

Boundary Politics and International Boundaries of Iran

*With Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan Republic,
Bahrain, (the autonomous republic of Ganjah) Iraq,
Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar,
Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Turkmenistan,
and the United Arab Emirates*

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*Boundary Politics and International Boundaries of Iran:
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PREFACE

Boundary and territoriality have often been the cause of conflicts and erosion of security in international relations, and Iran is no exception in this respect. In fact, with at least fifteen neighbours, Iran has the largest number of neighbours in the world, and that is the reason for the existence around Iran of arguably the most varied and complex boundary issues in the world. Cross-border issues here greatly influence the regional economic and political life of the country. For example, determining Iran's territorial sovereignty and her boundary delimitation in the Caspian Sea extensively influenced her national interests and foreign relations in the 1990s, especially considering that the United States was trying to neutralize her extremely important geopolitical and geo-strategic position between the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea energy depots: territorial challenges to Iran in the south by the United Arab Emirates in respect of the islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs and to the west by former Baath regime of Iraq in Shatt al-Arab and Khuzestan have had a major impact on Iran's political life over the past three decades.

In spite of this situation, Iran is one of a handful of the world's major nations that has not systematically studied, catalogued, and analyzed information about its boundaries. This is mainly because Iran's boundaries have not, as yet, been systematically and comprehensively studied by scholars and academics. This shortcoming is particularly noticeable when remembering the fact that although such concepts as *state*, *territory*, and *boundary* have been formulated in Europe of 19th century, they are rooted in the ancient Persian civilization.

Apart from legendary Arash the Archer, the range of whose arrows determined Iran's frontiers, historical documents confirm that the Achaemenids of 500 BC founded the first empire of global aspiration and fashioned the concepts of "state", "territory" and "frontiers." About a thousand years later the Persian concept of frontier developed into the concept of "boundary" similar to the modern sense of the term "*a line in space that separated*" Iran from her neighbours. 10th century epic *Shahnameh* of Ferdosi reports that the Sassanid Bahram IV (420 – 438 AD) commissioned construction of boundary pillars between Iran and Turan to its east. He decided that River Oxus (Jeyhun) would form a river boundary between the two sides.

This is indeed creation of a boundary line within the modern forms of the concept. This is Ferdosi saying, a thousand years ago, that boundary pillars were erected six hundred years earlier, and people were prohibited from going beyond them unless permitted by the king himself, which must have amounted to the early form of a passport from the Sassanid State.

The territorial inheritance of the nation state of Iran from the Qajar dynasty in 1921 was much reduced from earlier periods and weakly defined in international practice. In this volume, attempts will be made to examine the evolution of the international boundaries of the country in the contemporary epoch during which Iran has been buffeted by an apparently unending series of international and regional crises. It is against this background that Iran today needs to compile and catalogue not only historical data about the evolution of its concept of territoriality and boundary, but also is in need of seriously studying its boundaries with her neighbours in order to reduce the causes of friction with the outside world.

In this volume Iran's boundaries will be studied by the author/editor and a number of other experts in the field. This study will be divided into four sections each including a number of chapters in the following:

A- Iran's Boundaries in the North: the Caucasus, the Caspian, and Central Asia

Two experts from Iranian universities will examine Iran's boundaries in the Caucasus, which began to take shape in the wake of the conclusion of the treaties of Golestan (1813) and Turkmenchai (1828). These boundaries were first defined with Russia largely against Iran's territorial rights and interests. The Khanats and local chiefs played an important role throughout history in shaping the political geography of the border regions between Iran and Russia. The Soviets, especially under Stalin, introduced serious changes to the regional political geography by moving the population around and turning occupied territories into a number of new republics. In some instances, they changed the historical names of geographical localities for questionable reasons.

