting from T. R. Glover's writings on Persian civilization Nayer-Nouri, an eminent writer of ancient Persian civilization, asserts*: the Persians set new ideas before mankind, ideas for the world's good government with utmost of 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 BC) and Xenophon (430? - 355? BC) confirm that the Achaemenids (559 - 330 BC) founded a federal kind of state, a vast commonwealth of autonomous nations, aided by state apparatus, thus making *state* and *federalism* central to Iran's governance from the earliest time. Founder of the federation,

Cyrus (*Kurosh*) the Great (559 - 529 BC) 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 federal of global proportions, which included lands of Trans-Oxania, Sind, and Trans-Caucasus as far as what are now Moldavia, Trans-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 religions of all in the federation (Templeton, 1979:14). Moreover in a state described by T. R. Glover (ibid) as *good government* that the Achaemenids created, and according to Cyrus's proclamation in Babylonia (4) that all were *equal in his realm*, ethnic or cultural groups enjoyed large measures of independence in the practice of their language, religion and economies. To uphold religious, cultural and political independence of varying peoples of 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 their land, 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 fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (*chapter xliv*) where it says: *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 site a 'dark side' to this early form of a federative state and/or *good government*. The best some party political considerations of our time could have contemplated - such as the former Baath Party in Iraq - has been to equate Cyrus with a warmongering king

who supported the Zionists (Captive Jews in Babylonia). They blame Cyrus for having brought about the vast commonwealth of Achaeminid state solely by force of arm. These are but blatant anachronisms as Babylonia was not an Arab state. It was but an Akkadian civilization; the Arabs first appeared in Mesopotamia when the Sassanid state created the vassal kingdom of Hirah according to Arab historians like Masudi (1977) and Maqdasi (1906) who have also indicated that Arab settlement of southern Mesopotamia begun after the advent of Islam; and finally the captive Jews in Babylonia could not have had anything to do with *Zionism*, a 20th century phenomenon. Moreover, war has always been an inherent aspect of man's 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, and/thus Cyrus's war on Babylonian tyranny can easily qualify 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, all too scanty as it is, derived from foreign sources (Iliff, 1953) who, tell us that the decree Cyrus issued in Babylonia was about freedom and equality for all, including the Babylonians and the captive Jews alike, and it was for this broad-minded policy that he is so praised in the biblical literatures of the West and Islam. And that it was because of this broad-minded policy of the Achaeminid king that won allegiance of many peoples including the Greeks of Ionian cities (Templeton 1979), Cyprus and Jerusalem who joined their federation and that, other than the force of arm, there must have been certain attractions in that system of governance for them to join it voluntarily. That attraction was from Iran's federal tradition of statehood based on justice which by the turn of the Christian era became Iran's spirit and its territorial identity, turning the idea of Iran into a distinct state of mind.

'Justice' as the foundation-stone of Iranian state system

Meanwhile, Considering that *justice* was the corner stone of ancient Iranian Political philosophy, the idea that ancient Iranian spatial arrangement have contributed to the evolution of the concept of democracy in the West cannot be too difficult to contemplate. There are those who say that when founded the federative state of many nations in what was to become known in the West as the 'Persian Empire', Cyrus did not invent righteousness and tolerance out of genius of his own, but that he was following a deep-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 respects for varying religious beliefs from the Medes whose king; Deicos (Diaxus) had collected all Iranians into one nation (Nayer-Nouri 1971: 188). Nevertheless, the earliest available evidence suggesting that *justice* formed the foundation of the good governance in ancient Iranian tradition of statehood as Cyrus decreed *freedom* and *equality* when opening Babylonia in 539 BC.

According to the stales left for posterity at *Naghsh-e Rostam* in western Iran, Darius the Great (*Dariush I*) (521- 486 BC), organized thirty satrapies, each under an autonomous king assisted by a Satrap representing central authority of the king of kings. He appointed commanders of army and secretaries of political affairs. He fixed the tributes of each satrapy: appointed tribute-collectors and traveling inspectors called *eyes and ears* of the great king, to watch over the Satraps and army commanders. He introduced currencies of gold *darics* and silver *siglus* facilitating trade exchange in the federation (Nayer-Nouri, 1971, 221): built the 2,700 kilometers long Royal Road from Susa, northwest of 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 for the map of this road and civilized countries alongside it to be engraved on a plate of bronze (5) that was perhaps the first detailed geographic map in history. He established a postal service with relays of men and horses at short intervals, and caused a canal to be dug in Egypt to link 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; a federative system in which peoples of varying ethnicities were given the right of governing their affairs autonomously with their religion and cultural identity respected. Thus it seems quite plausible that equality and justice were the essence of governance in that ancient tradition of statehood. The administration of justice 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 suggest 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*Shahanshahi* order of Iran, peoples of varying different ethnicities enjoyed no autonomy or self-rule in the *imperial* system that the Romans developed. On the same premise it may not be difficult to presume that the Romans evolved their idea of *Senate* on the basis of ancient Parthian MEHESTAN, the House of the Elders, or the *vice versa*.

