Tarzi and the Emergence of Afghan Nationalism: 
Formation of a Nationalist Ideology

by

Senzil K. Nawid

Introduction

The modern nation-state and the concept of national sovereignty developed in Europe and spread from there to other parts of the world. Nationalist ideologies developed in the Middle East, as in many other parts of the Third World, in reaction to Western aggression and the presumption of Western cultural and political superiority. A primary concern of the first generation of Islamic modernist thinkers was to reinterpret Islam in the context of modern science and stop further decline in the standing of the Islam in the world. Muslim reformers of the mid-nineteenth century tried to find religious justifications for change in order to reconcile Islamic morality and Western modernity. Prominent among these nineteenth-century reformers were Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), best known for their advocacy of unity among all Muslims in opposition to European imperialism, and his student and close associate, Sheikh Mohammad `Abduh (1849-1905) of Egyp. Together they published in Paris the journal, Al-`Urwat al-Wuthqa (The Indissoluble Bond), to advance Islamic ‘reform’ and ‘renewal’ (islah wa tajdid) to promote public welfare generally.

`Abduh, who later became rector of the Islamic University of Al-Azhar in Egypt, rejected blind acceptance of traditional doctrines and customs, asserting that a return to the purity of early Islam would restore Islamic spiritual vitality and create free-thinking conditions conducive to the adoption of modern science. He rejected the practice of taqlid, blind adherence to the interpretation of Islam by medieval jurists, and called for a fresh interpretation of the shari`a. In so doing, Afghani and `Abduh laid the intellectual foundation for social and political reform in the Middle East.

Nationalist discourse in the Middle East evolved along with the quest for reform. Although historically and ideologically grounded in Islamist thought, the nationalist movement in the Muslim world was greatly influenced by the Western ideal of the modern nation-state and was spread by the media, mainly journals and newspapers. Nationalist writers in the Middle East began to look at Western models and Western forms of government “to reshape Islamic society and re-imagine the Islamic polity”. Thinkers such as Namik Kemal (1840-1888) and Zia Pasha (1825-1880) of Turkey attempted to merge pan-Islamism with Ottoman nationalism. Later, other writers such as


2 Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), was also one of the pioneers of Muslim reform in the 19th century.
Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1963) and Mustafa Kamil (1874-1908) and Taha Husain of Egypt, Jowdat Pasha (1823-1898) of Turkey, and Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzada (d. 1878) and Mirza Agha Khan Kermani (1853-1896) of Iran attempted to promote ideals of national solidarity and national identity within the particular conditions of their respective national societies.

In this paper, I will examine the work of Mahmud Tarzi (1865–1933), the ideologue of nationalism in Afghanistan. Inasmuch as I cannot examine all aspects of Tarzi’s thought and writings in this paper, I will concentrate on his ideas of fatherland, nationality, statehood, and national sovereignty. I will base the analysis primarily on Tarzi’s writing in Seraj-Al-Akhbar, the newspaper he edited and published in Kabul.

Before delving into Tarzi’s ideology, a word should be said about his early life and the influences that shaped his political thinking.

**Early Life and Intellectual Development**

Mahmud Tarzi was born in 1865 in Ghazni, Afghanistan, to a notable family of the Muhammadzai ruling clan. His father, Gholam Mohammad Tarzi, a well-known poet, was forced to leave Afghanistan for India in 1882 by Amir Abd al-Rahman (1880–1901) as a result of rivalry between two branches of the ruling dynasty.

Tarzi was educated by his father and private tutors until the age of sixteen. One of these tutors, Mullah Mohammad Akram Hotaki, who accompanied the Tarzi family into exile, was an eminent scholar from Qandahar. Tarzi refers to him as a highly-revered and greatly admired man who, in addition to possessing high moral character, exhibited an amazing intellectual aptitude, erudition, eloquence, and sound knowledge of all branches of scholarship. “He was never defeated,” Tarzi wrote, “in any scholarly debate in the holy city of Damascus.”

After spending three years in Karachi in India, the Tarzi family moved to Baghdad and finally settled in Syria. It was in Baghdad and Syria, then parts of Ottoman Turkey, that the young Mahmud at the age of twenty began to learn Arabic. In Baghdad he studied Turkish under Mohammad Affendi, a private tutor introduced to his father by Hidayat Pasha, the Ottoman military commander in Baghdad. According to his own account, Tarzi’s interest in Turkish literature began with his exposure to the work of Ahmed Medhat, a noted Turkish writer. “In Istanbul, I came across Khwaja-i-Awwal (The First Teacher of Mehat). As soon as I opened it, art and science began to talk to me. Whatever...”