Improved Soviet-Iranian relations in the 1960s allowed the two sides to consolidate existing boundaries in most cases and began cross-border co-operation in various fields. The fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the independent or autonomous republics of Armenia, Karabakh, Nakhjevan, and the Republic of Azerbaijan have brought territorial and boundary sensitivities into the open once again. These territorial and border sensitivities have led to new conflicts, but they could also precipitate cooperation in the region.

A number of Iranian experts will state that, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and emergence of the US geopolitics of the New World Order, a combination of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia have emerged as one geo-strategic 'region' with enormous geopolitical significance. US oil and gas companies have invaded this region and, with the signing of many oil and gas agreements, the United States has been able to claim substantial 'interest' in this region. The US's strategy of neutralizing Iran's unique position between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf has influenced Iran's relations with many of her neighbours, including Russia, Turkey, and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Diverting oil and gas pipelines of the Caspian Sea from the Iranian routes, on the other hand, has had far reaching consequences for Iran's national interests in the region and has put Iran at a disadvantage in the geo-economic rivalries with her neighbours. Meanwhile, this strategy has substantially increased tension in the Iran-US relationship, with major security implications for the rest of West Asia. Though Iran prefers the Caspian Sea to be declared as a condominium or a sea of common use for the five littoral states, it realizes that, even in the case of full condominium, no country can define its boundaries on the coastline. That is to say that any legal regime division of at least coastal waters among the littoral states is inevitable. Yet, the fact is that bilateral agreements on coastal curve, though legally allowed, cannot replace a comprehensive legal regime decided by the five and satisfactory to the five.

At the end of this section, attention will be paid to a brief study of Iran's north-eastern boundaries that is the boundary line between Iran and Turkmenistan.

B- Iran's Western Boundaries

In this section, Iran's boundaries in the west will be studied by three experts from Iran and the United Kingdom, as well as the editor. They will state that Iran's western boundaries began to emerge in the 17th century, predating the emergence of the European concept of 'boundary'. Some of these borders were settled by war, and others through negotiation, mediation, or arbitration, and even as a result of international decision at the Berlin Congress. Cross-border

tribes have influenced the formation of the boundaries between Iran and Turkey, which are amongst Iran's most stable with no major differences between the two countries.

The emergence of Iran's boundaries with Iraq also dates back to the time of the Ottoman Empire. Local tribes have had a significant role in shaping the political geography of western Iranian boundaries. Some of these tribes consider themselves 'Arab', although they are from Mesopotamia, which, for more than two thousand years, had been part of Iranian realm.

Land and river boundaries in Mesopotamia have been the cause of much controversy between Iran and Iraq, with a catalogue of political and military ups and downs; pacts and protocols; and a major war that lasted for eight years. These controversies have expanded over several decades to include almost all aspects of political relations between the two countries. Even the war has not settled these controversies and there are still many instances of territorial and boundary issues that prevent peace and cooperation between the two neighbours. Today's crisis in Iraq is bound to influence Iranian borderlands. Even if the United States employed the utmost care in preserving Iraq's territorial integrity, its war on Iraq is bound to cause the influx of new waves of terrorism. Iran, like any other nation, was and is naturally opposed to any pre-emptive or unilateral military intervention in Iraq or any other country. This is not to overlook the fact that Iraq of Baath Party was indeed a serious threat to the peace and security of West Asia. Iraq has invaded Iran and Kuwait and has used chemical and biological weapons against Iranians and its own citizens in the past.

C- Iran's Eastern Boundaries

Nowhere in Iran has the role of autonomous local Amirs or Khans in shaping territorial and border arrangements been as significant as that played in eastern Iranian borderlands. Though the eastern frontiers of Iran have long been settled, there are still areas of uncertainty that need to be addressed. This is particularly true in the case of boundaries with Afghanistan, where civil wars have negatively influenced Iran's border areas. The influx of about two million Afghan refugees has left its permanent mark on the demography and human geography of Iran's eastern borderlands, while the traffic of illicit drugs has escalated dangerously. The hope in this context is that these developments may attract attention in both capitals to the urgency of a return to normalcy and re-establishment of security of border areas between the two countries.

