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## **Policy Report**

# **The Foundational Fallacy of the “Civilizational Battle between Iran and the West”**

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Standing before the Acropolis, Marco Rubio spoke of ancient Greece in order to lend present-day American politics a glorious lineage. In his address of 7 October, the Athenians' resistance to Xerxes, heroic virtue, the will to prevail, and the necessity of reviving Western power were set along a single continuous line. The oration was no mere homage to the legacy of Greece; it summoned the past onto the stage of present-day politics, so that power might present itself as the heir of civilization and the rival might appear in the guise of an age-old enemy.

The historical and philosophical critiques of this speech—from Touraj Daryaee's objection to the recasting of a war between an empire and city-states as a confrontation between East and West, to Hamid Aboutalebi's critique of the severing of *thumos* from reason and justice—arrive by two paths at a single problem: the appropriation of heritage to legitimize warmongering. Yet ardor and courage, without judgment as to end and action, are not virtue; just as the antiquity of an enmity is no proof of the rightfulness of its continuation. Rubio invoked Socrates as well; but the Socratic question cannot be answered by a merely nominal invocation of Socrates: power for what end, and in the service of which justice?

Before critiquing the political use of history, however, one must contest the notion that makes such use possible in the first place: the notion that something called "Iranian civilization" and something called "Western civilization," as two independent and mutually alien essences, have stood for thousands of years on opposite sides of history and may now once again be summoned to battle. The danger of this narrative lies not only in its justification of today's war; it lies in its transfer of enmity from the decisions of states to the very nature of cultures. Policies change; but once an enmity is presented as civilizational and innate, it no longer consents to end merely because policy has changed.

Before it is dangerous, this picture is historically distorted. The parties to this supposed battle have never been two worlds apart. Iran and Greece

fought one another at certain junctures, but they also learned from one another; they stood against each other, yet each came to dwell in the other's language, thought, and imagination. The erasure of this presence is the precondition for fashioning the myth of a primordial and essential enmity.

What we call civilization is built—alongside institutions and material achievements—from language and poetry, science and philosophy, religion and myth, art and architecture, and the manners of living; from humanity's conception of good and evil, freedom and justice, God and nature, and its own place in the world. Read at this level, history scarcely allows one to draw a line and declare: here Iran ends, and there the West begins. The history of culture is the history of people, words, legends, and knowledge crossing borders. The very frontiers over which armies have fought have, time and again, been passageways for thought.

The civilization that is today called “Western” would not have become what it is without its exchanges with Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, Asia Minor, and later the Islamic world. This is not a claim of ownership over the West; it is a reminder of part of its lineage.

Iranian civilization has been a mother to the global civilization of our day. Motherhood means giving, teaching, receiving, and nurturing—and then setting free what has been born, that it may find another form. What is meant by this maternity is a generative share that has reached beyond its own borders and lived on in the lives of others. In this sense, waging war on Iran in the name of the purity or authenticity of Western civilization is something akin to “cultural matricide”: the severing of a part of one's own roots. Iran has both bestowed and partaken. The strength of a culture lies not in repelling whatever comes from outside, but in its capacity to understand it, transform it, and bring forth something new from it. Civilization, in its loftiest form, is the capacity to enter into a covenant with the other.

Friedrich Hölderlin—among the foremost poets of the German language and a pivotal figure in the European union of poetry and philosophy—is a

thinker in whose poetry and thought the legacy of ancient Greece holds a central place. The Greece he contemplates is far more complex than the image of a monolithic West, estranged from all others, that Rubio's oration puts forward. In his letter of 4 December 1801 to Böhlendorff, Hölderlin explores the relation of Greece to his own world through the relation between one's own and the foreign, and writes: "But one's own must be learned as well as the foreign." He regards Homer's capacity to grasp the foreign element and make it his own as essential to explaining the excellence of the Greek art of expression. In this reading, a culture cannot dispense with learning from the other—even in order to attain its own capacities. The greatness of Greece does not appear within a fortress of purity; it is revealed in the power to transform what is foreign into a creative force. The other, within such a horizon, is not merely one against whom we must stand; it is one in whose encounter we may recognize ourselves anew and pass beyond our own limits.

The Greek accounts of ancient wisdom are themselves suffused with the presence of the East. From Aristoxenus, the pupil of Aristotle, who recorded the earliest report of Pythagoras' discipleship under the Chaldean "Zaratas" (Zoroaster), to Plutarch, who expressly calls Zoroaster "the teacher of Pythagoras"; from Porphyry and Iamblichus, who take Pythagoras' instruction by the Magi as self-evident, to Diogenes Laertius, who places the Magi in the succession of philosophers; from Clement of Alexandria, who calls Zoroaster "of Persian descent" and the teacher of Pythagoras, to Valerius Maximus and Pliny, who record the journeys of Greek philosophers to the Magi; and on to Plato and the tradition of the Academy, which describe the education of Persian princes at the hands of the Magi—all these accounts, even if not every one of them is a reliable record of actual travel and apprenticeship, constitute in themselves a meaningful fact in the history of thought. The philosophical imagination of Greece knew the Magi and Zoroaster as bearers of an ancient wisdom, not as its necessary enemy. And this tradition—which in its oldest strata seeks wisdom in the East and sees in the "other" the

wellspring of wisdom—is precisely what invalidates Rubio’s project of “civilizational battle” at its foundations: for the Athens to which he appeals, it is the Athens of Socrates and Plato, far from warring with Iran, held its own wisdom to be indebted to the Magi.