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4 For more information about Tarzi’s life see May Schinasi, Afghanistan at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century, and Rawan-Farhadi, Maqalat-i-Mahmud Tarzi dar Seraj al-Akhbar (the Articles of Mahmud Tarzi in Seraj al-Akhbar), p. 13.
5 “Nabeshta-i az Mahud Tarzi ba Zaban Turki (A short autobiography by Mahmud Tarzi in Turkish Language,) translated into Dari by his son, Abd al-Wahab Tarzi, Kabul, 1355/ 1976, p. 2; For Tarzi’s interest in Turkish literature, see Seraj al-Akhbar, no. 19, Jawza 3, 1292, p. 13.

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it said, I understood. The more I read, the more I became enthralled.”

Tarzi’s passionate desire to learn Turkısh and his long residence in Syria within the Ottoman Empire led to his acquiring fluency in Turkish and initiated a life-long interest in Turkish literature. At the same time, as May Schinasi points out,

…[t]he tidal wave of books which inundated Turkey in the form of translation and adaptation offered a very wide choice of what Europe had produced through the ages. Mahmud started to read and learn and thanks to a rapid mastery of the Turkish language, he delved into every possible subject.7

Tarzi soon became acquainted with numerous Ottoman political writers.

Driven by an intense desire to learn about science and literature, I acquired whatever work I could find by Ottoman thinkers and literary men and devoted days and nights to reading them. The more I became acquainted with the writings of Ottoman authors the more passionate I felt about my own country and became increasingly absorbed in the love of homeland….I was in flesh an Afghan but considered myself culturally an Ottoman–I began to dream the lofty idea of the establishment of close ties and cultural relations between these two countries and the two noble nations.8

An important event for Tarzi was his encounter in 1896 with Sayyid Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani in Istanbul, where he spent seven months benefiting from the teachings of this renowned Muslim thinker. Afghani’s strong influence on Tarzi is revealed in his written account of his meetings with Al-Afghani in Istanbul. Tarzi refers to the Sayyid as the wealth of knowledge and describes his seven months of companionship with him as “equivalent to seventy years of travel.”9

Tarzi and the Rise of Afghan Nationalism

Mahmud Tarzi returned to Afghanistan in 1902, a year after his father’s death in 1901 in Syrian. His return to Afghanistan was prompted by a royal declaration by Amir Habibullah, granting amnesty to families forced into exile by his father, Amir Abd al-Rahman. As a widely-traveled poet and persuasive writer, Tarzi quickly attracted the attention of the Amir, who commissioned him to establish contact with Ottoman authorities to invite Turkish experts to Afghanistan to assist with educational and other reform projects.10 In 1904, Tarzi moved his family from Damascus to resettle in Kabul after twenty years of living in exile.

Tarzi’s return to Afghanistan coincided with the rise of Afghan nationalism inspired, according to Gregorian, by constitutional movements in Ottoman Turkey and Iran, and the victory of Japan, a small Asian country, over Russia in 1906. The single most important factor contributing to the rise of nationalism in Afghanistan was the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, by which Iran, Afghanistan, and other regions of Central

7 May Schinasi, Afghanistan at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century, p. 53.
8 Ibid. p. 3.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Asia were divided into spheres of Russian and British influence. The resolutions of the Convention, formulated and imposed without the knowledge or participation of the countries affected, evoked strong repercussions in Afghanistan and Iran and heightened anti-imperialist feelings. Pan-Islamism aroused by the Italo-Turkish War (1911), and Balkan Wars (1912-1913), which resulted in the defeat of Turkey and the mistreatment of Muslims, further strengthened anti-Western sentiments in Afghanistan.  

Early in the 1900s, a small group of Afghan intellectuals formed the Secret National Party (Jam`iat-i-Sirr-i-Milli). Known also as the Constitutionalists (Mashruta Khwahan), the members included liberal elites of well-educated middle-class families who demanded social and political reforms and Afghanistan’s unconditional independence from Great Britain. In 1909, a secret plot by the group to replace Amir Habibullah’s despotic regime with a constitutional monarchy was discovered and resulted in the suppression of the association. The Nationalist movement, however, did not die but was kept alive after the 1909 incident by another loosely organized group of nationalists who referred to themselves as the Young Afghans (Jawanan-i-Afghan). Composed of writers, teachers, and liberal court members, the Young Afghans like their nationalist predecessors demanded modernist reforms and Afghanistan’s complete independence from Great Britain.

The leading figure in this latter group was Mahmud Tarzi, whose ideas had attracted educated individuals, liberal members of the court and royal family members, such as the Amir’s older sons, Prince Enayatullah and Prince Amanullah, both of whom were married to daughters of Tarzi. In 1911, Tarzi received permission from the amir to start the bi-weekly Seraj al-Akhbar (The Torch of News). Seraj al-Akhbar became for Tarzi the vehicle with which to disseminate his modernist views on politics, literature, education, and gender, and to give concrete expression to nascent Afghan nationalism. As outlined in one of his editorials, Seraj al-Akhbar’s objectives were to provide information on important events in the world, raise religious and national consciousness of the public, inspire in the citizens the love of homeland, advocate for national unity and obedience to the sovereign, promote modern education and science, promote ethical principles that would ensure progress, civility, and prosperity, make known to the public the enemies of Islam and the homeland, and promote independence and national sovereignty.