More urgent, however, are the case of Hirmand River boundary and the issue of water distribution between Afghanistan and Iran. Previous agreements have failed to settle this problem, but they provide the necessary background information and useful bases on which a permanent and equitable solution can be found. Furthermore, the meeting in 2002 of the presidents of the two countries seems to have resulted in new agreements on the water use of Hirmand River. No detailed information has been made available as yet, but the two neighbours seem to have decided to settle boundary issues in a technical manner away from the sentimentalities of the past.

E- Iran's Boundaries in the Persian Gulf

Iran's maritime boundaries in the Persian Gulf have all been settled except in two areas: one is with UAE where territorial claims on islands of Tunbs and Abu Musa by the United Arab Emirates have prevented delimitation of relevant maritime areas. The other area is the north-western end of the Persian Gulf where Iran, Iraq and Kuwait have not been able to define their realms and boundaries. This is mainly because Iraq is unable to define a starting point for maritime division, owing to its continued claims on Iranian and Kuwaiti border areas.

Although some measures have been foreseen in the existing boundary arrangements to prevent horizontal drilling for extraction from cross-border oil fields, no measures exist to regulate the use of energy from the newly discovered cross-border gas fields. Sizeable gas fields, such as south Pars and Arash between Iran on the one hand and Qatar and Kuwait on the other, are the subject of controversies between Iran and these states. However, unlike some areas mentioned previously, cross-border cooperation here can lead to a just and equitable settlement of these controversies.

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Boundary and Its Origin in the Ancient Persian Tradition

Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh

Whither Boundary?

Boundary can 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.

Boundaries can also be described as lines demarcating the outer limits of territory under the Sovereign jurisdiction of a nation-state (Dikshit, 1995: 54).

Whereas man was preoccupied, in the ancient world, with the idea of establishing the “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. Endeavouring to distinguish frontiers from boundaries, geographers have used various etymologies. Having quoted Kristof (1959) that the etymology of each term derives their essential difference; that frontier comes from the notion of ‘in front’ as the “spearhead of the civilisation” and boundary comes from ‘bounds’ implying territorial limits, Taylor (1989) observes that: “*Frontier is therefore outward-oriented and boundary inward-oriented. Whereas a boundary is a definite line of separation, a frontier is a zone of contact.*” (1)

A frontier, therefore, functioned in the more ancient times as a zone of contact between two socially and politically united entities on its two extremes and can safely be described as the embodiment of the outer limits of a state’s power and influence, and/or it can be described as the embodiment of the edges of the political push of one power against another. Boundaries in the Persian Gulf, for instance, are, on the whole, the manifestation of political push between the Persian and Ottoman empires in the beginning, and later between British and Iranian powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Best examples of frontier zones in the ancient world were those between the Persian and Roman empires in the areas now known as Iraq and Syria.

With the emergence of the world-economy in the nineteenth century, which in turn was caused by the development of imperialism of global aspirations of the earlier periods, and with the development of the inherent structural phenomena of the new world economic order, such as trade and communication systems, the need for defining precise points of contacts between states, through their political and economic agents, and establishing customs houses gave birth to the idea of creating border lines or “boundaries”. The new border-lines were defined first in North America, Europe, Australia, South Africa and boundaries between Iran and British India – now Pakistan.

The functions or practices of boundaries change overtime. These function can be economic, defensive or military, separating of the sovereign jurisdiction of two countries, interacting of the state system, separating of the societies which have closer ties with each other, control of the emigration, etc. (Glassner, 1993:80-84)

Holdich noted that most of the important wars have arisen over disputed boundaries, therefore authoritative diplomats like Lord Curzon emphasized the military role of the boundaries (Dikshit, 1995:68).

