A Review of "**Iranian Identity: The Medieval Islamic Period**" by Ahmad Ashraf

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1 Introduction

Like other social phenomena, national and ethnic identity is a historically contingent construct that emerges, develops, and transforms through the course of historical events. While various elements—such as race, territory, statehood, citizenship, shared language and culture, historical lineage, religion, social values, and modes of economic production—have been invoked in defining concepts such as ethnicity, nationality, and collective identity, no single factor or fixed combination thereof can be universally accepted as the definitive criterion for distinguishing between ethnic and national identities.

Although national identity often intersects with ethnic identity, it is fundamentally a modern construct—one that has taken shape primarily over the past two centuries in the context of the rise of nation-states across the globe. National and ethnic identities frequently derive from a perceived dichotomy between "you" and "them", or between the self and the other. Throughout Iranian history, this distinction has been articulated in various forms: Iran versus Aniran (non-Iran) during the Sasanian era; Iran versus Turan and Tajik versus Turk during Turkic dominion; Iran versus Rome, understood variously as Greece, Byzantium, or the Ottoman Empire; Ajam (non-Arab) versus Arab during the Islamic caliphates; and more recently, Iran versus the West (Europe and the United States).

This book traces the historical evolution of Iranian identity across several pivotal periods: the Abbasid Caliphate and the emergence of local dynasties; the rule of Turkic powers including the Ghaznavids, Seljuks, and Ilkhanids; and ultimately, the Safavid era. Although more briefly, it also touches upon later developments during the Constitutional Revolution and the Pahlavi period.

2 Iranian Identity: Historical Reconstructions

According to Ahmad Ashraf, Iranian identity has been interpreted through three major historical narratives that each attempt to answer the fundamental question: What is the origin of nations, and to what era does their emergence trace back? These narratives, presented chronologically, are: (1) the primordialist or romantic-nationalist account, (2) the modernist and postmodernist paradigm, and (3) the historicist or pre-modern continuity approach.

The first narrative, rooted in romantic nationalism, views nations as natural and timeless entities, tracing their origins to prehistorical antiquity. The modernist and postmodernist schools, particularly influential since the mid-20th century, regard the nation as a modern construct—an artificial product of the rise of nation-states whose existence does not extend beyond the 18th century. This view asserts a historical rupture between pre-modern identities and the modern concept of national identity.

The third, historicist narrative agrees with the modernist stance that national identity is a modern phenomenon, yet challenges the notion of a radical disjunction between modern national identity and the cultural-historical identity of ancient civilizations such as Iran. Drawing on rich historical evidence, it rejects the wholesale discontinuity proposed by modernists.

From the 19th century onward, the construction of a modern Iranian national identity was heavily influenced by romantic nationalism. Various strands of this ideology emerged in the mid-1800s, gained momentum through Constitutional Revolution-era literature, and eventually provided the ideological foundation of the Pahlavi state. It served both as the doctrinal basis for the modern Iranian nation-state and as a platform for Iranian nationalist movements. The early romantic nationalist discourse was marked by emotional attachment to the homeland, admiration for ancient Persian heritage and mythology, reverence for Zoroastrianism and the Achaemenid Empire,

and a privileging of national identity over religious affiliation—along with animosity toward Turks and Arabs, who were depicted as the historical sources of Iran's decline.

Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh exemplified these sentiments. Despite his Turkic linguistic background, he emphasized his Persian ancestry and advocated for solidarity with Zoroastrians as fellow Iranians. He wrote: "Though I am apparently a Turk, my ancestry is Persian... Zoroastrians are our brothers, compatriots, and fellow beings. We are the children of the Persians and should exhibit patriotic zeal for our land, people, and language—not for religion." His romanticism is particularly evident in statements like: "My heart burns for you, Iran! Where is the glory and fortune you had in the time of Kayumars, Jamshid, and Khosrow Parviz?"