Zoroaster, too, returned to Europe again and again: in esoteric traditions and religious reinterpretations, and later, in a new guise, in the philosophy of Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra was no rewriting of the Iranian prophet’s teachings; yet the very choice of that name for one of Europe’s most important philosophical works is itself part of Iran’s presence in the imagination and thought of the West. Schelling, likewise, returns to Iranian traditions in his reflections on myth and religion. These names are not ornaments in a catalogue of national glories; they are signs that Iran, for European thought, has not always been the absolute outside and the utterly foreign, but has rather preserved its place as the generative wellspring of an ancient and ever-renewing wisdom.

This presence is not confined to books. Roman Mithraism, for all its differences from the veneration of Mehr (Mithra) in Iran, kept Iranian names and elements alive in the religious history of Rome. In the sixth century CE, according to Agathias, a group of Neoplatonist philosophers, in the wake of the anti-intellectual turmoil in Athens, made their way to the court of Khosrow Anushirvan. The significance of the heirs and bearers of Greek philosophy taking refuge in Sasanian Iran lies not only in its confirmation of the real bonds and exchanges between these two intellectual and cultural spheres, but also in its demonstration that actual history is always more intricate than contrived binaries and reductive camp-making: the refuge of thought does not necessarily lie on the side of the border that political genealogy has assigned to it.

With the rise of Islamic civilization, this interweaving grew wider still. The Greek, Iranian, and Indian heritages were brought together in a web of translation, commentary, critique, and inquiry, and gave rise to new

knowledge. Muslims, Christians, and others all had a share in this great civilizational workshop. The share of Iranian scholars was especially prominent: from Rhazes and Avicenna in medicine and philosophy to al-Khwarizmi in mathematics, and from al-Biruni to Khayyam and Nasir al-Din Tusi in the history of the sciences. What reached Europe from this world was not merely the preserved heritage of Greece; it was also the fruit of analysis, extension, and deepening. Thus many technical terms of science and culture in the Latin languages still carry the resonance of their Persian and Arabic roots—such as the word “algorithm,” which has immortalized the name of Khwarizmi in the language of the modern world.

But perhaps the most beautiful testimony to this bond lies in the converse of poets. In Hafez, Goethe found no Eastern enemy; he found a kindred interlocutor in whose mirror he could come to know himself anew. Goethe’s *West–Eastern Divan* is a poetic answer to the notion of two worlds condemned to enmity. In it, East and West are two sides of a dialogue whose difference becomes the very possibility of creation. Hafez need not relinquish his Iranianness to dwell in Goethe’s poetry; nor does Goethe, through this communion, step outside his Europeanness. The truth is that there is no pure “we” and no pure “they” in the history of culture. We have lived within one another. What we now count as our own has at times come from afar and made its home here; and what we have given to the other has, in the other’s home, taken on a form no longer wholly ours.

Human ideals, likewise, cannot be divided between two fronts. Justice, the pursuit of truth, freedom, self-restraint, responsibility toward the other, and fidelity to one’s covenant are the exclusive possession of no civilization. From *dād* (justice) and *mehr* (loving-kindness) in Iranian thought to justice and virtue in Greek philosophy, from the spiritual wayfaring (*seyr-o soluk*) of Iranian and Islamic mysticism to autonomy in modern European philosophy, we encounter again and again the same shared questions: How ought a human being to live? What makes power legitimate? What is justice? And how does my freedom stand in relation to the freedom of another? The

answers, of course, for all their many resemblances, are not identical; but a difference in answers is no verdict of enmity among those who ask.

Iran and Greece did, of course, fight one another—just as Greeks fought Greeks, Iranians fought Iranians, and Europeans fought Europeans. States wage war, empires rise and fall, borders shift. But converting the wars of states into a war of civilizations is a political and ideological act. Civilization is far greater than states and far more enduring than their enmities. No state has the right to press the whole meaning of a culture into the service of its war; nor should any nation be expelled from the shared heritage of humankind on account of its government’s policies.

Last week, at a ceremony honoring Dr. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, at the close of a Shahnameh recitation, I witnessed a scene that perhaps conveys the meaning of this culture better than many an argument. More than a hundred of those present joined in the closing chorus:

“Be kind, each one of you, to one another;  
*Hame yek be yek mehrbāni konid*  
keep watch, all of you, over the whole world.”  
*be koll-e jahān pāsbāni konid*

And, at the very end, they sang together:

“Should Iran be no more, may this body of mine be no more.”  
*Cho Irān nabāshad tan-e man mabād*

What was so stirring in that moment was the placing of these two longings side by side: guardianship of the whole world, and love of Iran. Love of Iran was not defined by enmity toward the world; to love Iran was bound up with responsibility toward the world. Perhaps the civilizational motherhood of Iran—if the expression holds any meaning—lies precisely here: in a cradle that joins affection and care to covenant; in welcoming the other, in seeking justice, and in wishing for the good—not for oneself alone, but for the world.

One may oppose a government. One may stand against aggression and defend one's country. But one cannot divide thousands of years of the intermingling of languages, ideas, knowledge, myths, and ideals into two armies, and name the one "Iran" and the other "the West." The civilizational battle between Iran and the West is a project fallacious at its very foundations, for in order to justify itself it must first forget history. And should this myth one day become political reality, it will be a war neither of the West against Iran nor of Iran against the West; it will be a war of each against a part of its own innermost self.

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