

## **Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance**

*Shabnam J. Holliday*

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Shabnam Holliday's *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance* is a timely investigation of the Iranian national identity. Through careful discursive analysis of a number of texts, including primary sources – speeches, statements, and interviews – as well as articles on the Iranian identity in general and national identity in particular, Holliday seeks to show how discourses and counter-discourses emerge and shape the ways Iranians imagine and define their national identity. Such deconstruction regards texts produced since the Pahlavis reign as a preface to her main focus on those produced during and after Seyyed Mohammad Khatami's presidency. By looking at the genealogy of tensions and dynamics between *Irānīyat* (referring to pre-Islamic Iran), *Islāmīyat* (referring to Islam, namely Persian Shi'i), and the Western influences in defining what it means to be Iranian, Holliday illustrates the roots of the "contemporary Iranian national identity" and "Iranian cosmopolitanism" (127).

Chapter 1 begins with a theoretical discussion of Holliday's discursive approach, which "allows for an analysis of multiple ideologies embedded in the multiple constructions of Iranian national identity" (11) and, thereby, the dynamics between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses pertaining to this identity. The elite, producers of the majority of Persian texts analyzed by Holliday, often articulate competing discourses by using the same terminology – *Islāmīyat*, *Irānīyat*, *farhang* (culture), *tamaddun*

(civilization), and *millat* (nation) – in ways that show the differing meanings attached. A theoretical discussion of a number of Persian language terms follows in this chapter. This is a valuable contribution; as opposed to adopting a definition of such terms drawn from the existing literature in the Western academe, the author examines these definitions within the context itself, allowing for nuances which would otherwise be lost in translation.

Given that *Irānīyat* and *Islāmīyat* have been and continue to be used in the construction of the national identity to differentiate Iran from both external and internal “others,” in chapters 2 and 3, Holliday discusses the multiple constructions of these two notions. A discussion of *Irānīyat* in Mohammed Reza Shah’s “positive nationalism” vis-à-vis Muhammad Mossaddiq’s discourse of “freedom and independence” is the subject of chapter 2. Here the reader is able to see the commonalities between Khatami’s Islamist-Iranian discourse, in which significant importance is given to Iran’s pre-Islamic culture, and the Pahlavi prioritization of *Irānīyat* over *Islāmīyat*; even though much of the Islamic Republic’s resistance to Pahlavi was directed at this very formulation of *Irānīyat* as superior to *Islāmīyat*. Holliday further expands on this paradox through a review of multiple texts by Iranian academics, who contribute to shaping the discourses of differentiating Iran and *Irānīyat*, a “true” and “authentic” “self,” from both internal and external “others” (that is, Turks, Arabs, Kurds, etc.).

In chapter 3, the author explains the various ways *Islāmīyat* is used in the construction of Iranian national identity by deconstructing the texts produced by Jalal Al-i Ahmad, Ali Shari’ati, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Integral to these is both a rejection of the Pahlavi regime as well as a redefinition of Iran’s relationship with the West. Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamene’i’s Islamist discourse and Khatami’s Islamist-Iranian discourse are discussed in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. By examining the dynamics and tensions between these two discourses, the author suggests, in the final chapter, that a new discourse of Iranian civic national identity – reflected in the deconstructed texts produced by a number of figureheads from the Green Movement and other movements – seems to be emerging. More than Iran’s past heritage, be it *Irānīyat* or *Islāmīyat*, what is key to this emergent notion of the national identity is equality for all Iran’s citizens, and their enjoyment of human and political rights.

The most valuable aspect of the book is its deconstructionist analysis and framework, employed in order to understand a multiplicity of empirical sources. This analysis helps problematize binary distinctions – such as state/non-state, global/local, and internal/external – especially when pertaining to the “othering” processes inherent to constructions of national

identity. The author shows that what might be a hegemonic discourse within the political boundaries of Iran, for instance the Islamists discourse of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamene'i is simultaneously a counter-hegemonic discourse on the global scale opposing the West/US/International Zionism – hence the subtitle, *Politics of Resistance*. The fluidity between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses is another matter that Holliday highlights: what has been hegemonic at one point during the life of the Islamic Republic, for instance the Reformist discourse, can soon move to the realm of the counter-hegemonic, as was the case after the 2009 uprising.

The broader framework of *Defining Iran* is itself locked up inside yet another hegemonic discourse, which sees resistance mostly in terms of discourses pertaining to nationality, religion, and/or culture. It is also rather narrow in its focus on texts produced by intellectual and religious elites. In other words, what Holliday calls counter-hegemonic almost entirely excludes the subordinate discourses – that is, popular (non-elitist), secularist, leftist, and so on. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to see an analysis of resistance to existing configurations of class and gender, and most importantly their intersections. While there is a meticulous analysis of the social and political discourses, there is almost no mention of the economic realm and its intersections with on the one hand, social and political, and on the other, global neoliberal capitalism.

In light of Holliday's use of the Foucauldian notion of discourse, the Gramscian notion of hegemony, and her references to Fairclough's and van Dijk's crucial linking of ideology and power,<sup>1</sup> the author keeps the reader in the dark with regards to her own positionality.<sup>2</sup> By the same token, when interviews with a few Iranian citizens are deconstructed (42–46; 134–37), the respondents' positionality – in particular with regards to class, ethnicity, city of residence, political affiliation, etc. – remains unknown.

Ultimately, *Defining Iran* proves a valuable resource as it pertains to the construction of national identity in general and Iranian national identity in particular – matters that could be further explored by a complementary study of non-discursive factors.

## Notes

1. See pages 12 and 13 of *Defining Iran* for Holliday's discussion of "discourse," "hegemony," and the links between knowledge/ideology and power.
2. *Positionality*, which could broadly be defined as "one's situated subjectivity vis-à-vis context-specific and intersecting power structures," is a widely used concept in post-colonial and post-structural literature. For some of the discussions pertaining to

the concept, see Adrienne Rich, Linda Alcoff, Chandra Talpade  
Mohanty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to name but a few.

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