Generally we can categorize the functions of boundaries under:

- 1- Differentiation between two geographical spaces.
- 2- Separating line between two sovereign jurisdictions.
- 3- Integrating the nation.
- 4- The line of war and peace between two countries.
- 5- The line of interaction and connection between two nations.
- 6- The line of control of flows of goods and commodities (Hafeznia, 2000:19)

The most important function of boundary is controlling interactions between two or more countries, providing them with security and also protecting their national interests.

Boundary lines influence the behaviour of the people and governments of their environs. Reciprocally, governments and people affect the behaviour and function of boundaries as well as change the function and structure of the boundaries. Similarly, behaviour and relations between two neighboring countries, to some extent, are influenced by the boundaries (Prescott, 1979: 64-80).

Boundary, an Ancient Persian Concept

While the concept of *frontier* as a vast area or a zone of contact (Kristof, 1959: 259-262) between two states is old and was well established before the modern era, many scholars treat the concept of *boundary* as if it were the product of the past few hundred years. Mirroring a tendency found in the political scientists' literature, many political geographers treat the concept of 'state' – with its 'boundary' component—as a product of the peace treaty of Westphalia in 1648 (Glassner & de Blij, 1989: 46-59). Moreover, it is also widely accepted that the need for a precise territorial definition and segregation of states was an inevitable concomitant of modernity. This new concept is treated as the necessary outcome of imperialism's global aspirations, with its inherent global economic order and trade and communication systems (Taylor, 1989: 144-46).

The concept of 'state' and 'boundary', however, seems to be older than modern era, as 'boundary' exists only in association with a 'state' system—the legitimacy of which being tied to the normative territorial ideas (which are old): *states should be discrete territories and that the pattern of states should reflect the pattern of nations* (Alexander B. Murphy, 2003). There is little doubt that the modern concepts of *state* and *territory* were developed in modern Europe; nevertheless, it is hard to overlook the fact that they are rooted in the periods prior to the emergence of nation-states in Europe. There are indications that ancient civilizations were familiar with the notion of 'state' in connection with territorial and boundary characteristics similar to modern states. 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: 146). 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 other words, they embodied the basic principle for boundary separation. Indeed, there are references in ancient Persian literature to modern-like states, territories, and boundaries. Similarly, when considering the scale of both belligerent and peaceful contacts between Roma and Iran (Persia) (2), the likelihood exists that these Persian notions could have influenced Roman civilization.

A combination of ancient Greek/Roman and Persian civilizations, however, is said to have been a major source of contribution to what culturally constitutes the "West" in our time. Taking into consideration the extent to which Greek and Roman civilizations interacted with that of ancient Persia, little doubt remains about validity of Jean Gottmann's assertion in his letter to this writer (1987) 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 (3).

Verification of this can be sought in historical events, as when conquering Iran Alexander the Great claimed in Persepolis that he was the 'true successor to the Achaemenid Darius III'. Ferdosi (1020 AD), the famous Persian epic poet says of this in his *Shahnameh* (book of kings) (4) that: having conquered Iran, Alexander wrote to the nobles of the country apologizing for having done away with their king *Dara* (Darius III). 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 (Achaemenid) political organization of space, which was modified later by his successors. Alexander also proclaimed justice to be the goal, attainment of which will be his mission in Iran.

گر او شد نهان آشکارا منم	بدانید که امروز دارا منم
بباشید شادان دل و تندرست	همان است ایران که بود از نخست
ز رفتار گیتی مگیرید یاد	جز از نیکنامی و فرهنگ و داد

Bedanid ke emrooz Dara manam
Gar'oo shod nahan ashekara manam
Haman ast Iran ke bood az nokhost
Bebashid shadan del-o tandorost
Joz az nikanamiy-o farhang-o dad
Ze rafter guiti magirid yad

Literally meaning:

Be informed that today I am Dara
If he has disappeared, I am to be seen
Iran is as it 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 the world

(Ferdosi, 1985: III, 330).

Later in the Sassanid period, the inter-linked notions of state, territory, and boundary developed substantially, coming close to their contemporary forms. However, to arrive at a better analysis of these ancient Persian notions, a brief introduction to the history of ancient Iran's political geography seems to be much consequence.