During the eight years of his career as the editor-in-chief of Seraj al-Akhbar, Tarzi attempted to fulfill these goals. He endeavored in numerous articles to raise the national consciousness of the general Afghan public by admonishing love of the fatherland, pride in Afghan national identity, and insistence on national sovereignty.

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13 For more details see, Habibi, pp. 181-220.
14 “Sarguzasht-i-Seraj al-Akhbar” (The Story of Seraj al-Akhbar), Seraj al-Akhbar, vol. 6, Asad 24, 1295; Rawan Farhadi, p. 74-75.
Seraj al-Akhbar played a crucial role in introducing Western ideas into Afghan intellectual circles by reporting international news from foreign newspapers. Although the paper’s initial obligation was “to inform and satisfy the Amir’s curiosity as to the events within the Muslim world and in Europe,” Tarzi used his position as the editor-in-chief of Seraj al-Akhbar to draw the attention of the Amir and the ruling elite to Afghanistan’s backwardness and to push for social and institutional reforms.

Causes of Decline

Tarzi set out first to analyze the causes of the decline of the Islamic world in general and of Afghanistan in particular. He addressed the backwardness of the Muslim world in a series of articles titled “What are the Obstacles to Progress for Muslims?” Subscribing to theories advanced by the earlier Muslim reformers, he claimed that the backwardness of Muslims was not due to any inherent defect in Islam, but to the unreceptiveness of many Muslims to its teachings. Muslims, he argued, had the potential to unite and move forward. As with earlier Muslim reformers, he advocated a synthesis of the material achievements of the West, its science and technology, with the spirituality of Islam. The Qur’an, he asserted, combined spiritual knowledge with knowledge of things temporal. When Muslims properly understood the Qur’an, they spread to the world the message of the Holy Book, as well as literacy, the arts, and science. He repeatedly referred to the pioneering role of Islam in science and the arts during Islam’s Golden Age and reminded his readers that it was from the cultural centers of the Islamic world that science and philosophy had spread to pre-renaissance Europe. He blamed the religious scholars, the ulama, for the general lack of knowledge about the Qur’an. Their rigid adherence to peripheral issues and their failure to guide believers had led to ignorance and to the acceptance of ideas and practices that were alien to Islam. Folk practice and superstition had replaced rational religion, (din-i`aqli) and Muslims had gradually lost their confidence, vitality, sense of unity, vigor, vitality, and leadership role in science and culture.

Fanaticism, lack of access to the outside world, and disunity, in Tarzi’s view, were important contributing factors to Afghanistan’s backwardness. He singled out disunity as the main cause of the country’s weakness. The calamity of disunity among Afghans was such, he declared, that it had set city against city, village against village, street against street, and tribe against tribe, adding that these divisions defied not only the principles of Islam, which ordains that all faithful are brethren, but also the dictates of reason, which shows that society functions best within a framework of unity and mutual cooperation. Had Afghan national strength not been irreparably damaged by this disunity, Tarzi asked, who could have extracted from them Peshawar, Baluchistan, and Sistan?

State and Nation

Tarzi’s political views are best expressed in a series of articles titled “Religion? State? Fatherland?, and Nation?” (din?, dawlat?, watan?, millat?), which appeared in the Ethics (akhlaqiyat) column in the Seraj al-Akhbar. He explained that these four elements were interrelated.

In his constantly imaginative, deliberately “poetic” style, which he was sure would speak to a public unfamiliar with abstractions, he presented the homeland as “the container”, “the benevolent parents”, “the tree” and the nation (mellat) as the “contents”, “the children”, the “fruit”. Phrased in words understandable to all, he described how indissolubly one was linked to the other, how, in fact, each one had no separate existence.\(^\text{19}\)

The foundation of humanity, he wrote, is based on these four elements. The person who does not love his homeland will not be able to protect his national honor.

In Tarzi’s view, homeland (watan) and nation were symbiotic. He compared “homeland” to a loving father and a nurturing mother and the nation to the children who are protected and nurtured by it. The survival of one will complete the existence of the other.\(^\text{20}\)

Tarzi’s search for statehood and nationality was founded on territorially defined conceptions of the modern nation-state and a geographically distinct and historically unique Afghan nation. He sought to awaken a consciousness that would supersede local parochialism, redefining the meaning of the term “watan,” which traditionally meant merely one's birthplace. The term watan, he wrote, referred to a territory with fixed boundaries to the north, south, east, and west, separating it from other countries. For Tarzi, it included regions, cities, and villages governed by a single state and a single government. The homeland of the Kabuli, Jalalabadi, Mazari, Laghmani, Konari, Nuristani, Shinwari, Safidkohi, Khosti, Mangali, Jadrani, Kohistani, Kohdamani, Nijrawi, Tagawi, Panjshiri, Ghaznichi, Hazarai, Waziristani, Badakhshi, Herati, Mainanagi, Qataghani, Qandahar, etc, is the same blessed land that we call Afghanistan.\(^\text{21}\) The changed meaning of the word ‘watan’ and the portrayal of the whole country as ‘native place’ were integral to Tarzi’s idea that the territory of the state was an indivisible whole.

