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The Concept of Iran in the Works of Contemporary Afghan Intellectuals (Case Study: Ghafran Badakhshani)

Abstract

Ghafran Badakhshani is an Afghan poet, writer, and political activist with a distinctive and critical perspective on the historical-political definition of Iran, the fate of Persian-speaking Tajiks, and the future of Afghanistan. He has published numerous and varied works in both verse and prose on topics such as literature and politics.

This article seeks to answer the question of how the concepts of Iran, Khorasan, and Afghanistan are defined in Badakhshani's works by analyzing his writings and views as a representative of Tajik-origin elites in Afghanistan. The hypothesis of the present study is that while critiquing and rejecting both Iranian and Afghan nationalist historiography, he attempts to redefine the concept of Iran and fully align it with Khorasan—present-day Afghanistan.

The findings of this research indicate that the efforts of Afghans toward mono-ethnic nation-building, accompanied by the denial of other ethnic groups' identities in the country, alongside the indifference of Iranian statesmen to the "Iran" issue and the growing confrontation between Afghan migrants in Iran and the host society, have pushed Tajik elites into a two-front war in the arena of historical narrative. In this narrative, both Iranian and Afghan versions of history are equally critiqued. Without seeking rapprochement with Iran, a contradictory third narrative is constructed in which the name of the ancient Iranian civilization is eliminated and replaced by other phrases such as "Persian homeland" and "Council of the Union of Tajiks." This not entirely successful endeavor, while fueling ethnic conflicts and confrontations within Afghanistan, will also lead to divergence, hostility, and confrontation with Iran. It will harm the people on both sides of the border equally by erasing and denying the name "Iran."

Keywords: Iran – Afghanistan – Ghafran Badakhshani – Khorasan

Ghafran Badakhshani was born on 26 Shahrivar 1361 (solar calendar / 17 September 1982) in Baharestan city, Badakhshan Province. He is a poet, writer, and political activist from Afghanistan. He completed his primary education in Badakhshan and at the age of 13 first spent one year in Russia before migrating to England. Badakhshani earned his bachelor's degree in Political Science in England and then moved to the Netherlands, where he still resides. In the Netherlands, he obtained a PhD in Philosophy. He wrote his first poem in the autumn of 1380 (2001) and began seriously collecting his poetry from 1383 (2004). In addition to his scholarly

and literary activities, he is an active presence in virtual space. He has established a website to reflect his views and works, which he mostly publishes free of charge. Among his written works are *Man Iranam* (I Am Iran, 1392/2013), *Dowlat-e Bi-Mellat* (A Nationless State: A Critique of the Political System Structure in Afghanistan, 1393/2014), *Pashehaye Dordi-kesh* (Dregs-Drinking Mosquitoes, 1396/2017), *Federalism (A Prescription for Multi-Ethnic Afghanistan, 1400/2021)*, and *Ehya-ye Eqtedar-e Tajikan* (Revival of Tajik Power, 1401/2022). The book *Khabgah-e Abrhaye Siyah* (Sleeping Place of Black Clouds) by Badakhshani has also been published in Iran for children and adolescents.

Iran According to Ghafran Badakhshani

Badakhshani has specifically discussed the concept of “Iran” and its relation to present-day Iran and Afghanistan in three books—*Man Iranam*, *Federalism (A Prescription for Multi-Ethnic Afghanistan)*, and *Revival of Tajik Power*—as well as in several interviews. In the preface to his poetry collection *Man Iranam*, he introduces himself as a novice in literature who, due to the prevalence of “heated discourses regarding Afghan identity, language, and values” by “misguided thinkers and custodians of mono-ethnic policies,” and their efforts to “forge our culture and history ... and deprive us of a glorious past and a several-thousand-year-old history,” has become sensitive to his native and historical identity and to the words “Khorasan,” “Iran,” “Iranian,” and “Persian.” He raises important questions such as: “Where is Iran? Who is Iranian? Is being Iranian or Afghan determined by the British or by you and me? Why is identity important and why do we need our historical roots?”