State, Territory, and Boundary in Ancient Persia

Although the Achaemenids waged wars and captured territories, in their overall political conception of space, they were more culturally oriented than concerned with the rigidity of physical space. Various satrapies were defined along the lines of cultural and ethnic divides. Indeed, eminent scholars like Will Daurant (trans.1988: 412) and Filippani-Ronconi (1978:67) maintain that the concept of 'state' is an original Persian 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 researcher of ancient Persian civilization, asserts that:

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 historians/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. Founder of this federation, Cyrus (*Kurosh*) the Great (559 - 529 BC), together with his successors, substantially expanded their new commonwealth 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 commonwealth 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 (5) 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 cultural and political independence of varying peoples of the federation and to respect their religions, 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 Jerusalem, but his respect for captive Jews' religious freedom guaranteed their good will towards the Iranians. He became their prophet and they became the voluntary citizens of the Persian federation. Cyrus commissioned the building of their temple and their reaction was to assess his work as fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (*chapter xlv*) 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 hard to determine a ‘dark side’ to this early example of a ‘federative state’ and/or ‘good government’. The best that 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 (the Jews in captivity in Babylonia). They blame Cyrus for waging wars on varying nations, implying that the vast commonwealth of the Achaemenid state has come about by the force of the arm. These criticisms are based on blatant anachronisms. Babylonia was not an Arab state but an Akkadian civilization; the Arabs first appeared in Mesopotamia when the Sassanid state created the vassal kingdom of Hirah according to Arab historian/geographers like Masudi (1977) and Maqdasi (1906) who have also indicated that Arab settlement of southern Mesopotamia increased after the advent of Islam; and finally the captive Jews in Babylonia have nothing to do with Zionism which is a 20th century phenomenon. Moreover, war has always been an inherent part of political behaviour of mankind. Even in the age of modernity when “war” is detested as an act of immorality in the domain of human behaviour, there are the moralists who defend the so-called “Just war”. Babylonia was an Akkadian civilization ruled by tyranny according to biblical texts; therefore Cyrus’s war against 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 (J. H. Iliff, 1953) that were at war with Iran most of the time. It is in deed a matter of regret that we do not have historical accounts from pre-Islamic Iranians themselves that would deal with details of wars and political conflicts that involved ancient Persia or analyzing social structure and religious and gender status or differences of groups and individuals in ancient Persian societies. All we know is that the decree that 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 Achaemenid 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 government for them to join it voluntarily.

‘Justice’ as the Foundation-Stone of the Persian State System

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 claim that when Cyrus the Great founded the federative state of many nations in what was to become the Persian Empire (6), did not invent tolerance, righteousness, and happiness for the people 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 government in ancient Persian

tradition of statehood as the Achaemenid king decreed freedom and equality when conquering Babylonia in 539 BC.

This tradition was observed by all those who succeeded Cyrus in Iran throughout its pre-Islamic history. According to the tales left behind at *Naghsh-e Rostam* in western Iran, Darius I (*Dariush*), known as Darius the Great (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 (Mojtahed-Zadeh 1974: pp. 4-5 & 56-9). He ordered for the map of this road and civilized countries alongside it to be engraved on a plate of bronze (7), 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 caused a canal to be dug in Egypt to link Red Sea to the Nile (see Arbery, 1953).

In matters of state politics, while the Athenians were busy with their peculiar version of citizenship-oriented democracy, the Achaemenids, as has been elaborated, were forging a state system based on independence for cultural groups or nationalities; a federative system in which peoples of varying cultural backgrounds 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 governing 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 Persian traditions of political philosophy have contributed to the development of modern concepts of democracy in the West. Some suggest (see Tavakoli 1998) that the concept of *empire* is perhaps a Roman adoption of the Persian *Shahanshahi* system. 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 Boundary under the Sassanids

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

Around the dawn of Christian era, the concepts of state and territory assumed greater sophistication with the advent of the notion of frontier or boundary in Iran. 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 internal and external 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 (8).