Such patriotic sentiments crystallized during the Constitutional Revolution, disseminated through school textbooks and the press, and laid the groundwork for what is now known as "modern national identity." Under the influence of European Orientalists, particularly specialists on the Achaemenid period, a transformation occurred in Iranian historical consciousness. Where history had once been a blend of myth and dynastic chronicles, it was now reframed as a coherent continuum from the Achaemenids to the modern era—culminating in what is now called "Achaemenid nationalism." The country's name was restored from "Persia" (used in the West) to "Iran," with its implicit Aryan connotations, and Mohammad Reza Shah assumed the title "Aryamehr."

Modernist and postmodernist scholars argue that the nation is a constructed concept of the modern age—either invented or imagined. Eric Hobsbawm, one of the leading historians of nationalism, defined the nation as an abstract invention of ruling classes within the modern nation-state. In The Invention of Tradition, he contended that many supposed historical memories or ancient traditions are modern fabrications used to legitimize state power. According to Hobsbawm, the nation-building process is top-down but requires mass acceptance—though what the state proclaims does not always align with public consciousness.

Yet Hobsbawm also acknowledged a small group of "historic nations," including China, Korea, Vietnam, Egypt, and Iran—societies with continuous political existence that, had they been located in Europe, would have been classified as historical nations. He further asserted that in societies where religion becomes intertwined with ethnicity—as in Ireland, Poland, or Israel—religion often serves as a major catalyst for nationalist movements. In Iran's case, he noted that both in pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, ethno-religious identity played a crucial role in proto-nationalist formation: Zoroastrian-Iranian identity before Islam, and Shi'i-Iranian identity afterward. Iran, he argued, is perhaps the only Muslim country to have used Islam to demarcate a distinct identity vis-à-vis other Muslim communities.

Ehsan Yarshater, in his historical studies of the Sasanian era, had previously advanced a similar view, arguing that the Sasanians were instrumental in organizing and narrating a coherent historical tradition for Iran. Gerardo Gnoli likewise adopted Hobsbawm's framework of "invented traditions" to explain the formation of a pre-modern Iranian national identity during the Sasanian period. While both scholars acknowledged the constructed nature of modern nationalism, their historicist approach demonstrates that a pre-modern Iranian national consciousness existed well before the 18th century.

Bert Fragner proposed a paradigm in which Persian developed as a transregional language during the Islamic middle period, asserting its hegemonic role in shaping identity across vast territories. While this theory is persuasive for cases such as the Ottoman Empire, Central Asia, and Mughal India, its application to the Iranian plateau—where Persian had deep cultural roots—requires nuance. In Iran itself, Persian evolved as the native language and dominant cultural force, continuously contributing to the formation of a pre-modern national identity. Thus, Fragner's universal paradigm applies more aptly to non-Iranian Islamic territories than to Iran proper, where the term "Iran" (or "Ērānšahr" in Middle Persian) had been in consistent use since the Sasanian period and was revived from the 13th century onward.

There is no doubt that modern national identity is politically constructed and historically legitimated by the state, as Hobsbawm and others have argued. But in Iran's case, such historical engineering began with the Sasanians, who organized mytho-historical narratives—from the first human and first king to the conquest of Alexander, and from the Arsacid dynasty to the fall of the Sasanians—preserved in Khwadāynāmag texts and Ferdowsi's Shahnameh.

The historicist narrative thus seeks a balanced perspective, avoiding both romantic essentialism and rigid constructivism. According to Ashraf, one must distinguish analytically and ontologically between "Iranian identity" and "Iranian national identity." While the latter is a modern phenomenon that should not be retroactively applied, the former is a historical cultural identity that has been reconstructed in various ways from pre-Islamic times to the present.

Among those who have contributed to the historicist view of Iranian identity are: Ehsan Yarshater, Gerardo Gnoli, Ann Lambton, Alessandro Bausani, Roy Mottahedeh, David Morgan, Fereydoun Adamiyat, Shahrokh Meskoob, Mohammad-Reza Shafiei Kadkani, and Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi. Ann Lambton, in her Encyclopaedia

Iranica entry on ethnicity, denied the existence of nationalism in the Islamic Middle Ages but acknowledged the presence of a distinct Iranian consciousness, which she termed "Iraniyat." She argued that during the Safavid era, Iran once again became a politically demarcated state vis-à-vis the Ottomans and Mughals—an essential precursor to 19th-century nationalist thought, even if not fully nationalistic in itself.