This preface, which seems unusual for a poetry collection, reveals Badakhshani’s most important concerns, which appear throughout all his works—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—in the heart of his poems, articles, conversations, and comments in virtual space. Naturally, answering these questions, shaped by the prevailing atmosphere in Afghanistan, the cultural policies of Pashtun-origin statesmen, the cultural policies of governments in Iran, and Iran’s current approach toward the people of Afghanistan (Tajiks, Hazaras, etc.), requires presenting a narrative of shared history. Through this narrative, the issue of Greater Iran, the formation of modern Afghanistan, and the relationship between contemporary Iran and the countries of the Iranian cultural sphere will become clear.

In an interview with Faraz News Agency, explaining why he wrote the poem “Man Iranam,” he refers to the shared history of Iran and Afghanistan as “the history of contradictions” and claims that “our history is the history of contradictions, which is why it has never been clarified where the borders of Iran were or who the owners of Iran were.” In this interview, he specifically says about the historical and correct name of present-day Iran: “Present-day Iran is sometimes called Fars and sometimes Iran.”

In the preface to *Man Iranam*, Badakhshani considers Iran the general name of a land “located between the Oxus (Amu Darya) and Indus rivers to the Euphrates River, and from the Caucasus and Armenia mountains to the Persian Gulf.” He views Iranian history, culture, and civilization as extending beyond modern Iran. While believing that “with a little reflection on the history of this land, it becomes clear that Iranian identity and culture have never in any historical period belonged to a specific ethnicity or race, and everyone from Turks to Arabs and Persians has had a share in the emergence of this culture and civilization and all share in its values and achievements,” he assigns a special, important, and constructive role to the province of

Khorasan. In his view, this corresponds to the position of present-day Afghanistan. For this reason, he believes that most of the cities and regions mentioned in the *Shahnameh* are those we see in Afghanistan today.

In his conversation with Faraz News Agency, Badakhshani considers one of his motivations for writing the poem “Man Iranam” to be “a complaint against today’s Iran.” He emphasizes that “there is a dispute over ownership here. Iran and the nationalism arising from it sing a different tune to the Iranian ear: that the owner of this identity, civilization, and language is only you, and no one else has any right to this language.”

Beyond Badakhshani’s references to historical Iran, its antiquity, and its borders, his view of contemporary Iran is also noteworthy and linked to his historical narrative. In most of his works, he avoids using the name “Iran” for the country that exists on the current political map of the world and prefers to use the word “Fars.” At the same time, he replaces the name Afghanistan with “Khorasan.” As a result of this substitution, the Ghilzai rebellion in Kandahar turns into Khorasan’s uprising against Fars. By critiquing and rejecting the established narrative of the founding of Afghanistan by Ahmad Khan Durrani (Abdali), he refers to Mirwais Hotaki as “the first person who tried in 1707 AD to create an Afghan government” and believes that Mirwais succeeded in “the first attempt by Pashtun tribes to create a political community for Pashtuns.”

Badakhshani describes Reza Shah’s action in changing the international name of his kingdom from Persia to Iran as equivalent to changing the name of Khorasan to Afghanistan and as a clear example of “historical forgery.” He links the silence and acquiescence of the Afghan government regarding this name change to the policy of Pashtunization of Afghanistan. Quoting Wasif Bakhtari, he writes: “When Reza Shah’s government asked the government of Zahir Shah at the time to agree to the change of the name Persia to Iran in the League of Nations, Prime Minister Hashem Khan accepted this request without question because the policy of making the culture of this country monolingual and mono-voiced was on the government’s agenda.”

Badakhshani agrees with the arguments of Ahmad Ali Kohzad, Abdul Hai Habibi, Habibullah Zamrial, and Sarwar Guya Etemadi. He believes that, just as they correctly raised their criticisms with the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time, “the name Iran should be placed in a state of historical suspension.” He argues that not only was Reza Shah’s government not entitled to assign the name Khorasan to one of its provinces, but the Afghan government should also have objected to naming the ruling dynasty of Iran “Pahlavi,” because “Pahlavi does not refer to an ethnicity but to culture and language, and this Pahlavi of the Parthians also existed in parts of the current geography of Afghanistan.”