A look at the works of Persian literature relevant to Iran's ancient political geography such as Ferdosi's *Shahnameh* reveals that the Sassanids successfully developed the concepts of 'territory' within the framework of defined boundaries. They created an elaborated system of territorial organization of state. To begin with, the founder of the dynasty revived the Achaemenid 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, the priesthood, supreme judges, and four generals commanding the four armies (Masudi, 1977: 464-5). Khosro Anushirvan the Just (531 – 579 AD) whose administration of justice is widely praised by early Islamic historian/geographers (9) lent a more practical meaning to the Achaemenid concept of the 'four corner' of the realm by placing the twenty countries of the Iranian federation in four major *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 = southern Iran) 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 boundary. It is of consequence to note that the term 'boundary' existed in middle Persian. The Persian equivalents for territory and boundary, attributed to the Sassanid period by Ferdosi, appear synonymously in the form of *Marz-o Boum*, literally meaning boundary and territory. But in Ferdosi's idiosyncratic manner of using these two terms, together they assume the meaning of 'political territory' or 'country' (homeland). *Marz*, meaning boundary, however existed on its own at the time, whereas another middle Persian term for boundary was also in use in the form of *saman*—mostly in reference to a line separating houses from one another in modern Persian. Both concepts of boundary and frontier were in practical use in the Sassanid era. While appointing governors or *Padusbans* for the vassal states, they appointed mayors or *shahrigs* for the cities. They created frontier zones in the west of their federation and boundary 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 states within their four *Kusts*: and the external frontier-keeping states, the most famous of which was the state of *Hirah* or *Manazerah* in Mesopotamia (Masudi, *ibid*).

On the northwestern corner of the Persian Gulf, where Iranian and Roman empires' frontiers met, the vassal kingdom of *Hirah* was created in 5th century by the Sassanids on the 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 for Iran, thereby defusing pressures emanating from the Romans (Masudi, 1977:240). In a similar move, the Romans created the vassal kingdom of *Ghassan* 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 Iran in that region. 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 precise boundaries with the Turans in the east. This must have resulted from the degree in which rivalling 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, rivalries with the Turans to the east were of intense strategic nature culminating in many wars, which in turn necessitated demarcation of boundary lines that separated the two.

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

بر آورد میلی ز سنگ و ز گچ که کس را ز ایران و ترک و خلیج
 نبودی گذر جز به فرمان شاه همو کرد جیحون میانجی به راه

Bar avard mili ze sang-o ze gach
ke kass ra ze Iran-o Turk-o Khalaj
Nabudi gozar joz be farman-e Shah
Hamoo kard Jeyhun mianji be rah

Literally meaning:

(He) constructed pillars of stone and chalk (plaster); thereby 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).

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 boundary (river boundary) between the two political entities. This may be seen as a clear example of the creation of a boundary line in ancient Iran corresponding to the modern understanding of the concept. Similarly, the permission from the king for passing beyond the boundary might be considered as an early form of a passport in today's term.

In the south, the Achaemenid federation included two satrapies: Aaval, the countries now known as Bahrain, Qatar and the Hasa & Qatif provinces of Saudi Arabia, and the state (later became known as Masun) that included areas that in our time belong to Oman and the United

