

# Rewriting Iran: Memory, Commemoration and Identity in the Islamic Republic

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Drawing on extensive archival research, discourse analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork, “Rewriting Iran” examines how the Islamic Republic has systematically reconstructed Iranian national identity through the manipulation of collective memory and commemorative practices. The book explores how state authorities have deployed a complex array of cultural tools, from renaming streets and reorganizing the official calendar to transforming traditional Shia rituals to embed a new ideological narrative into the temporal, spatial, and ritual fabric of everyday life.

The book also highlights the contested nature of this memory regime by analyzing how ordinary Iranians, both within and beyond Iran, resist, reinterpret, and reappropriate state-imposed commemorations. Through social media activism, grassroots rituals, and symbolic interventions in urban space, citizens articulate alternative visions of history, identity, and justice that challenge the hegemonic narrative. By foregrounding both the state’s strategies and the everyday practices of counter-memory, “Rewriting Iran” offers a nuanced and original account of how authoritarian regimes seek to construct and sustain national identity through the politics of memory, while also revealing the limits of state control in the face of popular creativity, dissent, and pluralism.

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## Chapter by chapter synopsis

**Chapter 1** provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how post-Khomeini Iran constructs national identity through memory politics. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks from Halbwachs, Nora, Hobsbawm, and Anderson, the chapter demonstrates how collective memory operates as a dynamic tool of state power. The chapter’s original contribution lies in its systematic analysis of how memory theory can be applied to understand the intersection of religious and national identity in contemporary Iran. It establishes the theoretical groundwork for the book’s subsequent empirical chapters, which examine specific mechanisms of memory construction, from calendar changes to Shia ritual co-optation. This framework provides a new model for

analyzing how modern states utilize religious traditions to shape national identity and reinforce political legitimacy.

**Chapter 2** begins with a critical analysis of historical narratives of Iranian identity, examining how different political movements and intellectuals have grappled with defining Iranian identity. The chapter traces these competing discourses from the Constitutional Period through the Pahlavi era to the Islamic Revolution, revealing persistent tensions between secular nationalism, religious identity, and cultural authenticity. Building on this historical foundation, the chapter presents a detailed discourse analysis of Ayatollah Khamenei's articulation of Iranian identity through his writings and public speeches spanning over four decades of leadership. As both former President and current Supreme Leader, Khamenei's discourse represents the Islamic Republic's most authoritative vision of Iranian identity.

The discourse analysis reveals key elements that the Islamic Republic systematically promotes through three interconnected domains examined in subsequent chapters. These discursive elements, including Islamic history and values, the formative experiences of revolution and war, and anti-Western resistance, are embedded in the state's reconstruction of time, space, and ritual practices. Through this analysis, the chapter demonstrates how Khamenei's articulation of Iranian identity provides the ideological foundation for the state's comprehensive program of memory construction.

Chapters 3 to 6 are distinct yet interconnected, each examining how the state-sponsored narrative of identity, as articulated in Khamenei's discourse, is systematically embedded in different domains of Iranian social life. Through the manipulation of time (calendar changes), space (street naming), and ritual practices (Shia commemorations), these chapters offer compelling evidence of how the Islamic Republic weaves its ideological vision into the everyday fabric of contemporary Iran.

**Chapter 3** examines how the Islamic Republic uses the official calendar as a tacit yet powerful tool for constructing collective memory and national identity. Through comparative analysis of pre-and post-1979 calendars, the chapter reveals how strategic modifications to holidays and commemorative dates reflect the state's deliberate effort to embed the state's preferred narrative of Iranian history and identity, as articulated by Khamenei, into the everyday experience of time. The chapter's analysis centers on three key calendar changes: first, the systematic removal of holidays associated with the Pahlavi monarchy; second, the introduction of new Islamic and revolutionary commemorations that elevate religious and revolutionary events to national significance; and third, the reinterpretation of existing cultural celebrations, such as Nowruz, to align with Islamic-revolutionary values. Through examination of official documents, state media coverage, and commemorative practices, the chapter shows how these calendar modifications create a new temporal framework that portrays certain historical periods as pivotal moments of national achievement while depicting others as times of decline and foreign domination.