Shahrokh Meskoob also adhered partially to this historical approach. In his Iranian Identity and the Persian Language, he examined the roles of bureaucracy, religion, and mysticism in shaping Persian prose. While frequently using the terms "national" and "ethnic identity," and recognizing the nationalist inclinations of the Samanid era, Meskoob remained conscious of the distinction between pre-modern ethnicity and modern nationality. He concluded: "To avoid conceptual confusion, I have consistently referred to 'national and ethnic sentiment' rather than 'nationality,' which is a more modern term and misleading if applied to societies of a thousand years ago."

From the 1970s onward, a new line of thought emphasizing the continuity of "Iranian Islam" as the core of national identity gained traction among religious intellectuals and scholars. Italian Iranologist Alessandro Bausani advocated for this view, asserting that Iranian national identity in the modern age emerged not from retroactive Achaemenid nationalism, but from the rich cultural legacy of Persian-Islamic civilization forged during the Turkic dynasties.

In this framework, Iranian national identity is a functional synthesis of three main historical pillars: the political heritage of monarchy, the Persian language and literary tradition, and the dual religious heritage of Zoroastrianism and Shi'ism. The emphasis on religion as a stable axis of Iranian identity is reflected in the works of Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, both of whom traced Shi'ism's metaphysical foundations to ancient Iranian religious thought.

Finally, the major stages in the formation and transformation of Iranian identity from the Sasanian era to the present can be summarized as follows:

- The foundational reconstruction of Iranian identity as a pre-modern national identity in the Sasanian period;
- A phase of stagnation and dormancy during the early Islamic centuries;
- The revival and reconstruction of Iranian cultural identity during the era of indigenous dynasties;
- The complex Seljuk era, marked by the institutionalization of Persian as the administrative language amid competing imperial and ethnic ideologies;
- The cultural renaissance under the Ilkhanids and Timurids;
- The emergence of a Shi'i-Iranian identity under the Safavids;
- And, the construction of a modern "Iranian national identity" over the past two centuries.

3 The Islamic Era: From the Early Abbasids to the End of the Samanids

The Arab conquest of Iran and the collapse of the Sasanian Empire marked a profound rupture in the political and religious foundations of Iranian identity. The Islamic Caliphate supplanted the quasi-national imperial structure of the Sasanians, and over the next three centuries, Islam gradually replaced Zoroastrianism as the dominant religion. Until the rise of the Ilkhanids and especially the Safavids, Iran remained politically fragmented. Yet, during this prolonged interregnum, several key elements of Iranian identity endured: first, the notion of Iranian ethnicity, expressed in oppositions such as Iranians versus Arabs and Tajiks versus Turks; second, the geographical conception of Iran as the center of the world; third, mythological narratives of human origin and the genesis of the Iranian peoples, now intertwined with Islamic cosmology; and fourth, and most importantly, the flourishing of the Persian language, which became the vessel of cultural memory and identity.

Despite the devastations of the Arab invasion, three important consequences emerged: the destruction of the rigid Sasanian social hierarchy; the liberation of Persian language and thought from elite monopolization; and the unleashing of latent Iranian intellectual potential. As Ibn Khaldun observed, Iranians would come to play a decisive role in shaping Islamic civilization.

Under the Abbasids, Iranian influence resurfaced, particularly through powerful families like the Barmakids. The Persian language evolved from a spoken vernacular to a sophisticated medium for literature, historiography, and religious instruction. In contrast to other regions of the Islamic world, such as Syria and Egypt, which succumbed to the linguistic hegemony of Arabic, Iran retained and reconstructed its distinct cultural-linguistic identity. Persian became the administrative and literary lingua franca of the eastern Islamic world.

However, the rise of Turkic dynasties dealt a new blow to Iranian identity. Under the Seljuks, in particular, the concept of "Iran" lost some of its distinctiveness within the broader Islamic ecumene. Nonetheless, Persian persisted as the dominant bureaucratic language. It was under the Safavids that Iranian identity merged with Shi'ism, establishing the foundations of modern Iranian national consciousness.