Evolution of state and territory under the Sassanids

The Parthians (247BC 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 the latter enjoying greater autonomy (Vadiei, 1974: 186). This system of diffusion of power was revived by the Safavids of the 16th century Iran in the form of *ialats* and *biglarbeigis*.

Around the dawn of 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 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, boundary pillars etc. There are even hints in the ancient literature of river boundary between Iran and Turan in Central Asia (6).

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 elaborated system of 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 the nobles by dividing the political structure in the form of seven classes: the ministers, priesthood, supreme judges, and 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 (7) lent a more practical meaning to the Achaeminid concept of the 'four corner' 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 an *espahbad* or general commanded the army of each Pazgous. In his epic *Shahnameh*, Ferdosi describes these *kusts* or *Pazgous* in the following fashion: 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*): 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 of consequence to note 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 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* –سامان mostly 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 Iranian borders met those of the Roman's, the vassal kingdom of *Hirah* - حیره was created in 5th century by the Sassanids on 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* قصان in the region now known as Syria, (Masudi, 1977: 467). Moreover, it is notable that by virtue of its struggle against Arab rule, Iran played the role of a cultural barrier throughout the Islamic era, which guaranteed its cultural survival in the subsequent periods. The precise location of the line of this cultural barrier can be defined somewhere around western peripheries of Iranian Plateau, in Mesopotamia, which played the same

role in pre-Islamic era between the Persian and Roman empires. Here David Mitrani's theory of 'middle zone'– defined 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 Iran and powers to her west. This geography prevented total prevalence of other cultures over the Iranian Plateau throughout the history.

To their eastern flanks 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, at least in one instance the Iranians created border line with the Turans in the east. This must have resulted from the degree in which rivaling powers to their east and west exerted pressure on their federation. While rivalries with the Romans in the West were of geopolitical nature which evolved in a situation similar to Anglo-Russian Great Game of 19th century in Central Asia, with the Turans to the east, rivalries were of intense strategic nature culminating in many wars, which in turn necessitated demarcation of border lines that separated the two.

It is noteworthy that not only did the Sassanids revive the Achaemenid organisation of the state and territory, but also fashioned the term *Iranshahr* ايرانشهر (the country of Iran), which must have arguably been for the first time that a state or a nation had assumed an identity enshrined in a name that is independent of the name of its ruling dynasties (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999 *Iran va...*147-8). Having stated details of Bahram's debate with a Roman emissary on the subject of varying Roman and Persian style of *statesmanship* and *diplomacy*, Ferdosi asserts that victorious in his campaign against eastern Turks, Bahram (420 – 438AD) commissioned construction of border pillars between the two countries. He decided that river Oxus (*Jeyhun*) would form river boundary between the two sides. In his account of this, Ferdosi says:

بر آورد میلی ز سنگ و ز گچ   که کس را ز ایران و ترك و خلج

نبودی گذر جــز بفرمان شاه   همان نیـــز جیحون میانجی بـــه راه

Literally meaning:

> (he) constructed pillars of stones and plaster, ensuring that no one from Iran or Turk or other nationals would pass beyond unless permitted by the Shah, who has also made *Jeyhun* (river Oxus) a median 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 shoot by Arash the archer from the top of Demavand pick of the Elborz range, lands that mark the border of Iran and Turan in the legendary beginning of Iran, in the historical part of the *Shahnameh*, he refers to the process of boundary demarcation in no uncertain terms. Thus it is Ferdosi who asserted a thousand years ago that boundary pillars were 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 had also defined 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. The permission from the king for passing beyond the border might also be considered as the initial form of a passport in today's term.

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 no more than the limits of the varying 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 the 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 the 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 on 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 British Museum) declaring *equality* and *justice* for individuals as well as freedom for religious-cultural entities in the realm. These notions formed the political fabric of the Persian State as Darius the Great also frequently refers to *justice* in the stales he bequeathed to posterity. This is to suggest that while the Athenians were concerned about the 'rights' of the 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 Daurant (Pers. trans._1988). Even a philosopher as widely misrepresented as Friedrich Nietzche whose writings many

philosophers found difficult to take seriously, seems to have formed his view of the civilized Western man under the influence of 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, on the other hand, identifies Arab Caliphate as an intermediate culture through which the Persian tradition of statehood influenced modern world. Quoting early Arab and Islamic records he argues that: *the Fakhri, an early – fourteenth century manual of politics and history, relates how the caliph, Umar, when at his wits 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.* (Levy, 1953, 61). Of the influence of the Iranian legacy of statehood 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, based 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