The concept of the unity and indivisibility of the Afghan State, as articulated by Tarzi, appeared early in the reign of King Amanullah in the First Article of the 1923 Constitution, following Afghanistan’s declaration of independence.

One of Tarzi’s most important contributions was the development of a new concept of the state. In his view, the state derived political legitimacy from its role in protecting the nation and nurturing its cultural and social life. He believed that to preserve order the

\(^{19}\) May Schinasi, p. 202.
\(^{20}\) Seraj-al-Akhbar, vol. 4, no. 20, Jawza 24, 1294/ June 14, 1915, pp. 4-5.

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The state must protect the interests of all its citizens. The progress of the nation, according to Tarzi, depended on the efficiency of the state and its success in carrying out policies that promoted national security and progress, which are achieved by “qualified and educated men who run its affairs and ensure the good of the nation on behalf of the king who had selected them. They were responsible to him and to the nation.”

The state must advance a political system that ensured societal wellbeing. It is the responsibility of the state to ensure the security of its citizens, protect their rights, their freedoms, and promote their self-esteem. The state must implement efficient measures to create an environment that improves the living conditions of the citizens. In foreign policy, the role of the state must be to integrate the nation into the international community and to develop mutually beneficial political, economic, cultural, and other relations with all countries of the world.

Tarzi’s paramount goal was to instill national consciousness by means of leadership from above. He believed that a benevolent ruler concerned primarily with the people’s welfare could win the loyalty of the masses and educate them to participate effectively in the government and social development. It was the responsibility of the state to maintain a harmonious social balance through legislation and administration. The state was responsible to provide to its subjects not only security, but also comfort and prosperity.

Although a liberal, Tarzi was not an advocate for constitutional government. In the volumes of the newspaper he published there is no article favoring political democracy or parliamentarianism. Tarzi’s indifference to democratic government may have been the result of his close association with the royal court or the conviction that the country was not yet ready for political democracy. For him the test of good government was the prosperity of the people. He, therefore, enthusiastically applauded Amir Habibullah’s early program of reform. The sovereign in Tarzi’s view is able to choose the best course of survival and well-being for his subjects, more dispassionately than they are able to do for themselves. The sovereign is the supreme commander of the army and determines who will hold which public office and how the economy will be regulated. The stability of the state is directly related to the success of the sovereign in providing security and prosperity for the people.

The nation and the state, he argued, had mutual responsibilities (hoquq-i-motaqabela) and were mutually dependent on each other for survival. The failure of one would cause the failure of the other. He urged discipline, devotion to duty, and the subordination of individual pursuits to the good of the state. If the nation refuses to obey the laws and regulations of the state, then that nation is ineffectual, paralyzed, and sickly. An ailing nation cannot benefit from the state, nor can the state benefit from it.

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22 Schinasi, p. 203.
Tarzi devotes considerable attention to the civil obligations of Muslim believers and the reciprocal roles of the ruler and the ruled. He stressed the obligation of the people of nation to help the state become strong through hard work, learning, and industry. He felt that the state and the nation must unite to protect Islam and the “fatherland.” He insisted that the unity of all peoples was needed to achieve economic and cultural prosperity. Accordingly, in his discourse on development, he emphasized the idea of brotherly union of different peoples to serve the homeland.

Tarzi viewed the nation as a living entity and emphasized its long-standing historic existence. The term *millat* (nation) like *watan*, he wrote, is applied to a group of people living in a specific state. While it is true that we recognize the entire Muslim community as one Islamic nation (*millat-i-islamia*), what we mean specifically by *millat* is the people who are the inhabitants of the sacred and blessed land of Afghanistan.