Initial Iranian responses to Arab domination took the form of sectarian uprisings against the Umayyads—Khārijite rebellions, pro-Alid movements, and various revolts. Some historians, such as Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub, viewed these as expressions of proto-nationalist sentiment. Others, like Mohammad Rokaya, interpreted them as last-ditch efforts by the Sasanian elite to preserve their privileges. Regardless of their motivations, these movements drew more on the Iranian cultural legacy than on Islamic orthodoxy.

The transfer of the caliphal seat from Syria to Iraq during the Abbasid period—territory that had been the Sasanian imperial heartland—played a crucial role in the cultural resurgence of Iranian identity. Iranian bureaucratic elites (scribes, viziers, historians, poets, jurists, and scientists) exerted significant influence. These administrators preserved and transmitted pre-Islamic techniques of governance into the Islamic empire and later to local Persianate dynasties. Prominent bureaucratic families such as the Jihani, Bal'ami, Atabi, Nizam al-Mulk, Juvayni, and Rashid al-Din exemplify this tradition. Additionally, dehqāns (landed aristocrats) preserved and propagated epic literature, national myths, and romantic tales.

The Arab translations of Middle Persian works during the Abbasid era facilitated the survival of Iran's ethical and historical traditions. Genealogical schemes linking Sasanian lineage with local rulers, as well as the rise of the Shu'ubiyya movement, contributed to the diffusion of Iranian cultural norms.

Persian and Arab writers involved in the Shu'ubiyya literary movement of the 9th–10th centuries played an instrumental role in reviving Iranian pride and cultural identity. Drawing on Qur'anic language that emphasized equality among peoples, Shu'ubiyya literature challenged Arab cultural superiority and mocked their customs. Some extreme partisans even denied Arab cultural and religious virtues. These polemics reflect a vibrant, proto-nationalist assertion of Iranian distinctiveness.

The spread of Dari Persian from Khurasan and Transoxiana to the Iranian plateau culminated in its adoption as the scholarly and administrative language of most Islamic dynasties. The ambition to preserve Iran's historical memory, as recorded in the Khwadaynamag corpus, likely motivated scribes to develop a robust written literary tradition.

According to Ehsan Yarshater, a clear conception of Iranian identity emerged in traditional historiography, rooted in the Achaemenid legacy and later formalized by the Sasanians, who called themselves "Kings of Iran and non-Iran" (Shahanshah-e Iran o Aniran). These narratives were first written in the late Sasanian period and codified mytho-historical traditions from the first human and king to Alexander's conquest. After the Arab conquest, such materials formed the basis of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh.

The Shahnameh itself is structured around the mythical and heroic history of Iran. In this account, Kayumars is the primordial man, Hushang is the first lawgiver, and Jamshid institutes the social order—only to fall to the tyrant Zahhak. The righteous king Fereydun later reclaims the throne and divides the world among his sons: Salm (Rome), Tur (Turān), and Iraj (Iran). Iraj, portrayed as wise and just, becomes the progenitor of Iran, setting up a symbolic conflict between Iran and external forces that echoes throughout the epic tradition.

In these narratives, the Parthians are sidelined, their five-century reign compressed and minimized, in favor of linking the mythical Kayanids to the Sasanians. The aim was to legitimize the latter's rule and forge a historical-political continuity. These mythologies were refined during the Sasanian period, particularly in eastern Iran, to bolster resistance against invasions by Hephthalites and Turks.

Ahmed Ashraf argues that the Islamicization of Iranian myths—such as connecting the Shahnameh's figures to Biblical prophets—was an effort to legitimize Iranian history within the Islamic world. Sources like al-Tabari even identify Kayumars with Adam or Hushang with a son of Adam, integrating Persian narratives into the Abrahamic framework.

