

## ORIGINAL PAPER

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# Iran's Turkic Millennium: Rethinking an Imperial Past

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the conceptual and historical dimensions of the "Turkic millennium" concept in Iranian history. The authors conduct a systematic analysis of the succession of ruling dynasties from the 11th to the early 20th centuries and identify the key political, military, and administrative mechanisms that underpinned the dominance of the Turkic elite, as well as assess its role in the development of modern Iranian statehood. Particular attention is paid to models of the supra-ethnic empire, which combined Turkic military and political power with the Persian administrative and cultural apparatus. The work provides an in-depth analysis of the historiographical turning point of 1925, which entailed a paradigm shift from imperial to national statehood and a targeted revision of the historical narrative. The authors examine the contemporary implications of this historical period, including issues of ethnic identity, language policy, and the contested nature of heritage in present-day Iranian-Azerbaijani relations. The study concludes that the modern Iranian state is, to a considerable extent, a product of the Turkic imperial legacy, which exists in a complex symbiosis with the ancient Persian cultural tradition. The practical significance of the work lies in the potential to apply the proposed analysis to understanding contemporary ethno-political processes and historical memory in the region. The study concludes that it is necessary to reconsider established historiographical frameworks and take into account the centuries-old Turkic factor as a constitutive element of Iran's history.

**Keywords:** Iranian Turkic millennium; historiography of Iran; Turkic dynasties; supra-ethnic state; Azerbaijanis of Iran; national identity; sovereignty; model of power

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## ОРИГИНАЛЬНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

# Тюркское тысячелетие Ирана: переосмысление имперского прошлого

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## АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье анализируются концептуальные и исторические аспекты концепции «тюркского тысячелетия» в истории Ирана. Авторы проводят системный анализ последовательности правящих династий с образцом XI по начало XX в. и выявляют основные политические, военные и административные механизмы, обеспечивающие движение доминирования тюркской элиты, а также дают оценку ее сдвигу в развитии современной иранской государственности. Особое внимание уделено моделям надэтнической империи, сочетавшей тюркскую военно-политическую власть с персидским административным и культурным аппаратом. В работе углубленно анализируется историографический перелом 1925 г., повлекший за собой смену парадигмы от имперской к национальной государственности и целенаправленной ревизией исторического нарратива. Авторы исследуют современные последствия данного исторического периода, включая вопросы этнической идентичности, языковой политики и ограничения наследия в современных ирано-азербайджанских отношениях. По результатам исследования сделан вывод о том, что современная Иранская республика в некоторой степени является продуктом именно тюркского имперского наследия, находящегося в сложном симбиозе с древнейшей персидской культурной традицией. Практическая оригинальность работы заключается в возможности использования предложенного анализа для понимания современных этнополитических процессов и исторической памяти в религиях. По итогам работы сделаны выводы о необходимости переосмысления устоявшихся историографических схем и учета многовекового тюркского фактора как записывающей истории Ирана.

**Ключевые слова:** иранское тюркское тысячелетие; историография Ирана; тюркские династии; надэтническое государство; азербайджанцы Ирана; национальная идентичность; суверенитет; модель власти

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## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary understanding of national history and identity in the Middle East faces the need to reassess established historiographical paradigms, many of which were formed in the context of twentieth-century state-building. One such complex problem is the interpretation of the role of Turkic dynasties in the history of the Iranian plateau over a period of nearly a millennium. Traditional Iranian historiography, particularly during the Pahlavi dynasty, was grounded in the concept of continuous Persian statehood, viewing the Arab, Turkic, and Mongol periods as episodes of foreign domination ultimately overcome by the assimilative power of Persian culture. However, a number of contemporary academic studies offer an alternative perspective, emphasizing not external conquest but the internal state-building efforts of Turkic elites, which determined the key political, religious, and administrative parameters of modern Iran.

The problem stems from the contradiction between the ethnonationalist historical narrative and the multiethnic imperial model of governance that dominated the region for centuries. Existing approaches to the study of Iranian history often fragment it along dynastic or ethnolinguistic lines, overlooking the mechanisms underlying the long-term functioning of supra-ethnic imperial systems. This complicates a comprehensive understanding of the genesis of modern state institutions and the socio-cultural landscape of the region.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the concept of the "Turkic millennium" as a model of sustainable imperial statehood on the Iranian plateau, and to explore the mechanisms of power that ensured its long-term existence. The objectives include systematizing the dynastic succession of Turkic ruling houses, examining the model of supra-ethnic governance, and assessing the impact of the twentieth-century historiographical turning point on the modern perception of the past.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The theoretical basis of the study rests on the principles of imperial history and the theory of ethnogenesis, which conceptualize the state as a complex system in which political power and cultural production may be functionally divided among different ethnolinguistic groups.

