In the Circuit of Hatred and Love: A Review of Zero Degree Turn
Pedram Partovi

Madār-e sefī darejeh (Zero Degree Turn), initially broadcasted in 2007, drew significant media attention outside of Iran during its eight-month run on Channel One of the Islamic Republic’s Sedā va Sīmā network. This historical drama written and directed by Hasan Fathī captivated millions of viewers every Monday. The series told the story of a young Iranian student whose love for a French woman throws him into the middle of a global conflict involving the Nazis, the Allied powers, and the Jewish Agency. But the popularity of the series with Iranian viewers did not alone draw the interest of foreign commentators reporting on it. Television since the Islamic Revolution has become the most common and widespread source of entertainment in Iran. Television is now even the most important venue for the screening of films—with video piracy, the shortage of modern cinema halls, and the general shift of leisure activities to private settings all contributing to this state of affairs. Moreover, the weary sermonizing that had dominated programming in the early years of the Islamic Republic has increasingly given way to lighter family dramas and comedy series. Competition from overseas Persian-language satellite television has likely contributed to the state television networks’ greater emphasis on entertainment programming. The handful of major television productions destined yearly for the best time slots often become like required viewing for all household members, turning normally busy city streets ghostly quiet for those hours.

Foreign press accounts have acknowledged
the sizeable audience that Madār-e sefr darejeh attracted but only in relation to the series’s controversial handling of the topic of Zionism and the Iranian Jewish minority during World War II.

Of course, an Iranian television series where the villain is a Zionist agent agitating for Jewish migration from their homeland in Iran to mandatory Palestine is likely to take on broader relevance in light of the incendiary comments attributed to President Ahmadinejad about the state of Israel in 2005 and the organization of a conference in Tehran of Holocaust revisionists in 2006. In fact, some interpreted the series to be an official attempt to deflect the claims of anti-Semitism made of Ahmadinejad and his government by presenting a more thoughtful and reasoned perspective on the Holocaust, Israel, and Muslim-Jewish relations. Its popularity in turn was proof of the Iranian public’s sensitivity to the plight of Jews during World War II.1 More critical reviews, though, condemned the series as a thinly veiled message of hate whose popularity reflected the efficacy of regime propaganda.2 However, scenes of the Holocaust and international Zionist plots do not make up the entire series. In fact, it is worth asking whether the interests of the outside world in Madār-e sefr darejeh wholly align with those of the Iranian audience for whom it was made. There are several points of appeal that are seldom mentioned in the foreign press. More specifically, I would argue that the contributions of the series to a broader dialogue on Iranian nationalism hold particular interest to Iranian viewers. Its setting in a different time and place both excuses this provocative content as well as helps to explain its appeal. Moreover, there is a powerful emotional dimension to the series, with its love affairs and tragic deaths, that may be easily dismissed in reviews as melodrama but that adds gravity and depth to the audio-visual arguments presented.

The series introduces us to a large cast of characters during its thirty episodes. However, much of the plot revolves around Habīb Pārsā (played by Shahāb Hoseinī), the son of a former diplomat in the Reza Shah government, Dr. Mohammad Hosein Pārsā (Masʿūd Rāyegān). Habīb’s mother, Āsiyeh (Ro’yā Teymūriyān), is a Palestinian whom Dr. Pārsā first met while posted at the Iranian mission in Jerusalem. He had resigned from his position after authorities in Tehran objected to his participation in a conference protesting the Zionist program. It is implied that foreign pressure was responsible for his censure. In the first episode, set a few months before the start of World War II, we learn that his principled father’s dispute with members of the political elite stands in the way of Habīb taking up a government scholarship to study philosophy in Paris. Even Habīb’s brother-in-law, Ehteshām (Payām Dehkordī), a rising star in the foreign ministry, is unable to appeal his case. In fact, it is an investigation into the murder of a prominent Tehran rabbi that ultimately frees Habīb to pursue his studies abroad. The detective in charge of the case, Behrūz Fattāḥī (Pierre Dagher), uncovers the involvement of the Jewish Agency, which had attempted to pin the crime on increasingly powerful Germanophile groups in the country in order to create