Eight years after the publication of the poetry collection and the historical narrative in its preface—and his sympathy with older Afghan historians regarding the injustice of Reza Shah’s name change from Persia to Iran—Badakhshani, in his interview with Faraz News Agency, pointed to some positive consequences of this action and said: “It is fortunate that we were able to preserve part of this identity in Iran, which is not a bad thing that the name Iran and Khorasan and this language and identity are still alive. If they had not named this land Iran, perhaps, like Afghanistan, a new and rootless name would have taken its place, or if the name Khorasan had not been preserved, a rootless name would have replaced it. Of course, it should not be forgotten that history is alive, and no one can deny us, but Khorasan could also have been forgotten like Afghanistan.”

From Khorasan and Ariana to Afghanistan

In Badakhshani's narrative, Khorasan fluctuates between the name of a historical province today, the eastern half of Iranian civilization (Eastern Iran), sometimes the civilization itself, a substitute for the name Iran, and even an equivalent for Afghanistan. Although Badakhshani defends an identity and civilization that he prefers not to call Iran, he believes that "Iran has collapsed" and that "we cannot and should not erase today's borders." For this reason, he considers himself a citizen of Afghanistan—a newly emerged country born of colonialism with, in his view, a forged name that is a sign of mono-ethnic and Pashtunization policy. He avoids mentioning its name just as he does with Iran. At the same time, he criticizes the emphasis of Afghan government officials on the name "Ariana," saying: "In Afghanistan, we ourselves have turned our backs on the fact that we are not owners of this identity [Iranian civilization]; there is no such thing as Khorasan, and all of Afghanistan's emphasis is on Ariana, which is the name of a large plateau that has neither borders, nor language, nor a specific identity."

Badakhshani places the constructed identity of Ariana in opposition to Persian glory and calls this region "Khorasan-zamin" (the land of Khorasan), using an expression usually applied to Iran in history. He re-sings Ferdowsi's poem in praise of Iran—"Woe if Iran is ruined / and becomes the den of leopards and lions"—this time for Khorasan: "Alas for Khorasan that has been ruined / and has become the pavilion of four-legged beasts."

On the other hand, a similar idea to the foundation of the poem "Man Iranam"—which equates Afghanistan (ancient Khorasan) with true Iran—appears in other forms in his other works, including the poetry collection *Pashehaye Dordi-kesh*. There, Badakhshani sings:

"From Mashhad to Badakhshan is Khorasan
Khojand and Tus and Tehran are Khorasan
In short, wherever Nowruz has grown
The soul of that people's body is Khorasan"

The birthplace of Abu Muslim, Ustadhis, al-Muqanna, and Zoroaster—who are Khorasani before and more than they are Iranian.

Afghan Activists and Badakhshani's Narrative of History

Badakhshani is not the only Persian-speaking Afghan who deliberately uses the name Khorasan instead of Afghanistan. Dr. Latif Pedram, leader of the National Congress Party of Afghanistan and one of the most influential Tajik-origin political figures—who also has intellectual affinity and closeness with the National Resistance Front led by Ahmad Massoud—frequently uses the word Khorasan instead of Afghanistan and Fars for present-day Iran in his works and conversations.

Mohammad Hassan Kakar, an Afghan historian, is another researcher who avoids using the name Iran for present-day Iran and, like Ghafran Badakhshani, introduces Afghanistan as the true owner and heir of Iranian civilization and name. Although Kakar accepts that Khorasan was

a land in the east of Iran and part of the Sasanian Iranshahr, he simultaneously refers to this province as a country and equates it with present-day Afghanistan. In Kakar's narrative, the Hotakis are a ruling dynasty that conquered from outside Fars, and Mahmud Afghan is considered one of the youngest conquerors of his time who occupied Safavid Isfahan and dominated the Fars people.