The source base for the study was formed according to several key criteria. First, chronological coverage: sources and studies were selected covering the period from the mid-eleventh to the early twentieth centuries,

corresponding to the period of political dominance of the Turkic dynasties on the Iranian Plateau. Second, geographical focus: materials pertaining to the territory of historical Iran (the Iranian Plateau) within its extended imperial borders were examined. Third, thematic focus: priority was given to works analyzing the ethnopolitical foundations of the ruling elites, the mechanisms of administrative governance, and the transformation of historical memory. Fourth, typological diversity: the corpus of sources includes foundational monographs O. Efendiyev [1], R. Savory [2], Bosworth,<sup>1</sup> Persian narrative sources and chronicles (Alam ara-i Safavi[3], Dumbouli<sup>2</sup> [4]), archival documents (the State Historical Archives of the Republic of Azerbaijan,<sup>3</sup> the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran<sup>4</sup>), reference and genealogical publications, as well as classic works of Russian Oriental studies (I. Petrushevsky,<sup>5</sup> V. Bartold,<sup>6</sup> A. Krymsky<sup>7</sup>). A separate group consists of modern academic publications (D. Durand-Guédy [5], R. Tapper[6]) and legislative acts (the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>8</sup>), which allow the long-term influence of imperial structures to be traced.

**Data Analysis Tools.** To achieve the stated objectives, a combination of qualitative historical research methods was employed. Historical-genetic analysis was applied to trace dynastic ties and identify continuity among ruling houses from the Seljuks to the Qajars. A structural-functional approach enabled the study of the administrative mechanisms of the supra-ethnic empire and the functional division between the

<sup>1</sup> Bosworth C.E. (1966). *The New Islamic Dynasties: A Chronological and Genealogical Manual*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 1996. 416 p.

<sup>2</sup> Dumbouli A. Maasiri-Sultaniye (Maasiri-Sultaniye). *History of the Qajar Dynasty*. Tabriz; 19th century.

<sup>3</sup> Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. *Research on the History of the Safavids and Qajars*. Baku. URL: <http://www.history.az/>; State Historical Archives of the Republic of Azerbaijan. F. 24 (Chancellory of the Baku Governor). Op. 2. D. 114. Correspondence on the population and administrative division of Southern Azerbaijan (19th century). URL: <https://milliarxiv.gov.az/>

<sup>4</sup> Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran. Primary Documents of the Qajar Era. URL: <https://www.farhangedar.ir/>

<sup>5</sup> Petrushevsky I.P. *Agriculture and Agrarian Relations in Iran in the 13th-14th Centuries*. Moscow-Leningrad: USSR Academy of Sciences Press; 1960. 492 p. (In Russ.).

<sup>6</sup> Bartold V.V. *Works on the History of the Turkish Peoples of Central Asia. Timur and the Timurids*. In: *Works*. Vol. 2, Part 2. Moscow: Nauka; 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Krymsky A.E. *History of Persia, Its Literature, and Dervish Theosophy*. In 3 vol. Moscow: I.N. Kushnerev and Co. Printing House; 1909–191.

<sup>8</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Articles 15, 19. URL: <https://www.iran.gov.ir/>

military (Turkic) and bureaucratic (Persian) spheres. Historiographical analysis was used to compare narratives produced during the Pahlavi period with data from modern research, revealing a deliberate transformation in the interpretation of the past during the twentieth century. A comparative-historical method was employed to analyze commonalities and differences in the organization of power under various Turkic dynasties. Genealogical and chronological tools, based on data from C.E. Bosworth's reference work [7], ensured the verification of the dynastic chain.