**Chapter 4** looks at how the Islamic Republic transforms urban space into a vehicle for promoting its narrative of Iranian identity through the systematic renaming of streets, squares, and public places. Through analysis of street names in Tehran before and after the revolution, with particular attention to changes in the post-Khomeini era, the chapter demonstrates how spatial reorganization serves to materialize Khamenei's vision of Islamic-Iranian identity in the everyday urban landscape.

The analysis reveals how street renaming follows clear ideological patterns that reinforce key elements of state discourse. New street names prominently feature Islamic figures and revolutionary martyrs, embedding religious values and revolutionary memory into daily navigation. Pre-Islamic Iranian historical figures and cultural symbols are selectively preserved or reframed, reflecting the state's careful negotiation between Persian heritage and Islamic identity. Meanwhile, names associated with the Pahlavi era or Western influence are systematically erased. The analysis demonstrates how seemingly administrative decisions about street names actually constitute a sophisticated program of memory engineering that shapes how citizens interact with, remember, and imagine their national space and history. Like the calendar reforms examined in Chapter 3, these spatial transformations serve to naturalize the state's preferred narrative of Iranian identity by embedding it in the material infrastructure of everyday life.

**Chapter 5** traces the historical development of Shia mourning rituals from their origins through their contemporary reinvention in post-revolutionary Iran. Beginning with early Shia commemorative practices, the chapter demonstrates how these rituals evolved from private expressions of religious devotion into powerful vehicles for collective identity expression. Through examination of historical documents, religious texts, and eyewitness accounts, it reveals how different political authorities, from the Safavids to the Pahlavis, attempted to shape these rituals to serve their own legitimacy. The analysis then focuses on how revolutionary intellectuals and clerics radically reinterpreted these rituals in the lead-up to the 1979 revolution. Through careful examination of the writings and speeches of Khomeini, Shariati, and other revolutionary figures, it shows how traditional narratives of Karbala and Ashura were transformed into powerful metaphors for contemporary political struggle. The analysis concludes by examining how this revolutionary reinterpretation of rituals intensified during the Iran-Iraq War, as state authorities drew parallels between historical and contemporary sacrifice. This transformation set the stage for the post-Khomeini state's systematic reconstruction of commemorative practices, particularly Arbacen and Maddahi, which are examined in detail in Chapter

**Chapter 6** examines how the Islamic Republic has systematically transformed two traditional Shia commemorative practices into powerful vehicles for promoting its vision of Iranian-Islamic identity. Through analysis of state media coverage, official pronouncements, and ethnographic observation in the period of 2020-2024, the chapter demonstrates how these religious practices have been reinvented to serve contemporary political purposes.

The chapter first focuses on Maddahi, showing how these mourning processions have evolved from their wartime role of revolutionary mobilization into sophisticated mechanisms that blend religious identity with political messaging. The analysis demonstrates how modern Maddahi, through emotional performances, music, and multimedia elements, resonates with younger generations while incorporating revolutionary themes, war memories, and current political concerns. By examining the rise of popular young Maddah, their innovative performance styles, and their massive social media following, the chapter reveals how these ceremonies effectively translate state ideology into powerful emotional experiences that attract a new generation of supporters who lack direct experience of the revolution and war.

The chapter then turns to Arbaeen, analyzing how the state has transformed this traditional pilgrimage into a massive display of Iranian-Islamic identity through substantial financial investment, sophisticated media coverage, and careful narrative construction. Through examination of state funding allocations, extensive media programming, organizational infrastructure, and carefully curated official narratives, it reveals how the ritual has been systematically developed into a powerful platform for promoting state ideology, reinforcing key elements of state discourse, from Islamic values and revolutionary memory to cultural authenticity and resistance against foreign influence.