A harsh critic of unbridled individualism in Afghan society, he argued that a healthy social environment should mold individual behavior. According to Tarzi, disunity among Afghans was the result of many having accepted a negative concept of the state and the nation. In his poems and articles, a theme frequently repeated by Tarzi was the need for national unity. He promoted the concept of a single Afghan identity that would bring together the disparate ethnic and religious groups of the country as one nation. His discourse on reform was thus combined with the idea of brotherly union of different peoples, whose cooperation was important for the progress of the homeland. Recognizing that ethnic identity loomed large in the historical and social background of the nation, he advocated for unity under the banner of Islam. In his opinion, the numerous languages and ethnic groups that existed in Afghanistan need not be an obstacle to national unification. In an article titled “If Muslims Unite” (*Agar Musalmanan Mottahid shawand*), he focused on the `ulama’s leading role as jurists, teachers and preachers in the mosques, and he appealed to them to use their influence to enlighten the masses and unite the diverse ethnic groups under the banner of Islam. He advocated for unity between Shi’as and Sunnis, questioning the rationale that divided the two sects who pray in the same direction, believe in the same prophet and the same holy book, utter the same phrase of *tawhid*, worship the One God—though one might pray with open hands and the other with closed hands—both recognize the same things that the Qur’an has designated as lawful and as unlawful; neither believes in the Trinity or the Cross, and neither wears signs to distinguish themselves as non-Muslims.…

He added that “it is a pity that Muslims have sliced their one precious body into two sections and have made it possible for their enemies to widen the wound and inflame it further.”

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25 Ibid.
27 *Seraj Al-Akhbar*, vol. quoted in Vertan Gregorian,
28 “Payinda bad ittihad (Long live Unity)” *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 6, no. 24, Saratan 30th, 1296.

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As most of Tarzi’s poems and articles suggest, education was a top priority on his agenda for national revival. He argued that education was a necessity that man could not do without, and he stressed the importance of the mind as a power governing human life. “No country or nation has attained or will attain progress and prosperity without scientific knowledge and technology….Can the astonishing achievements of the civilized world, the extraordinary inventions that have illuminated the world be attributed to anything other than the radiant effect of science?”

Afghanistan’s backwardness, in Tarzi’s opinion, was largely due to the ignorance of Afghans about the scientific achievements of the modern world and Afghanistan’s cultural isolation from the outside world. Consequently, in place of rational thought, “Superstition reigned supreme in Afghanistan. Steeped in centuries of superstition and irrational folk religion, the Afghans, like Muslims in other parts of the world, had failed to utilize a multitude of human and natural resources.”

For Tarzi, education would be the key to forging a new national consciousness and reducing cultural differences among diverse elements of the country. He believed that the acquisition of modern science and technology was essential for Afghanistan’s economic growth, cultural progress, and national strength, and he called attention to the rudimentary educational system, high illiteracy rate, and regrettable absence of modern educational facilities in Afghanistan. He stressed the need for modern schools in the provinces and encouraged wealthy citizens to take an active role in achieving that goal.

…unfortunately, the majority of people do not understand the value of science and the impact that modern education can have on their children’s future. If they do, they rely on government to take up this responsibility alone, while it is imperative that they also take part in this endeavor. For instance, if the people of Qandahar, Herat, Balkh, Ghazni, and Jalalabad were aware of the great advantages that modern education could provide for their children, they would willingly take the initiative to establish modern schools themselves…. By contributing the same amount of money that they are now spending annually on the education of their children by private tutors (akhunds), they will be able to help with the establishment of modern schools in their districts.

The love of the homeland, he argued, includes taking interest in the future of the children of the homeland and making it possible for them to attain proper training in modern science. Additionally, Tarzi urged the youth to strengthen their faith through knowledge. The greatest and noblest worship, he argued, was to obtain knowledge, because it is only through knowledge that a Muslim will be able to acquire full intellectual capacity to understand God’s Unity.

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30 Gregorian, “
32 Seraj al-Akhbar, vol. 1, no. 3, p.7. See also Mahmud Tarzi, Majmu‘a-i-Akhlaqiyat (Collection of Essays on Ethics), Damascus 1305/1888, pp. 4-16; “Ilm wa Insaniyat (Knowledge and Humanity), Seraj al-Akhbar, vol. 1, no. 12, 31 Hut, 1290, cited in Rawan-Farhadi, p. 162.

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It is important to note that Tarzi advocated for modern education for both men and women. In fact, he advocated for compulsory education for everyone with a uniform syllabus to instill patriotism in the minds of the new generation and diminish cultural differences among different ethnic groups.

Language

Tarzi recognized the need to pay close attention to the symbolic role of language in the ideology of nationalism. He published a series of articles on the importance of language and devoted a column of Seraj al-Akhbar to Persian and Pashto literature under the aphorism: “A nation survives through its language and its language survives through its literature.”

Comparing the “fatherland” to a vessel and the nation to substance contained therein, he pointed out that the contents of a vessel can be composed of one particular ingredient, such as water, or a combination of two or several ingredients. The Afghan nation, he wrote, is composed primarily of two constituents, speakers of Persian and speakers of Pashto, and in one of his articles, he went so far as to claim that Afghani (Pashto) was the ancestor to all aryans (Indo-Iranian) languages, admitting, however, that his attitude could be biased by nationalist fervor.

Although Tarzi wrote exclusively in Dari Persian, he urged readers to make a concerted effort to enhance the status of Pashto. He promoted Pashto as Afghanistan’s national language and Dari Persian as its official language. As Gregorian points out, for Tarzi and his associates, “Islam, Afghan history, and Pashtu together formed the mortar that would permit the country’s ethnic mosaic to be molded into a single nation.”