It is true that prominent Afghan historians from Mir Ghulam Mohammad Gobar to Ahmad Ali Kohzad, Mir Seddiq Farhang, Mohammad Azam Sistani, Habibullah Rafi, Farooq Ansari, and the official narrative in history and patriotism textbooks during the Republic period—unlike this Tajik narrative—have eliminated the name Khorasan along with the name Iran. They prefer to present the name Afghanistan as an independent and glorious civilization situated between Iran and India, exposed to harm, attack, and aggression by its two neighbors. However, what seems to make the official Afghan narrative similar to that of the Tajiks is naming as “Fars” a geography that historical sources refer to as Iran. These researchers prefer to name it with other names such as Fars in order to historically justify the new country of Afghanistan's ability to benefit from its heritage.

From Khorasan to Iranshahr

Now the question is: Where is Khorasan? Is it the name of a civilization or a province among the provinces of Iran? Can historical Khorasan be precisely equated with the current political geography of Afghanistan? Furthermore, which geographical region does Fars refer to, and what are its similarities and differences with Iranshahr?

European maps, along with geographical texts, are reliable sources that can help us understand the geographical position and naming of these regions. Some of these maps are drawn according to the Ptolemaic tradition and specifically relate to Iran. Maps by Giacomo Gastaldi (1548), Girolamo Ruscelli (1561), Antonio Magini (1596), Matthäus Quad (1600), van der Keere (1610), Matthäus Merian (1636), Philipp Clüver (1667), Olfert Dapper (1672), and Pieter van der Aa (1714)—all drawn during the Safavid period in Iran—name this great empire and its southwestern province “Pars” (Persia). This naming follows the Greek tradition and occurred because the Greeks encountered the Persian people and identified the entire realm by their name. In these maps, Persia or Pars is an empire bordering India, with provinces such as Khorasan and Sistan. Thus, contrary to Badakhshani's constructed historical narrative, the name Fars was not limited to the geography of present-day Iran but was the name of a civilization—equivalent to Iran. All Iranian historians used this word to name the land, and the name Iran is repeatedly mentioned in international documents of this period, including the treaty between Peter the Great of Russia and Shah Tahmasp II of the Safavids and his letter to Ottoman Sultan Ahmed III. Historical sources also indicate that, contrary to today's Afghan narrative, the name Khorasan was not the name of a neighboring civilization but the name of a province among the provinces of Iran.

The naming of Khorasan as a province of Persia continues in later maps during the Afsharid period—for example, in maps by Isaak Tirion (1744), Emanuel Bowen (1747), and Georges Louis Le Rouge (1747)—and in even later maps during the Zand and early Qajar periods, such as those by George Rollos (1770), Rigobert Bonne (1771), Thomas Kitchin (1782), and Antonio Zatta (1784).

Of course, the presence of migrant ethnic groups such as Uzbeks gradually caused fluctuations in the borders of Khorasan, but there is still no mention of Khorasan as a country, nor any trace of Afghanistan on the maps.

From 1797, there is a map by French cartographers Adam Mantel and Pierre Grégoire Chanlaire titled “New Iran and the Empire of the Afghans.” This map, drawn during the reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, reflects French attention to the East at the time of Napoleon’s rise to power and his campaign in Egypt, which, in colonial rivalries, drew his gaze toward India, the wealthy British colony. The cartographer included parts of eastern Iran in the territory of an empire he called “Afghan.” However, since other surviving maps from the Qajar period (such as those by Charles Smith and A. Jones in 1801, Gottlieb Reichard in 1804, John Pinkerton in 1811, Abraham Rees in 1819, etc.) show no trace of an Afghan Empire, it can be concluded that the mapping by these two Frenchmen was influenced by Napoleon’s political ambitions and, of course, the fragile situation of Iran’s eastern borders after the fall of the Safavids—an ill-fated legacy passed to the Qajar period. This ultimately led, during Naser al-Din Shah’s reign, to the conclusion of the Treaty of Paris, in which the rulers of Khorasan or Afghanistan had no role; only representatives of Iran and Britain were present. In this treaty, Iran renounced any claim to Herat and other Afghan territories.