**Potential Limitations of the Methods.** The study is subject to a number of methodological limitations. First, there is an inherent reliance on secondary sources and published translations of Persian chronicles, which may contain interpretive biases introduced by earlier researchers; direct work with the full corpus of unpublished archival materials from the Qajar and Safavid eras remains limited. Second, much of the historiography used — particularly the works of the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan — is grounded in the Azerbaijani academic tradition, which, despite its scholarly value, may carry a certain ethnocentric bias in interpreting multiethnic imperial structures. To minimize this effect, Western and Russian studies employing different methodological approaches were included in the analysis. Third, the focus on political and administrative history precludes an in-depth analysis of the socioeconomic processes that may also have influenced the stability of the imperial model. Finally, the study of the twentieth-century historiographical turning point is constrained by reliance on available official narratives and requires further microhistorical analysis of the intellectual environment of that period.

## RESULTS

**Dynastic Succession.** A systematic classification of ruling houses reveals a virtually unbroken chain of dynasties of Turkic origin on the Iranian plateau from the mid-eleventh to the early twentieth centuries. This historical period encompasses the successive reigns of the Seljuks (1040–1194), marked by the arrival of the Turkic Oghuz tribes and the creation of a vast empire centered in Iran; the Ilkhanids (1256–1335), a Mongol dynasty of Hulaguid origin that underwent rapid Turkification and Islamization and made Tabriz its capital [8]; the Timurids (1370–1507), a dynasty of Turkic origin whose empire, centered in Central Asia and Khorasan, patronized Persian culture while relying on the Turkic military nobility; the Safavids (1501–1736), a dynasty of Azerbaijani origin that unified Iran and established Twelver Shiism as the state

religion — a key element of modern Iranian identity; and the Afsharids (1736–1796) and Qajars (1796–1925), ruling houses of Azerbaijani origin that continued the imperial model of governance [1, 9–13]. This dynastic continuity was interrupted only in 1925, with the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi, who founded a dynasty that emphasized Persian ethnonationalism.

**A Model of the Supra-Ethnic Empire.** The study of administrative mechanisms has revealed a clear functional division characteristic of a supra-ethnic imperial state. At the top level (Power) were the shah, his court, the guard (the Qizilbash under the Safavids<sup>9</sup>), and the senior military command; the *lingua franca* of the elite under the Safavids, Afsharids, and Qajars was frequently Azerbaijani Turkic. The middle level (Administration) was represented by the state apparatus, the judiciary, diplomacy, and high culture, with Persian dominating. At the bottom level (Society), the identity of subjects was determined by religious affiliation and loyalty to the ruling dynasty rather than by ethnicity. Moreover, the Turkic shahs frequently acted as patrons of Persian literature and art.

**The Historiographical Turning Point of 1925.** A comparative analysis of historical policy before and after 1925 reveals that the rise to power of the Pahlavi dynasty marked a radical break with the imperial model and a deliberate policy of building a centralized nation-state along European lines. This process was accompanied by a large-scale revision of historical memory. Ideologically, the idea of a “Greater Iran” was promoted, positioning the new state as the direct successor to the pre-Islamic Aryan Achaemenid Empire. In historiography, the period of the Turkic dynasties was declared a “dark age” of foreign oppression, and the Safavids and Qajars were recast from “native” rulers into “foreign” conquerors. In terms of language policy, Farsi was declared the sole official state language, and the use of Azerbaijani Turkic and other languages in education, the courts, and the public sphere was restricted or prohibited. In toponymy, Turkic place names were massively replaced with Persian ones.

## DISCUSSION

The results obtained allow us to interpret the history of the Iranian plateau not through the prism of ethnic continuity, but in terms of the stability of imperial political models governed by Turkic elites. The

<sup>9</sup> Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. Research on the History of the Safavids and Qajars. Baku. URL: <http://www.history.az/>; Azerbaijan National Library. Electronic Resources on the History of the Safavids. Baku. URL: <http://www.anl.az/>

identified dynastic chain from the Seljuks to the Qajars confirms the key argument of the “Turkic millennium” concept: the political hegemony of Turkic-speaking elites was virtually uninterrupted, and periodizing history along ethnolinguistic lines obscures the actual mechanisms of power.

Analysis of the supra-ethnic empire model explains the stability of Turkic political dominance within a Persian-speaking majority. The resulting symbiosis of the “Turkic sword” and the “Persian pen” was not a random episode but a system-forming principle, whereby the military might of the steppe tradition was combined with the developed bureaucratic apparatus of a sedentary civilization. This system proved resilient and adaptable over the centuries precisely because it did not require ethnic unification, but instead built loyalty on confessional and dynastic foundations.