The Promotion of Women

Tarzi also addressed the status of women and their role in the society. His concern for the social condition of women is integral to the rest of his philosophy and fits into his larger scheme for Afghan national revival. Not unlike other contemporary Muslim modernist-nationalist writers, such as Qasim Amin and Mohammad Lutfi al-Sayyid of...
Egypt, Tarzi linked nationalism with feminism. He viewed women as forming the core of the family and, inasmuch as the family was the foundation of the society, women’s intellectual progress or backwardness had direct influence on the progress or backwardness of the nation. He claimed that Islam was founded upon equality for all, women and men. Quoting a saying of the Prophet, “Women are the other half of men and exactly like them, he argued that the original human being was composed of these two halves and that one part could not progress without the other.

Tarzi began his defense of women in an article that became the prelude of a series of biographical accounts of famous women. He argued against the common belief that the subordination of women to men reflected a natural order in which women are by nature unequal to men. It is an established fact, he wrote, that the human race originated from a man and a woman and that both contributed to the propagation of the human race. His purpose in assigning a column in his paper to “famous women” was to set the stage for discourse on women’s role in society, to celebrate women’s intellect, and to accord women a sense of pride. He intended, first, to demonstrate that, given the opportunity, women would be able to develop their minds the same way men do and, secondly, to pave the way for opening public schools for girls to enable them to participate in the progress of the nation.

Mindful of deep-seated prejudices against women in patriarchal Afghan society, Tarzi adopted a cautious approach. His support of feminism was kept within the bounds of traditional culture. He cautioned women against the exercise of excessive freedom which, he argued, had given way to promiscuity in Europe, As I have explained elsewhere, his ideal woman was strong, well-informed and rational, yet bound by the moral values of Afghan Muslim society. The home, according to Tarzi, was the foundation upon which the entire society was built and women as homemakers and mothers bore the primary burden to improve the home and society. In his view, the progress of the nation depended on the progress of women. In “Woman in the Family”, he described woman as the pillar of the household and compared her to a seed sewn in the ground. Just as a kernel of wheat will produce wheat, and the seed of a wild gourd will produce its own kind, a good wife will make a happy, healthy home, whereas a bad wife will destroy an entire family. Accordingly, Tarzi advocated for the building of schools for girls and believed that education would give women a sense of accomplishment and enable them to contribute to Afghanistan’s progress as the mothers of the country’s future generation.

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43 For more details see, Nawid, “The Feminism and Feminist in Tarzi’s Work.”
Patriotism and National Freedom

Central to Tarzi’s message was love of fatherland. He saw patriotism as a noble sentiment and a solid base for nationalism and for the establishment of a powerful state. A significant contribution was his promotion of the concepts of “national sovereignty” (hakimiyat-i-milli) and “love of homeland” (hubb-i-watan). Quoting a saying of the Prophet, he declared that love of homeland is from faith.

He tried in many articles to create a sense of commonality rooted in the love for the “homeland,” and he repeatedly enjoined his readers to feel and demonstrate that love. The “love of fatherland” hubb al-watan, he argued, was the nation’s most effective weapon against foreign aggression. We love our homeland for many reasons, he wrote, but most of all because our homeland is our universe, because our existence is connected to it. The love of fatherland does not just mean to love the soil, rocks, woods, trees and the products of one’s country, but means to cherish one’s faith, honor (namus), national pride (sharaf wa `izzat-i-milli), and national freedom (azadi).45

Tarzi claimed that patriotism was inherent in the character of Afghans, and he cited Afghanistan’s fierce resistance against the British during the First and the Second Anglo-Afghan Wars as examples of the natural nationalistic character of the Afghan people.46

Call for Independence

In many of his articles, Tarzi stressed the importance of independence and national sovereignty. The British control of Afghanistan’s foreign policy, in Tarzi’s view, had deprived Afghanistan of direct channels of communication with the outside world. The establishment of direct diplomatic, commercial, and cultural relations with foreign countries was essential, in his mind, to bring the country out of decades of political and cultural isolation and pave the way for its progress.

The outbreak of World War I in Europe had far-reaching effects in the Middle East. It also had an impact on Afghanistan. In November 1914, Ottoman Turkey, which had recently been humiliated by setbacks in Libya and the Balkans, joined the War in support of the Axis powers against the Allies. The Ottoman Sultan’s call for an Islamic jihad against France, Russia, and Great Britain aroused strong pan-Islamic sentiments in Afghanistan. Seraj al Akhbar expressed deep sympathy for Ottoman Turkey and became a strong political voice in the region during the Great War. It enjoyed a wide circulation, with many readers in Central Asia, Iran, and India. An issue of Seraj al-Akhbar in which Tarzi declared British India the “Abode of War” (dar al-harb) caused a great sensation in India.47 Alarmed by the paper’s growing influence, Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy and Governor General of India, sent the following letter on December 14 to Amir Habibullah:

46 “ Watan (Homeland), Seraj al-Akhbar, vol. 6, no. 24, Saratan, 1296./June 11, 1917.