1See, for example, Farnaz Fassihi, “Iran’s Unlikely TV Hit,” Wall Street Journal, September 7, 2007.
2See, for example, Karmel Melamed, “Iran’s ‘Zero Degree Turn’ Flips Facts on Holocaust, Jewish Journal, October 18, 2007, http://www.jewishjournal.com/arts/article/tv_irans_zero_degree_turn_flips_facts_on_holocaust_20071019/).
an atmosphere of fear among resident Jews. Events like Kristallnacht, pre-dating the war, had made Jews worldwide well aware of the danger of the Nazis and Nazi ideology. Fattāhī also discovers that his superior in the municipality, Sarhang Arsiyā (Farrokh Ne’matī), as well as some at the highest levels of government, had a role in the murder of the rabbi and its cover-up to advance their own interests. Fattāhī, a friend of the Pārsā family, agrees with Arsiyā to close the case in exchange for the lifting of Habīb’s travel ban.

Much of the first half of the series covers Habīb’s experiences in Paris. These events provide the emotional ballast that carries the series to its conclusion. He arrives in Paris just months before the start of the war. It is during these tense times that Habīb meets Sarah Astrok (Nathalie Matti), a French Jew and fellow student at the university. Their relationship takes up a pivotal role in the series narrative, with some reviewers even complaining of its overbearing nature.3 Hasan Fathī has become well known for creating unlikely or impossible love matches in serials like Pahlevānān nemīmīrand (2000), Shab-e dahom (2001), and Mīveh-ye māmnū’eh (2007).4 Of course, the idea of a love fraught with difficulties is a well-established narrative trope in Iranian literary and performative traditions. But a budding romance between a Muslim Iranian man and an uncovered French Jew, despite its historical setting, would seem to push the boundaries of propriety for television programs in the Islamic Republic. And this taboo relationship is no doubt a point of appeal for viewers. Fathī has even taken this trope a step further in the contemporary comedy film Ezdevāj beh sabk-e Īrānī (2006), in which he matches up a Christian American man with a Muslim Iranian woman.5

It is not only religious but racial tensions that are portrayed as standing in the way of Habīb and Sarah’s union. The series makes pointed claims about the prominence of Germanophiles and Aryan racial theory in Iranian government circles at the time. In fact, Ehteshām is shown to be one of the leading members of the Kānūn-e Īrān-e Bāstān. The journal of the society, Nāmeh-ye Īrān-e bāstān, which sought to emphasize the common ground between the Reza Shah regime and Nazi Germany, is also a prop in several scenes. The head of the Iranian diplomatic mission in Paris, Jahāngīr Homāyūnpanāh (Īraj Rād), is a fellow member of the Kānūn. In fact, Ehteshām’s connection to him lands Habīb a part-time position in the Iranian diplomatic mission during his stay in Paris. Homāyūnpanāh eagerly cultivates personal relationships with German officials there, especially after the Nazi occupation in May 1940. It is later revealed that his personal secretary enjoyed even closer relations as a Nazi double agent. Sarah’s initial hostility to Habīb, then, emphasizes his Iranian nationality and assumed sympathies for the Nazi cause because of shared Aryan roots. The Nuremberg Laws had shortly before the war identified Iranians as pure-blooded Aryans. Habīb nevertheless rejects the idea of Iranian racial purity and affinity with the Germans, presenting himself (a half Palestinian, half Iranian) as evidence of this falsehood.

Eventually, he wins over Sarah with his intelligence and generosity of spirit and they become inseparable. But the war and

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the establishment of the Vichy government introduces new complications to their relationship. In keeping with their neutrality in the war, the Iranian government recalls its embassy and the student delegation in Paris shortly after the Nazi occupation. At the same time, the Nazis begin to round up French Jews for transfer to the concentration camps. The series does not deny the Holocaust but stresses the full assimilation of French Jews like Sarah, her mother, and her maternal uncle Samuel Weiss (Laszlo Baranyi). Parallels may be drawn between this argument and claims made about (and often by) Iranian Jews as culturally Iranian. European Jewry is largely understood in the series to be a problem only from the perspective of the Nazis. In fact, Samuel insists on remaining in his homeland after the German occupation in spite of the danger that he faces.