Between the emergence of Persian poetry in the 9th century and the completion of the Shahnameh in the late 10th century, references to "Iran" in poetry and prose flourished. While the term "Iran" in these texts primarily referred to the pre-Islamic realm, it retained symbolic force in shaping cultural memory. Poets such as Rudaki invoked the Sasanian lineage to celebrate Iranian heroes. This revival reached its zenith under the Samanids and began to fade under the Turkic Ghaznavids and Seljuks, whose emphasis on Sunni orthodoxy marginalized Persianate cultural nationalism.

Thus, despite the upheavals of conquest and cultural transformation, the Iranian identity persisted—transformed, hybridized, and reconstructed—through language, mythology, and administrative continuity.

4 Turkic Rule: From the Ghaznavids to the End of the Ilkhanids

The Turkic dynasties that ruled Iran established military regimes largely sustained by conquest and territorial expansion. Their authority, often perceived as foreign domination, was imposed by the sword. To secure political legitimacy, these dynasties crafted Iranian genealogies—albeit fictive and politically expedient. For instance, the early Ghaznavids, in a climate still shaped by premodern Iranian ethnic sentiment revived during the Samanid era, traced their ancestry to Yazdegerd III, the last Sasanian king, as reported by Juzjani.

With the ascendancy of Turkic slave-soldiers and tribal forces in the 11th–12th centuries, the binary division of Turks and Tajiks (or Tāzīks) came to dominate. The term "Iran" gradually diminished in historical and literary texts, especially after the early Ghaznavid period. Even during Sultan Mahmud's reign, his antagonistic reception of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh marked a symbolic rupture: the waning of reverence for Iranian identity and the rise of cosmopolitan Islamic and mystical universalism. According to the History of Sistan, Mahmud dismissed Ferdowsi's epic, claiming he had countless warriors like Rostam in his army. Ferdowsi reportedly retorted that while many warriors may exist, God had never created another Rostam—a comment that allegedly offended the Sultan, leading to the poet's exile and demise without reward.

Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between the Ghaznavid and Seljuk periods. The former saw a continuation of Samanid traditions, including references to "Iran" in poetry and historiography. The Ghaznavids were symbolically linked to Sasanian lineage, whereas the Seljuks and Qara-Khitai rulers invoked Turanian associations. Under Sultan Mahmud, significant efforts to institutionalize Persian were made: all official correspondence was mandated to be in Persian by his vizier Abu'l-Hasan Isfarayini. Though his successor reinstated Arabic, this initiative set a precedent for Persian as the bureaucratic language of Turkic and Mongol dynasties across Iran, Central Asia, India, and Anatolia. Mahmud's campaigns in India also introduced Persian to the subcontinent.

In contrast, the Seljuks opposed Iranian ethnic identity. Bayhaqi's History recounts that when Sultan Tughril assumed the throne, the court was devoid of splendor, and he admitted: "We are newcomers and strangers; we do not know the customs of the Tāzīks [Iranians]." Despite unifying Iran for the first time since the Arab conquest, the Seljuks downplayed the term "Iran," reflecting both increased Islamicization and the rise of Sufi cosmopolitanism. Through the dual symbolism of the Sultan and the Abbasid Caliph, figures like Nizam al-Mulk built a politically and religiously integrated system. His Nizamiyya schools bridged religious and administrative spheres and institutionalized Islamic imperial ideology.

Poets like Rumi, aligned with Sufi thought, mentioned Iran rarely—emphasizing metaphysical notions of homeland beyond earthly boundaries. Epic literature waned and was replaced by Islamic or syncretic mythologies. Persian usage of "Iran" declined; viziers like Nizam al-Mulk referred only to "Tajiks," and poets such as Sa'di and Hafez, though filled with references to Persian values, rarely invoked the name "Iran."

Exceptions include Nezami and Khaqani of Ganja and Shirvan, who referenced "Iran" and "Ajam" frequently—26 and 29 times respectively for Khaqani, and 26 and 19 for Nezami. Nezami's epics depicted pre-Islamic love tales and Persian kings, while Khaqani described contemporary Iran. Yet Nezami, despite romanticizing pre-Islamic Iran, renounced Zoroastrianism.