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It has been brought to my notice that a newspaper called Siraj al-Akhbar which is published in Kabul contains a great deal of inaccurate and offensive matter in regard to the present war in Europe, which cannot but create a false impression in the minds of its readers as to the progress of that war and as to the motives of the British Government. I am well aware that this newspaper is in no way an official mouth-piece of your Majesty’s Government, that it in no way represents the feelings of the Government of His Majesty the King Emperor. But I consider it most undesirable that the paper should be disseminated at the present time in India, both because of the inaccuracy and the offensive character of the articles it publishes, and because it is likely to produce in the minds of ignorant people the idea that the articles reflect the feelings of Your Majesty’s Government and that the relations between your Majesty and myself are not as truly cordial as I am glad to know as they really are. You may be sure that I have not the slightest desire to interfere in any of the internal affairs of Afghanistan, but I would suggest to Your Majesty as a friend, the desirability of taking steps, either to suppress this paper or to alter the present tone.48

In 1915, an Indo-German-Turkish mission led by Oskar Niedermayer and the German legate Werner Otto von Hentig arrived in Kabul to encourage Amir Habibullah to join the war in support of Turkey. The mission included a number of Turkish officers and Indian revolutionaries. Amir Habibullah took advantage of the opportunity to play one side off against the other. However, after much procrastination and despite securing an agreement from the Central Powers for a huge payment and arms provisions in exchange for attacking British India, he decided to remain neutral, hoping to use his policy of neutrality during the War as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with the British for Afghanistan’s independence. In fact, on March 3, 1915, the viceroy wrote a letter to Amir Habibullah in which he commended him on his wise and courageous decision. “I am delighted,” he wrote, “to have proof that in spite of such influences as may be at work in your territories Your Majesty is steadily pursuing the policy of neutrality which throughout you have declared to the King Emperor’s Government.”49

The nationalists and the religious leaders, on the other hand, saw an alliance with Turkey as an opportunity to end the British control of Afghanistan’s foreign policy. The Amir’s decision to remain neutral during the War generated strong resentment among the nationalists. At this time, Seraj al-Akhbar moved in a new direction and abandoned its laudatory tone in reference to the Amir. In June1916, a British-inspired Arab revolt was launched by Sharif Husain, the governor of Mecca and Medina, who entered into an alliance with England and France against Ottoman Turkey.50 At the time, the outbreak of the Arab revolt prompted Tarzi to print an article in Seraj al-Akhbar on July 16 in which he declared the Sharif of Mecca a traitor, accusing him of provoking disunity among Muslims.51

48 India Office Records (London), L/PS/146, Kharita no. 29-POA, Delhi, December 14, 1914, from HE Viceroy to HM Amir of Afghanistan, quoted in Nawid, Ibid.
49 IOR, L/PS/14/6, Kharita no. 6, POA, Simla, March 3, 1915, from HE Viceroy to HM Amir of Afghanistan, quoted in Nawid, Ibid., p. 39.
50 After WWI, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the French and British took over the Arab provinces — dividing them into mandates. The Arabs were broken up into different groups and each developed its own distinct territorial nationalisms.
51 See Nawid, Religious Response to Social Change in Afghanistan, p. 4. Sharif Husain hoped to free Arab lands from Ottoman rule and to create a united Arab kingdom that would encompass the area stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Aden in Yemen. However, the idea of creating an independent united Arab
As tension between the contradictory sentiments of pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism intensified during the Great War, Tarzi shifted his attention from support of Turkey to the issue of Afghan independence. The strong Islamic nationalist feelings aroused during the war in defense of Ottoman Turkey encouraged Tarzi to become bolder in his anti-British rhetoric. He intensified his efforts to channel the sentiments aroused by the Great War in favor of defense of the fatherland. His patriotism is expressed to the fullest in a stirring article titled “Rise Up for Prosperity”, in which he used the second phrase of the call to prayer to advocate for a national uprising against the British. He decried Muslim indifference toward the war and made a passionate appeal to Afghan pride, calling upon the nation to rise up against the British.

Muslim advocates are preaching, singing songs of truth, appealing to Muslims everywhere to wake up, to be alert, but who is listening? Who is paying any attention? Who understands? Who moves? Who? Where? When?....but we should sing our own song, play our own music, and lead our own caravan....Seraj al-Akhbar is a Muslim newspaper...and solely Afghan. The songs it sings and the music it plays amplify the attitude of the Afghan and the dignity (maqamat-i-`oluwiyat) and the honor (sharaf) of the Afghan nation.