Weiss, a historian, is also an opponent of the Zionist program. It is revealed that he and some of his colleagues have been collecting materials to prove a longstanding alliance between the Nazis and the Zionists to rid Europe of Jews. Such anti-Zionist claims are not unique to Iranian television. Arab media outlets have also indulged in similar conspiracy theories in television series like Fāris bilā jawād/Rider without a Horse (Egypt, 2002) and al-Shatāt/The Diaspora (Syria, 2003). Sarah’s paternal uncle Theodore Astrok (Viktor Hanko), on the other hand, is presented in the series as a prominent Zionist who is well aware of Samuel’s research and willing to take any step to suppress it. In fact, Theodore eventually has Sarah’s beloved maternal uncle killed after he turns down an offer of safe passage for himself, his sister, and niece to Palestine in exchange for the papers. Habīb, however, manages to rescue his research and it finds its way to Sarah in the final installment of the series. Through his position in the embassy, Habīb also manages to save Sarah and her mother from the Nazis. He obtains Iranian passports for them to escape to Iran from France with the help of Homāyūnpanāh’s abused wife, Zīnat al-Molūk (La’yā Zanganeh). Her link to Habīb is through detective Fattāḥī, a former lover she abandoned when Homāyūnpanāh extorted her father for her hand in marriage. Viewers may interpret this deception of Homāyūnpanāh, who had himself been selling Iranian passports to Jews fleeing France, as Zīnat’s revenge as well as an attempt to save Habīb and Sarah from becoming like her, a victim of life’s circumstances.

This forging of Iranian passports for French Jews is based on actual events from the period. Fathī has explained in interviews that it was after reading about the exploits of ‘Abd al-Hosein Sardārī, a diplomat in Paris who had issued members of the Jewish community Iranian passports in order to save them from the Nazis, that he decided to write the series.6 And the teleplay, which was some two years in the making, is the product of significant research.7 In fact, the closing credits for each episode begin with a listing of the historical sources referenced in the production. Settings and costumes appropriate to the period and place were created at great effort and expense. The language is also intended to transport the viewer to that time. Character dialogue, though, is often stilted and unnatural, as if taken directly from the newspapers of the period.8 The series is less than

6Fassihi, “Iran’s Unlikely TV Hit.”
7Ehsānī, “Negāhī beh sākhtār-e «Madār-i sefr darejeh»,” 45.
8Reviewers have criticized not only the language used but also the lack of distinction that exists in the speech of characters of different classes and in different settings. See Mohammad Taqī Fahīm, “Hameh tīphā jazzāb-e yek seriyl,” Sorūsh 1321 (2007): 48–49.
faithful to the historical timeline as well, moving around real events most likely for dramatic effect. But of greatest concern are the controversial historical claims that the series makes, which may be related to the rather dubious historical sources that were consulted in its production. For one, there is an overstating of the position of Germanophiles and the Kanūn in the Reza Shah government. Indeed, by the late 1930s, the tide had already begun to turn against the Fascists and German sympathizers in Iran. Radicals on the right and on the left (including the “Group of 53,” which the series also invokes) were imprisoned and silenced en masse during this period. Likewise, the level of influence that the Jewish community enjoyed in national politics is much exaggerated. However, the prominence that the series gives to Germanophiles and Jews serves a larger narrative purpose in highlighting their supposed mutual political interests at the time.