The rise of sectarian intolerance led some poets to attack Iran's Zoroastrian roots. Sunni critics often disparaged Shi'i lineage doctrines as Zoroastrian remnants. Poets like Amir Mo'ezzi mocked Ferdowsi's glorification of Rostam, while Saif Farghani deemed Iranian soil defiled by Sasanian kings. Yet Sa'di, cognizant of the ethical power of myth, defended traditional epics as moral instruction for rulers.

The 13th century brought further upheaval. Genghis Khan's invasion in 1219 initiated widespread destruction. The Mongol Ilkhans, governing from mid-century onward, abolished the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258—signaling the collapse of Sunni orthodoxy and inaugurating a new era of religious pluralism. Though initially indifferent to Islam, the Ilkhans eventually adopted the religion but did not seek political legitimacy from the Caliphate.

During this period, a renewed historical consciousness of "Iran" as a coherent geographic and political entity emerged. The Ilkhanid unification of disparate Iranian provinces fostered spatial awareness of Iran-zamin. The Mongol interest in global conquests also stimulated universal historiography. Rashid al-Din's Jami'al-Tawarikh, often cited as the first "world history," refers to "Iran-zamin" 60 times and to "Tāzīks" 24 times, even calling Iran a "country"—among the first post-Seljuk uses of the term in a political sense.

Contemporaries such as Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi also invoked "Iran" and "Iran-zamin" repeatedly, warning during a battle that without divine intervention, "nothing would remain but the name of Iran." He further defined Iran's extent from the Euphrates to the Oxus. Such writings marked the first geographical reintegration of the Sasanian concept of Iran since the Arab conquest.

Hamdu'llah Mustawfi's Nuzhat al-Qulub consolidated this vision, delineating Iran's eastern boundary as Sind and Sogdiana, its western extent to Syria, and its northern limit to the Caucasus and Russian steppes. He emphasized

Iran as a distinct territorial whole. His work, like Baydawi's, traces Iranian history from mythic origins to the Mongol era—predating Western theories of historical continuity in Iranian identity.

According to his translator Hamid Ahmadi, Ahmad Ashraf's goal is to refute claims by postmodern and ethnic essentialist scholars who see Iranian identity as a modern invention. The Ilkhanid era thus completed the historical-cultural revival begun under the Samanids, adding a political-geographic dimension to the evolving idea of Iran.

5 Safavid Era: The Age of Religion and Homeland

Following the decline of the Ilkhanids and Timurids, Iran descended into political fragmentation and invasions by Turkmen tribal confederations, known as the third wave of Turko-Mongol incursions. Among these, Uzun Hasan of the Aq Qoyunlu played a pivotal role in reuniting the scattered Iranian territories and laying the groundwork for the establishment of the Safavid Empire. Shah Ismail, the last scion of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili's lineage, defeated the remnants of Uzun Hasan's power base and founded the Safavid dynasty. Proclaimed both as the "Perfect Guide" (Murshid Kamil) of the Qizilbash Sufis and as the Shahanshah of Iran, Ismail declared Twelver Shi'ism the official religion of his empire, initiating a religious transformation that would reshape Iranian identity.

While the Ilkhanids had revived the Sasanian-era concept of Iran-zamin as a territorial idea, the Safavid period witnessed the establishment of a fivefold foundation—historical, geographical, political, cultural, and now religious—for Iranian national identity. In the context of expanding Sunni empires to the west (Ottomans) and southeast (Mughals), Shi'ism emerged as a defining feature of Iranian distinctiveness. As the territorial borders of the Safavids, Ottomans, Uzbeks, and Mughals crystallized—albeit fluid at times—the movement across their boundaries came to signify transitions between distinct imperial spheres. The shared use of Persian as the bureaucratic and cultural lingua franca facilitated these interactions.

This confluence of factors led to the emergence of a territorial conception of homeland (vatan) for Iran, supplanting earlier Islamic or spiritual cosmopolitanism. Ahmad Ashraf identifies three major dimensions in Safavid-era Iranian identity: religious-national identity, historiographical and geographical conceptions of Iran, and the birth of territorial patriotism (Iran-vatani).

