

Nationalism in the
questionable
legitimization of
conflict in satrapi's
persepoli...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis: A Story of a Childhood*, there is a constant theme of exploitation of heroic concepts to legitimize political movements. The dissenters of the Shah used martyrdom, even exploiting a man who had died of cancer, claiming he was a political killing by the government (Satrapi 31-32). The Islamic regime mobilized religious fundamentalism to legitimize closing schools and purging western culture and thought (Satrapi 73). However, while fundamentalism and martyrdom were used often to achieve domestic political goals, it is nationalism which was used in a way that shaped the relations between Iran and foreign states, mobilized first in the novel by the British-installed Shah, and then later by the Islamic regime in its war effort against Iraq. Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation defines nationalism as "A celebration or assertion of national identity that commonly finds political expression in the claim of a right of self-determination or self-government." Throughout history this concept has fueled ethnic violence, civil war, and countless revolutions, but in *Persepolis* Satrapi investigates the ways in which nationalism was exploited for British imperialist means, and as a form of propaganda to fuel the Iranian government's war effort with Iraq.

Following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the international politics of Europe were governed by ideals of Balance of Power relations, in which redistribution of territory among great powers was utilized to check any single state from becoming too powerful. This later would lead to a new wave of 19th and 20th century imperialism, from which the British Empire would benefit handsomely from both actual colonies and puppet governments across the world. One of these puppet governments became

Iran when the British government took advantage of a soldier seeking to stage a coup and replace the emperor with a republic, helping to install him as the next Shah despite his republican sentiments. Satrapi recognized this imperialist takeover of her home country, depicting on a panel on page 21 a dubious looking Brit reassuring the soon to be Shah that he should, “ just give [the British] the oil and [they would] take care of the rest”. This brief backstory of imperialism in Iran, framed by Satrapi in the form of her father rebutting her naïve childhood claim that she “[Loved] the king, he was chosen by God,” is later picked up by her grandmother who tells of the nationalistic rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the son and successor of the Shah installed by Britain (Satrapi, 19). This is where exploitation of nationalism as a means to distract from British control of the Iranian oil industry is utilized by the Shah.

Actions such as the Shah’s visit to the grave of Cyrus the Great (depicted by Satrapi on page 28 as glaring disapprovingly at the Shah), and a frivolous government celebration of 2500 years of dynasty were two examples Satrapi gives of a celebration of Iranian national identity that was not in step with the political realities of Iranian autonomy. Ironically, history of empires and the states they colonize is riddled with various attempts to stamp out nationalistic sentiments, such as by the Soviets who deported around 6 million people across the various Soviet satellite states to remove ethnic and national ties (Finlayson, 73). History of International Relations suggests that the British imperialists should have opposed acts like the Shah’s visit to Cyrus the Great’s grave and should have instead purged nationalistic sentiments in the country. Instead, since Great Britain was only involved to

take advantage of the Iranian oil industry, they felt the mobilization of nationalism by leaders friendly to British interests actually served to benefit them. Their hopes were that this would make pro-British Shah's more popular (this wasn't particularly successful) and would distract the people of Iran by reinforcing their national identity while simultaneously exploiting their oil industry. Though early in the novel the Shah's government is overthrown by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the theme of exploiting nationalism to influence international affairs continues, this time by the Islamist government to support the war effort with Iraq.

Satrapi's memoir *Persepolis* serves as both a historical account of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and as a Bildungsroman or "coming of age" story. Part of the development of Satrapi as a character is her shifting views of Iran's government, growing increasingly skeptical and leftist as the story develops. Though by the start of Iraq-Iran war she has certainly grown from her blind acceptance of the king as a divine ruler, her response to the conflict shows just how successful nationalistic appeals can be in persuading citizens to support international conflict. Upon hearing from her grandmother that Iranian fundamentalists had attempted to overthrow Saddam Hussein with the support of Iraqi Shiite Muslims (the same sect of Islam with which the Iranian government associates itself), she ignores the obvious provocation of Iraq undertaken by the Iranian government, and instead latches onto the government's pretext for the war as the second Arab invasion. "The second invasion in 1400 years! My blood was boiling. I was ready to defend my country against these Arabs who kept attacking us. I wanted to fight," reads the final panel on page 79, outlining Satrapi's thoughts of the news. The

irony of the fact that the first Arab invasion had been what had brought Islam to the region in the first place, and the justification of war with a 1400-year-old event can seem almost humorous to the reader, but it also is not out of step with how people react when nationalism plays a significant role in conflict.

Over the course of the war, the ties to nationalism become even more obvious: in school students presented reports on the war and twice a day were required to participate in self-flagellation to mourn the dead (Satrapi 85-86, 95). Satrapi even described hitting yourself as “one of the country’s rituals” (Satrapi 96). However, it is with Satrapi’s shift in her views of the war, in which she realizes the sinister reality of the exploitative nature of the nationalistic conflict. “Iraq proposed a settlement, and Saudi Arabia was willing to pay for reconstruction to restore peace to the area,” tells an older and wiser Satrapi, “but our government was against it” (Satrapi 114). The reason that the Iranian government opposed peace it is revealed, was because, “They eventually admitted that the survival of the regime depended on the war” (Satrapi 116). The very idea as a bloody conflict with a foreign state as a means of nationalist propaganda is disgustingly backward, and with it we should learn a great truth about the ugliness which can sometimes occur when nationalism is exploited as a means of justification for violence or oppression.

The history of nationalist movements is checkered at best. When utilized properly, as a self-determination movement of and by an oppressed group or ethnic minority, it can result in the creation of a state which better reflects the interests of its populace. Unfortunately, in the history of international <https://assignbuster.com/nationalism-in-the-questionable-legitimization-of-conflict-in-satrapis-persepolis/>

relations, this is not often the case. Instead, often nationalist movements are exploited by those in power to justify cruel and unjust actions. During the reign of the Shah, under the watchful eye of Great Britain, this meant that while Iranian leaders were celebrating the might of Persia, the country gave up control of its most profitable industry in a grand political bargain. Under the Ayotollah this meant the avoidable deaths of countless Iranians who were convinced they were doing the right thing by giving their lives to defend a government who was fighting because the survival of their regime depended on conflict and nationalist fervor. It is because of events like these, and other even darker stains on the history of the human race, that remind us that we must be much more skeptical of leaders who prey on nationalism for justification. When nationalism becomes a façade to mobilize or distract supporters, when nationalism becomes associated with creating an “ other”, when nationalism is being preached by those who are overrepresented and not those who are underrepresented, that is when we must be conscious enough to reject it. Now, more than ever, we must understand this as it concerns both our domestic and international societies.