Indeed, what’s most problematic historically is the claim that the series’s makers advance about Zionist collusion with the Nazis. The series even references the Jewish Agency’s Haim Arlosoroff (1899–1933) as a prime example of Zionist-Nazi cooperation. Arlosoroff had negotiated with the Nazis in 1933 on behalf of the Agency for the safe passage of Jews to Palestine from Germany in exchange for increased Jewish imports of German manufactures to Palestine. Arlosoroff was assassinated in Haifa shortly thereafter by members of a rival Zionist group. Samuel Weiss brings up Arlosoroff in a heated conversation with Theodore Astrok about his relations with the Nazis. Commentators have traced the controversial storyline of Zionist-Nazi collusion to the show’s expert consultant ‘Abdollāh Shahbāzī, founder and previous head of the Mo’asseseh-e Takhassusī-e Motala’at-e Tārīkh-e Mo’āser-e Īrān (Professional Association for the Historical Study of Modern Iran) in the Bonyād-e Mostaz’āfīn va Jānbāzān (Foundation of the Oppressed and War Stricken). Shahbāzī, a former Communist Tudeh party official who escaped the postrevolutionary purges, has written extensively on modern Iranian history. He has paid particular attention to great power interventions in Iran and the inordinate influence on national events that Jewish and Baha’i minorities gained through these interventions. Of course, the idea of Baha’is and Jews as imperialist lackeys has a longer history, especially among ultranationalists and Islamists, dating back to at least World War II. Shahbāzī’s most significant work on this theme is entitled Zarsālārī-e Yahūdī va Pārsī, Este’mār-i Birītāniyā va Īrān (Parsi and Jewish Financial Domination: British Colonialism and Iran), currently at five volumes, which he has published online in his personal website, www.shahbazi.org. Interestingly, Shahbazi’s research into political and economic corruption in Iran has created another controversy perhaps worthy of its own soap opera. In a book released on his site in 2011, Zamīn va anbāsht-e sarvat: Takvīn-e ulīgārshī-i jadīd dar Īrān-e emrūz (Land and Wealth Accumulation: The Creation of a New Oligarchy in Today’s Iran), available at http://shahbazi.org/Oligarchy/index.htm, he details the massive theft of land in Fars province by high-ranking members of the Revolutionary Guard and clergy.

9This is the complaint that Khosrow Mo’tazid raises in “Lotfan tārīkh bekhvānīd!,” Sorūsh 1336 (2007): 25.
These claims would lead to his arrest in December 2010.11

The series itself takes a rather dim view of government officials in the Reza Shah period as grasping, venal, and self-interested. Undoubtedly, these representations add a subversive appeal to the series. While the characters are often depicted as the product of a corrupt regime, it may well be that viewers are also making unwelcome comparisons between them and those currently in power. There are nevertheless a few principled members of the bureaucracy, like Dr. Pārsā, Fattāhī, and even Habīb himself, who call for the rule of law and reject the undue influence of powerful outside interests. In fact, one might argue that the series upholds Iranian nationality as a moral imperative rather than something based in race or religion. The ideals of javānmardī, taken from Persianate literary traditions and even from filmfārsī, no doubt feed into this audio-visual argument. These men endure much suffering for their sense of duty and moral integrity. Thus, Habīb’s selfless actions in aid of his friends in France land him in a Gestapo prison where he is tortured as a suspected Allied spy. Conversely, the opportunist Homāyūnpanāh returns to Iran as a free man and even a hero to the Allied powers now in charge of the country.

The struggle for national sovereignty is a constant theme throughout the series, but it takes on greater emphasis during the wartime occupation of Iran by the Allied powers. In fact, it is outrage at the Allied occupation that leads to Dr. Pārsā’s death, only shortly after Habīb’s own return to Iran. As Dr. Pārsā collapses from a heart attack, he is depicted reciting a verse of a well-known Adīb al-Mamālek Farāhānī (1860–1917) poem in celebration of the nation as it emerged from foreign-dominated Qājār rule. The irony is hard to miss as some three decades later, very little had changed. In fact, Nazi pressure leads to Habīb’s re-arrest immediately after he returns to Iran for endangering Iran’s neutrality in the war—forcing him to attend his father’s funeral in manacles. Now it is the Allied powers that take him into custody and hold his fate. But his principles keep him from attempting escape, since it would only legitimize what he views to be an illegal detention by an illegal authority in his homeland.