Contrary to earlier Turkic dynasties such as the Ghaznavids and Seljuqs—who suppressed ethnic sentiments in favor of Sunni cosmopolitanism—the Safavid embrace of Shi'ism paradoxically anchored a distinctly Iranian religious nationalism. Similar to the role of Catholicism in shaping Irish identity or Orthodoxy in Serbian nationalism, Shi'ism became both a spiritual and ethnic marker. Hobsbawm regarded the role of Zoroastrianism under the Sasanians and Shi'ism under the Safavids as analogous cases of ethno-religious nation-building.

The Safavids sought to reconcile Iranian cultural traditions with Shi'i doctrine. This included attributing Shi'i hadith to Nowruz, popularizing the legend of Bibi Shahrbanu—the Sasanian princess said to have married Imam Husayn and mothered the fourth Shi'i Imam—and invoking the prophetic saying "Love of one's homeland is part of faith." This apocryphal hadith, widely cited by Iranian poets like Sa'di, was repurposed to apply not only to one's birthplace or the Muslim ummah, but to the Iranian homeland.

The myth of Bibi Shahrbanu served a legitimating function, symbolically linking the Imams to the Sasanian royal line and transferring the divine farr to the Prophet's family. This narrative, reinforced in sources like Ya'qubi's Tarikh, Ibn Babawayh's Uyūn al-Akhbār, and al-Kulayni's al-Kāfi, gained canonical status in Persian historiography and folklore. Mary Boyce later argued that shrines dedicated to Bibi Shahrbanu and her sister were originally Zoroastrian temples repurposed for Shi'i veneration.

This merging of Shi'ism and pre-Islamic tradition was emblematic of broader Safavid efforts to "Islamicize" Iran's mytho-historical memory. In literary texts like the Qabusnama, figures such as Imam 'Ali and Salman Farsi intervene to ensure Shahrbanu's sanctified integration into the Prophet's lineage. Whether taken as historical or symbolic, as Ahmad Ashraf argues, the narrative reflects a deliberate strategy to appropriate Iran's royal past into Shi'i legitimacy.

Further, the Safavids reintroduced pre-Islamic concepts such as the Zoroastrian khvarenah (divine radiance) into Islamic kingship theories, portraying the Shah as Zill Allah (Shadow of God) and bearer of divine grace. These ideas, drawn from Avestan texts like Yasht 19, emphasized the Shah's cosmological role in justice and order, echoed in both religious literature and royal ideology.

In ritual practice, the Safavid state institutionalized both Ashura and Nowruz as annual ceremonies that became foundational to Iranian Shi'i identity. The public mourning of Imam Husayn mirrored the myth of Siyavash, whose innocent martyrdom in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh had become a moral archetype. As Shahrokh Meskoob noted, Siyavash's mythic status was effectively transferred to Husayn, and ta'ziya replaced ancient mourning rites.

Despite opposition from Sunni orthodoxy, Nowruz persisted and was the object of Shi'i reinterpretation, with clerics authoring hadiths in its favor. During periods when Nowruz and Ashura coincided, rulers such as the Buyids

and Safavids carefully balanced both commemorations—reflecting their symbolic parity. Iranian Shi'ism thus came to rest on a dual calendar of sacral time.

Literary and emotional expressions of Iranian identity flourished among Safavid-era poets, especially émigrés in India, such as Sa'ib Tabrizi. While 750 poets left Iran for Mughal courts, only a minority expressed overt patriotism, yet their works reflect a shift from birthplace-based identity to a broader love for Iran as homeland.

The poem by Sa'ib—who eventually returned to Isfahan—encapsulates this transformation:

"Why did I journey far, Sa'ib asks, If not to long for Isfahan at last? Like a drowning man craves the shore, My soul seeks the city's door."

Ahmad Ashraf cautions against exaggerating the prevalence of this sentiment, noting that most émigré poets favored practical patronage over national nostalgia. Yet in the Safavid period, Iranian identity acquired its most complete form: religiously codified, territorially bounded, and emotionally resonant.