In addition to old maps, in all ancient geographical and historical texts—from “Shahrstanha-ye Iranshahr” and “The Geography of Movses Khorenatsi” to “Masalik wa Mamalik” by Istakhri and “A’laq al-Nafisa” by Ibn Rustah—Khorasan is the name of the prosperous eastern province of Iranshahr. Even in historical texts from the early Qajar period, during and after Fath-Ali Shah’s reign, when the eastern regions of Iran were in great turmoil and the presence and power displays of the British, along with Russian and French greed, created further difficulties for the region’s political-military situation, Khorasan is still described—as Zayn al-Abidin Shirvani wrote in *Bustan al-Siyaha* (1247 AH)—as “the greatest pillar of the country of Iran” and “a famous realm of the world” consisting of “four districts: Tokharistan, Marv-e Shajahan, Nishapur, and Herat.”

Accordingly, researchers believe that Khorasan is the name the Sasanians gave to the land of the Parthian people (Parthava) after overthrowing the Arsacids. Although its boundaries changed throughout history, it included all the provinces and cities on the left or southern side of the Oxus River (from northern present-day Afghanistan to southern Khwarazm), east of Gorgan and Astarabad, Dehistan, the central desert of Iran, and west of the Helmand River basin. While all northern provinces of Afghanistan such as Balkh, and western provinces such as Herat, Pushang, and Badghis, as well as all provinces and cities of present-day Turkmenistan (except the western-southern Khwarazm part of Dashhowuz Province and the Balkan Province/Balkhan desert), the northern desert of Nesa and Abiward, and all cities of the three current Khorasan provinces of Iran—including Golestan (former Gorgan and Astarabad), Semnan, Yazd and its desert, and Sistan and Baluchestan—were considered part of Khorasan, the cities and provinces of Kabul, Ghazni, Kandahar, Bost, Ghor, and Sistan were not part of this province.

Valid international documents concluded during the Qajar period also show that Qajar statesmen used the word “Iran” and not Fars to name their realm. Therefore, the use of the word “Iran” for this geography is not a later development related to the Reza Shah period.

Conclusion

Ghafran Badakhshani complains and protests against the forgery of history by totalizing Pashtuns who defend discriminatory mono-ethnic policies that deny the civilizational past of the Tajik people, and against Iranian nationalist historians who, in his view, have also engaged in historical forgery by changing the name Pars/Fars to Iran. They have limited Persian civilization to the geography of present-day Iran and deprived all Persian-speakers outside the new borders of Iran of its glory, identity, and culture. Instead of connecting with his Iranian Persian-speaking compatriots and striving to revive the name “Iran”—or even proposing the unity of the lands of Greater Iran—he defines himself on one hand as a citizen of Afghanistan and believes it is better to respect current borders and not seek to change them. On the other hand, following the example of Herzl and the success of the Jewish people in establishing a mono-ethnic state in the Middle East, he calls for the formation of a Global Council of Tajiks—a council centered on a common language and indifferent to the ancient name of Iran.

The reality is that Badakhshani and his peers, while grappling with the enmity of narrow-minded people, have themselves become infected with the same disease. Just as they decry the dominance of 19th- and 20th-century nationalism as the cause of the denial of the history and native identity of their land by totalizing Pashtuns and greedy neighbors, the prescription they offer for the future of Afghanistan is again based on the model of ethnic nationalism and the linguistic sphere.

Prominent Tajik figures in Afghanistan, within this intellectual framework, are more intent on destroying the Iranian heritage than reviving it. Contrary to numerous historical evidences, they do not believe in the disintegration of Iran during the Qajar period and the emergence of a new country such as Afghanistan as a result of colonial treaties such as the Treaty of Paris. In the best and most optimistic case, they have replaced the name Khorasan with Afghanistan without regard to its historical geography, sometimes claiming it as a rival to Fars and sometimes as its substitute. This historically incorrect view not only lacks the ability to confront and rival the imaginary history constructed by renowned historians such as Mir Ghulam Mohammad Gobar, Ahmad Ali Kohzad, Mir Seddiq Farhang, Mohammad Azam Sistani, Habibullah Rafi, Farooq Ansari, and the official government narrative in school textbooks, but also leads to the deletion, rejection, and denial of the name Iran and the divergence of oppressed Tajiks in Afghanistan from today's Iranians. It results in a harmful conflict among the children of one mother over her glorious heritage—a conflict in which, contrary to the perception of these activists, all the children of Iran will be equally harmed.

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