in Iran. But his commitment is depicted as eventually leading to profound personal and national crises when the Soviets and British reassert their presence in the country. His wife Sa’īdeh (Āteneh Faqīh Nāsīrī) and his mother-in-law both warn Ehteshām of the dangers that his political ties pose for him. But he brushes their concerns aside, mistakenly convinced that the Nazis will come to Iran’s aid. It is interesting to note that the women in the series are often depicted as having sharper political minds than the men. Ehteshām is forced into hiding upon the arrival of the Allied forces in Tehran and, after his old comrade Hornāyūnpanāh rebuffs his requests for aid, he commits suicide. And just as the Allied occupation marginalized many Germanophiles in national politics, it helped to bring to the fore Marxist elements and Soviet supporters who had previously been silenced. Habīb consequently chides his newly ascendant Tudeh party friend, Taqī Navādeh (Rahīm Nowrūzī), for his and his comrades’ faith in their Soviet patrons. He tells him that as long as Iran and Iranians are under the shadow of one or another foreign power, they cannot hope to control their own destiny.

It is the insights into Iranian nationalism that Madār-e sefr darejeh provides that are likely of particular interest to Iranian viewers and are largely ignored by the foreign outlets reporting on the series. Yet, there is also a built-in controversy in the series makers’ narrative focus, given the uneasy place of the nation in the Islamic Republic. The debates over the nation have intensified recently, with the post-2009 election demonstrations questioning the so-called principles of the Islamic Revolution in strongly nationalist terms (e.g., the protest chant “Nah Ghazzeh, nah Lobnān, jānam fadā-ye Īrān (“Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life I give to Iran). Of course, critics of the demonstrators labeled them imperialist agents or dupes working for the Western domination of Iran and the wider Muslim world. The current campaign emanating from the president’s office for giving priority to the maktab-e Īrān (“Iranian school of thought) over the maktab-e Islām (“Islamic school of thought) is another dimension of this ideological struggle for the nation in the Islamic Republic. The series argues through its protagonist Habīb for an independent path to national prosperity. To the extent that the series has a radical Islamist message, it is more the Third Worldism and anti-imperialism that the Khomeinists had adopted from the Marxists in particular and made their own. Unsurprisingly, Habīb’s attempts to live up to this patriotic ideal upon his release from prison invite danger from foreign interests and their local allies.

With his studies postponed due to the war, Habīb takes up a career in journalism, which was flourishing in Iran during the chaos of war. His writing for the newspaper Bīdārī initially concerns only cultural and historical matters that he believes to be of interest to his Iranian readership. But they take on an overtly political tone when Fattāhī provides him with buried police files detailing the criminal activities of Zionist agents in the country taking place with the knowledge and cooperation of senior government officials, including Fattāhī’s superior Arsiyā. The final five episodes of the series center on the conflict between Habīb and Sarah’s uncle Theodore, who is deeply implicated in the plots revealed in the newspaper. Of course, Theodore is also in Iran to track down Samuel’s research and his niece Sarah, whom he wishes to marry off to his own son. But Habīb
The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies (CAIS) in London has, in fact, reported that the television film crew discolored the floors and walls of a section of the site with exploded blood packs. They have also claimed that one crew member damaged two bas-reliefs in a failed attempt to steal Samuel’s papers. Theodore also frames Habīb as a Nazi spy to poison his relationship with Sarah. The series protagonist nevertheless manages to escape his British captors with the help of an Iranian resistance movement fighting against the wartime occupation of the country. He finally reveals to Sarah her uncle’s true nature before Theodore can take her to a new life in Jerusalem.

The series climaxes with a confrontation between Habīb and Theodore in Persepolis, the site of Iran’s past glories and the capital of Cyrus the Great (d. 530 BC) who freed the Jews from their captivity in Babylon. The series’s title credits, featuring scenes from Persepolis, foreshadow this confrontation. The two engage in a shootout, in which Habīb is badly wounded. But this time it is Sarah who saves Habīb, arriving to shoot her uncle before he can kill her love. With the British military police on their way, they communicate their love for one another. Habīb then commands Sarah to leave so that he can take responsibility for Theodore’s death. The series concludes with a scene set many years later as an elderly, bespectacled Habīb is released from prison. As he walks out of the prison gates, the flickering spectre of his mother draws his attention to the railroad tracks ahead. The series’s makers heighten the emotional tension with a passing train that obstructs his view for that moment of a figure standing on the other side of the tracks. When the train passes, Habīb finds that it is Sarah who has been waiting for him.