The historiographical turning point of 1925 thus appears not simply as a change of dynasties, but as the deliberate construction of a new national identity that required the “forgetting” of the imperial past. The recasting of Turkic rulers as “foreigners” and the exclusion of Turkic languages from the public sphere served as instruments for creating a homogeneous Persian nation-state. This explains why the contemporary perception of the past in Iran remains a field of intense ideological contestation.

Rethinking the “Turkic millennium” is significant not only academically but also for understanding contemporary domestic and regional processes related to questions of identity and historical memory among Iran’s millions of Azerbaijanis. The long-term existence of the supra-ethnic imperial model has shaped a multiethnic socio-cultural landscape that continues to influence the state’s structure, as indirectly reflected in documents such as the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Articles 15 and 19<sup>10</sup>). This analysis demonstrates that a comprehensive study of imperial legacies in Eurasia requires moving beyond linear, ethnocentric narratives toward multidimensional models that account for the complex division of political power and cultural production.

## CONCLUSIONS

The concept of the “Turkic millennium” offers an alternative perspective, shifting the focus from the myth of uninterrupted Persian statehood to the continuity of imperial models governed by Turkic elites. Its main contribution lies in identifying a central line of

state-building that was shaped for nearly nine centuries by the military and political dominance of dynasties of steppe origin. Systematizing the chain from the Seljuks to the Qajars reveals not a succession of conquerors, but an internal continuity of institutions, with each new dynasty reproducing and refining the administrative and military mechanisms of its predecessors.

The Safavid period occupies a key place within this era, having largely shaped the modern face of Iran within its geographical and religious boundaries. The Safavid state, founded by a dynasty of Azerbaijani Turkic origin, became a political project that united vast territories under the rule of a shah whose legitimacy rested both on Shiite doctrine and on the loyalty of the Qizilbash Turkic tribes. It was the Qizilbash military nobility, who spoke Azerbaijani Turkic, that formed the backbone of the army and the court elite, and this language itself functioned for centuries as the language of the court, the guard, and the senior military command — not only under the Safavids, but also under the Afsharids and Qajars. This circumstance is crucial: Iranian statehood was originally formed as a multiethnic empire, in which political sovereignty and cultural production did not necessarily coincide.

The study demonstrates that the historical reality of the region is one of complex symbiosis. The Persian language retained its position in administration, the courts, and literature, while political and military power was concentrated in Turkic hands. The metaphor of the “Turkic sword and the Persian pen” describes a deeply ingrained division of functions that ensured the empire’s stability across generations. The Azerbaijani Turkic element functioned not as an external factor, but as an internal core of the political organization, linking supreme authority with regions of both sedentary and nomadic population.

The rise of the Pahlavis in 1925 marked a radical break with this tradition. The transition to a centralized, European-style nation-state required not only administrative reform but also a profound revision of memory. The rule of the Turkic dynasties was reinterpreted as an era of foreign oppression, and the Safavids, Afsharids, and Qajars were recast from legitimate rulers into “foreign” conquerors. At the same time, the systematic marginalization of the Azerbaijani Turkic language was underway: it was expelled from education, the courts, and the public sphere, and confined to private life. The mass replacement of Turkic toponyms with Persian ones erased centuries-old traces of the Turkic elites’ presence from the region’s spatial landscape.

<sup>10</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Articles 15, 19. URL: <https://www.iran.gov.ir/>

Nationalist historiography obscured this multiethnic layering, producing a linear, ethnocentric narrative that continues to shape public consciousness and education. Modern research, however — including the works of O. Efendiyev [1], R. Savory [2], and the Azerbaijani historical school — is restoring the true significance of the Turkic component. This body of research demonstrates that Azerbaijani Turkic tribes were not merely participants in political life, but key actors in state-building whose activities shaped the

contours of modern Iran. Without understanding this role, it is impossible to adequately interpret the region's administrative institutions, cultural processes, or ethno-confessional map.

Rethinking the “Turkic millennium” thus illuminates the identity and historical memory of millions of Azerbaijanis in Iran, showing how the enduring symbiosis of the supra-ethnic Turkic imperial model challenges simplistic ethnocentric narratives and deepens understanding of the region's complex realities.

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