Following poignant remarks about Afghan pride and the bravery of the Afghans during the First and the Second Anglo-Afghan Wars, he wrote:

Rise up for prosperity, Oh noble Afghan nation! You must protect your dignity and your national honor. You must protect the independence of your government. The Afghans, who have become known for bravery, pride, and strong belief in Islam, must not accept the control and protection of a foreign non-Muslim nation.52

Tarzi then went on to elaborate what being a British protectorate would mean. He argued that the meaning of ‘protectorate’ is precisely that circumstance in which one state dictates to the other not to recognize any but itself, not to enter into negotiations with any state but itself and not to conclude any treaty with any nation but itself.

Tarzi asked rhetorically, “Can the Afghan people, who are known for bravery, accept the domination of another nation over their foreign policy?” “Never,” he replied.53

According to Abd al-Haiy Habbibi, this issue of the paper was immediately censured by order of Amir Habibullah before reaching readers, and Tarzi was reprimanded and fined for his “call to prayer” at an inappropriate time.54

kingdom under Sharif Husain’s rule was undermined by a secret pact known as the Sykes-Picot agreement within the terms of which French and British diplomats divided the Middle East into spheres of influence for their respective countries.


53 Abd al-Haiy Habbibi, “ Yak waraq-i-gomshoda-i-Tarikh (A Lost Page in History)” , Musawat (Kabul), Qaws 7, 1346/Nov. 29, 1967.

54 Ibid.; Nawid, Ibid.
In 1918, *Seraj al Akhbar* was shut down by the order of the Amir. By that time, however, Tarzi had accomplished his objectives. He had established a philosophical base for reform and had developed the intellectual foundation for Afghan nationalism and ultimate independence.

**Conclusion**

Progress was the hallmark of Tarzi’s ideology of nationalism. As with other Muslim reformers, he attempted to find *a modus vivendi* for traditional Islamic culture and the philosophical and scientific challenges of the modern world. He portrayed the era in the Muslim world generally and in Afghanistan in particular as one of decline and emphasized the need for modern education, rationality, and scientific thinking.

Although Tarzi’s ideas for Islamic modernism had their roots in the ideas of Al-Afghani and other nineteenth-century reformers, his nationalist ideology was distinct in dealing with Afghanistan’s particular social and political conditions. He set forth an exclusively national ideology in which loyalties of kinship, region, and village were to be subordinated to national solidarity. This nationalist ideology was however articulated within a framework of Islamic principles. Afghan Islamic identity would transcend tribal, ethnic, regional, and sectarian loyalties. At the same time, Tarzi used pan-Islamic fervor promote Afghan national unity and Afghan independence from Great Britain.

Tarzi presented his political philosophy differently to different audiences, and his nationalism was not confined to the world of politics. It was also cultural. He paid serious attention to issues of language and literature and modern education, which he saw as essential not only for national progress but for the realization of social and political homogeneity--common language, history, geography, and literature. His views and ideas had a profound effect on a rising generation of Afghan intellectuals, mostly young liberal members of the court, writers, and school teachers. An Afghan cultural consciousness began to take shape as writers stimulated interest in the history of Afghan peoples and Afghan literature, and the definition of the national language.

Tarzi’s passionate Afghan nationalism had far-reaching impact. His ideas led the way to an official Afghan identity proclaimed by King Amanullah and influenced a future generation of Asian reformers.55

Tarzi also initiated the first public debate in Afghanistan on the issue of women’s right to education and courageously broached the question of equality for women with men. Although the general public did not support the full range of Tarzi’s feminist ideas, his campaign for women’s education resulted in the establishment of the first school for girls


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in 1920, and his ideas paved the way for several improvements of the status of women in the following decade.

Among the most enthusiastic of Tarzi’s admirers was Prince Amanullah, one of Amir Habibullah’s sons, who married one of Tarzi’s daughter in 1915 and come into close contact with Tarzi and his circle. One cannot overestimate the influence of Tarzi on his son-in-law, Prince Amanullah. This influence instilled in the young prince a zeal for independence and reform.

In 1919, the nationalist-modernist movement advocated by Tarzi was abruptly transformed from a theoretical movement to a plan of action with the rise to power of King Amanullah. Immediately following his ascension to the throne, Amanullah created a Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presaging his intention to declare Afghanistan’s independence. The appointment of Tarzi as the first Minister of Foreign Affairs marked the triumph of Afghan nationalism begun two decades earlier by Tarzi.

On March 3, 1919, King Amanullah sent a communication to Lord Chelmsford, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, expressing the wishes of the people of Afghanistan to conclude a treaty of friendship with India. Unwilling to await a response from the Viceroy, the new king unilaterally declared Afghanistan’s independence and a national uprising against the British. This conflict, the Third Anglo-Afghan War ended in the same year with the recognition of Afghanistan’s unconditional independence by the British.

Reference