One might argue that it is precisely these personal relationships that are most responsible for viewer interest in Madār-e sefr darejeh. The politics of the series no doubt attracted Iranian audiences, too, especially the parallels that the series invites between domestic conditions and global conflict during World War II and the present day. Moreover, the political aspects of the series narrative often color the personal ones that anchor the story. Fathī complements the love story of Habīb and Sarah with two others: between Zīnat and Fattāhī and Saʿīdeh and Taqī. All three couples face major obstacles to the consummation of their erotic emotions, for which it would seem that the only acceptable outcomes are martyrdom or exile. As noted earlier, in its treatment of erotic love, the series closely follows the example of Persianate literary traditions. Thus, religion, race, family, and political circumstances all conspire to keep Habīb and Sarah apart until their later years. Similarly, viewers suffer alongside Saʿīdeh and Zīnat, whose unhappy marriages keep them from their true loves. The women finally do gain release from these relationships, though under ill-fated circumstances. Zīnat kills her husband in self-defense during one of his fits of jealous rage. But when Arsiyā seeks to implicate Fattāhī in her husband’s death, the lovelorn Zīnat commits suicide to protect his reputation. A devastated Fattāhī subsequently takes revenge on Arsiyā and is
executed for his actions. And, as he stands before the firing squad, he has a vision of Zimat in a wedding dress—symbolizing their eventual union in martyrdom. Likewise, after the disgraced Ehteshām commits suicide, a relationship between Sa’īdeh and Taqī blossoms. But before they can marry, they are both fatally wounded as they come to each other’s aid during a botched robbery. These intense, self-effacing loves may hold a similar “exotic” interest for Iranian viewers as the Zionist subplot of the series does for commentators abroad.

The extraordinary personal relationships at the heart of Madār-e sefr darejeh are mirrored by its exotic settings and characters. Fathī’s mise-en-scène also contributes to the popularity of his series. According to reviewers, Madār-e sefr darejeh was one of the most expensive Iranian television programs ever made. On-location shooting in Paris and Budapest partly explains the production’s high costs. In fact, critics even complained that too much time was spent in Europe during the middle third of the series at the expense of other narrative threads in Iran. Exotic locales were also employed in the scenes set in Iran. The historical setting of the series required the use of the old Tehran set at the Cinema City (Shahrak-e sīnamā’ī) complex off the Tehran-Karaj Road. The scenes shot at Persepolis during the series finale were also a relative novelty for a television production in the postrevolutionary period. Foreign characters in the teleplay also called on the use of foreign actors. Most of these roles were cast in Hungary, but the role of Sarah was played by the French-born Nathalie Matti, who perhaps had a unique insight into the character due to her husband’s Iranian background. But foreign actors were even cast in some Iranian roles, such as the Lebanese Pierre Dagher’s turn as Fattāḥī. The performances of Matti and Dagher in particular also generated press inquiries about their future participation in Iranian television or film.

To be sure, the international dimensions of the production bring back into the focus the preoccupations and concerns of the foreign press with Madār-e sefr darejeh. Indeed, the ambitious scale of the series would seem to promote the idea common to such press accounts that it was primarily a platform for Iranian officials to broadcast to the wider world their views on the internationally sensitive issues of the Holocaust, Zionism, and the state of Israel. The expressed desire of its producers to export the series for broadcast elsewhere perhaps reinforces this assumption. However, interpretations of the series as a piece of government propaganda do not adequately explain its draw for Iranian viewers, especially when we consider how often such messages about Zionism and Israel have found their way into the state media over the years yet have not previously attracted similar viewership. From the perspective of this reviewer, it would seem to be the emotionally charged representations of Iranian nationalism in the series that have most resonated with those watching at home.

1Ehsānī, “Negāhī beh sākhtār-e «Madār-i sefr darejeh»,” 45.