Arab Emirates. The *qanat* underground irrigation system – invented in Achaemenid era – was introduced to the southern coasts of the Persian Gulf at the time of Darius I (Wilkinson, 1975: 98). There are indications that the Parthians (250 BC – 224 AD) made substantial progress in seafaring, but no evidence exists suggesting how the Achaemenids and/or the Parthians treated the issue of territoriality and boundary in those areas. The Sassanids by contrast, organised territories of southern Persian Gulf into two states or satrapies. In the western section, they created the kingdom of Hagar, embracing ancient *Aaval*, whereas in the eastern half they created the vassal kingdom of *Masun* or *Mazun* to embrace modern countries of Oman and United Arab Emirates (Hawley, 1970: 38). The indigenous population of all these areas was Iranian (Dravidians, Elamites etc.) before there were any Arabs living in the coastal south. Arab immigration to these areas began in the 2nd century AD. When the *Kawadh* (*Qobads*) ruled Masun in 6th century BC, immigrant Arabs succeeded in forming a large union. Faced with this massive tribal union of migrant Arabs the Persian rulers treated the newcomers as *Shahrvandan* in Persian or *Ahlalbilad* in Arabic, literally meaning *citizens*, and accorded them a degree of autonomy under their own tribal leadership (Wilkinson, *ibid.*). Here the Iranian federative system is applicable even in the internal context of a vassal kingdom (see Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1999).

Conclusion

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 Achaemenid 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 states 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 Durant (Pers. trans., 1988). Even a philosopher as widely

misrepresented as Friedrich Nietzsche 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 (Iran, 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 “state” 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).

But just what happened to these concepts in the post-Islamic Iran might be of some interest to the scholars. The Arab Caliphate of Baghdad (Abbasid Caliphate 750 to 1258 AD) mimicked the Sassanid organization of territories almost in its entirety (Pourkamal, 1977: 7). They too created frontier-keeping states, one of which was *Khozeimeh Amirdom* of Qaenat that lasted until 1930s (see Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2004). But the prevailing notion of ‘universality’ in Islam would have left no scope for the evolution of the ancient idea of boundary formation in post-Islamic Iran. Consequently Iran’s embrace of Shiite Islam in this period was essentially a desire to revive the country’s cultural and national identity. The ancient Persian concept of ‘*justice*’ gained new currency by transmuting into one of the five basic principles of Shi’ite Islam. More importantly the expanding anti-Caliphate protestant Shi’ism in Iran merged with other local notions of identity, thus paving the way for the revival of the concepts of territoriality and statehood.

What the Safavids revived in terms of territorial organization of space was in reality a vague adaptation of Abbasid Caliphate’s interpretation of the Sassanid system and not the original version. This vagueness of the new state structure suggests that Iran had departed from its own ancient traditions of state and boundary. This 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.

Notes

- 1- This wall was built at the time of the Parthian civilization in Iran (247 BC to 224 AD) to separate that civilization from the Turans of the East.
- 2- The term “Iran” has constituted as the official name of the country or state known by that name in the Middle East, at least since the emergence of the Achaemenid federative state in 6th century BC. 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 the on-going tradition of naming places after the name of the dynasties or ethnic groups ruling them. Hence, they named Iran as “Persia” in reference to the province of Persia in southern Iran where the Achaemenid dynasty had emerged from in mid-6th century BC. This was in accordance with the Greek tradition of political geography of the time, whereas the Iranians of the Achaemenid era were familiar with the concept of state–cum–country and the need to name countries by a term that would not exclusively refer to a particular group or ethnicity among many, but a term common to all in a federative system. It is noteworthy that the term “Iran” means the land of the Aryans and it is a name in reference to all peoples of Iranic ethnic background; peoples like the Persians, the Kurds, the Baluchis, the Guilaks, the Mazandarans, the Khuzistanis, the Khorasanis, and the Azeris etc.
- 3- 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.
- 4- *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.
- 5- The text of this proclamation is in cuneiform Acadian (Akkadian), inscribed on a clay cylinder now in British Museum’s Persian section.
- 6- Some suggest that the concept of *empire* is perhaps a Roman adoption of the Persian *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* system of Iran, peoples of different national and ethnic backgrounds enjoyed no autonomy or self-rule in the *imperial* system that the Romans developed.

- 7- 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.
- 8- 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.
- 9- On Anushirvan's administration of justice see many early Arab and Islamic works of history and geography including:
- A-Tabari, Mohammad Bin Jarir, *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.