But just 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 in the thin air. Nevertheless, Iran, as a fundamental cultural heartland remained to shape political geography of the world of Islam for centuries to com. 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 in its place a number of ethnic authorities of Turkic and Iranic background ruled in the Iranian Plateau on the strength of what they could remember of Persian cultural and political heritage of the pre-Islamic Achaemenids and Sassanids era. Even when Timberline's grand son 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 and literature and Persian arts. In a similar fashion *Persian* was adopted by the vast Ottoman Empire as the official language of the state for sometime, which strengthens the idea that Iran had become a powerful empire of

the mind in its post-Islamic experience of living out of the body. Iranians' embrace of Shiite Islam over Sunni Islam of Arab Caliphate was essentially a desire to revive Iran's cultural and national identity. The ancient Persian concept of justice gained new currency, transmuted 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 revives again

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

Iran's re-emergence as a vast federative Shahanshahi in the post-Islamic era with its powerful sense of identity had to wait until the emergence on the political seen of medieval South, Central and West 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). Yet, what the Safavids (1501-1722) revived in terms of territorial organization of space was but a vague adaptation of Abbasid Caliphate's interpretation of the Sassanid system of statehood, and not the original version (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1995, Interod.). 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 was no doubt 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 a comprehensive territorial dismemberment.

By the 1920s decade no less than 14 countries, including the modern nation-state of Iran, emerged out of the Safavid federative Shahanshahi.

Iranian Identity in the era of Modernity

By 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 twentieth century but considerable progress has been made towards a home grown democracy which out to be preceded by a number of adjustments in her national and territorial identities. These occurred in two different movements: first the move for modernism by Reza Shah Pahlavi who established the Pahlavi dynasty in 1924 and successfully sacked regionalism of separatist nature; put an end to the old and decadent federative system that had by the turn of the twentieth century reduced to mere *feudalism* which was the cause of territorial dismemberment of the country; laid the foundation of the growth of a modern and industrial Iran; and architected a modern nation-state out of the core areas of the old feudal state 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 this time with a complete reversal of emphasis aimed at downgrading Iran's pre-Islamic identity. 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 *universality of Islam* which defies all ideas of border and territorial identity. But manifestation of twentieth century's realities modified this approach fundamentally and the Islamic Republic of Iran has successfully translated itself into territorial identity within the confines of a nation-state.

NOTES

1- This wall was built at the time of the Parthian civilization (247 BC 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 Oxford University in late 1970s, authorized this quotation from his 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 literatures that studies pre-Islamic history of Iran and its association with other political entities of the antiquity, but hitherto little attention has been paid to the way it describes political relations in association with political organization of the space in the ancient world. Popularly known 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 political geography of ancient world bears remarkable resemblance to the modern concepts of political geography that evolved in post-Westphalia Europe. But is it possible that he, who lived a thousand years ago, well before Westphalia treaty of 1648, had learnt these ideas from modern Europe or the fact is that what Ferdosi had described in terms of evolution of political thoughts and political geography in ancient Persia had influenced medieval Europe. This is certainly a fascinating question deserving further exploration with the help of reliable analysis of the socio-political developments of the ancient world.

4- The text of this proclamation is in cuneiform Acadian (Akkadian), inscribed on a clay cylinder now in British Museum'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, Shahnameh of Ferdosi speaks of legendary Jamshid Shah, founder of Iran, who had a jam showing the world. From this concept comes the mystical crystal ball in almost all cultures. Yet, this author is of opinion that Jamshid Shah was none other than Darius the Great who had the bronze disc 'jam' showing the map of the civilized world. There are other reasons supporting this theory the discussion on which goes beyond the scope of this article.

6- Turan is a term used by Ferdosi (d. AD 1020) in his Shahnameh, the greatest work of epic literature in Persian language, in reference to peoples of Turkic origin in the eastern fringes of Iran. What constitutes 'Central Asia' now was 'Greater Khorasan' in most parts of the post-Islamic Iranian geography and its eastern most formed parts of "Turan" before that.

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

A-Tabari, Mohammad, Tarikh-e Tabari, Persian translation, 11 volumes, published by Bongah-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab, Tehran 1974.

B- Maqdasi, al-Beshari, Ahsan at-Taqasim fi Marefat al-Aqalim, Liden 1906.

C- Biruni, Abu-Reihan, Qanoun-e Masudi, Published in Dakan 1955.

D- Ibn al-Faqih, Abu-Bakr Mohammad, Moktasar-e al-Boldan, 279 AH, Liden 1885.

E- Ibn Huqal, Mohammad, Surat al-Ardh, London 1938.

F- Estakhri, Ebrahim, Al-Masalek val-Mamalek, Liden 1889.

G- Hamavi, Abdullah Yaqut, Mo'jam al-Boldan, Cairo 1906.

H- Masudi, Abul-Hassan Ali Ibn Hussein, Moravvege az-Zahab, Pers. Trans., Bongah-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab, Tehran 1977.

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