**Chapter 7** examines how Iranian society, both within and beyond the Islamic Republic, challenges and reinterprets state-sponsored narratives of identity by reappropriating the very rituals and commemorative practices the state uses to assert ideological control. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, social media analysis, and interviews conducted between 2020 and 2024, the chapter reveals the existence of a vibrant counter-memory culture that disrupts the state's hegemonic narrative. The chapter focuses on three key domains where reappropriation takes place: 1) It explores how Iranians use online platforms, especially Instagram, Telegram, and Clubhouse, to commemorate key religious and political events in ways that resist official messaging, including the remembrance of political prisoners, victims of state violence, and marginalized voices excluded from the official pantheon. 2) It examines how citizens creatively challenge official memory in urban space, such as through unofficial renaming of streets, symbolic graffiti, or grassroots memorials, to reclaim historical figures or events omitted or vilified by the state. 3) It analyzes grassroots mourning processions, independent Maddahi performances, and Arbaeen gatherings that intentionally diverge from the state script, reviving alternative interpretations of Karbala centered on justice, dissent, and pluralism. By analyzing these acts of counter-memory, the chapter shows how ordinary citizens negotiate, contest, and transform the meanings of state-imposed identity narratives. These practices show the fluid and contested nature of collective memory, highlighting that even in authoritarian settings, commemorative spaces and rituals remain sites of struggle, resistance, and reinterpretation.

## RESEARCH INTEREST

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My research examines how nationalism and identity politics are represented and transformed in the digital era, specifically analyzing how social media platforms facilitate new forms of expression and contestation, reshaping narratives of national belonging and political identity. I am also interested in how diaspora communities, particularly the Iranian diaspora, engage with these digital spaces to renegotiate their collective identities, challenge dominant narratives, and express political dissent. In doing so, I explore how experiences of displacement, exile, and transnational connectivity influence identity formation, memory, and political expression.

My research to date has led to several publications, including three peer-reviewed journal articles and two book chapters. In my most recent work, I examined how diasporic communities use social media to challenge and reframe established national symbols. I focused on Iranian diaspora activists who contested the national football team's role as a unifying symbol. This study shows how digital platforms enable diasporic groups to transform traditional symbols of national identity into dynamic sites of political contestation and activism. In another article on identity politics, I examined the political use of commemorative street names in post-revolutionary Iran, arguing that street names in Tehran can be read as a mirror of the state's efforts to "correct" the long-lasting conflict over the meaning of Iranian identity and collective memory. These streets and their names have become contested spaces where diverse and often contradictory readings of the past collide in the present, challenging, resisting, or even negating the state's official narrative of Iranian identity.

As part of my postdoctoral position within the Iran Beyond Iran project at the University of Copenhagen, I am currently working on how Iranian ethnic minorities in the diaspora navigate and negotiate their multiple identities. It focuses specifically on how Iranian Azeris construct and express their identities in relation to both their ethnic heritage and Iranian national identity. I am also working on the emergence of right-wing nationalist populist rhetoric within the Iranian diaspora, one that is often sharply critical of Islam, hostile to liberal values and institutions, and exclusionary toward ethnic and linguistic minorities. This project examines how such narratives gain traction, particularly through digital platforms, and how they reshape diaspora identity and political discourse.

Building on this work, I plan to further examine the rise and articulation of anti-Islamic sentiments among members of the Iranian diaspora, focusing on how migration experiences, gender politics, and the political culture of host societies in Europe and North America shape these attitudes. The Iranian diaspora is highly diverse in terms of political orientation, ethnicity, and religion, with Iranians varying widely in religious belief, practice, and identification. Yet, in recent years, particularly following the 2009 Green Movement and

the 2022 “Women, Life, Freedom” uprising, certain segments of this diaspora have begun to vocalize increasingly explicit critiques of Islam, often positioning it as the cause of gender inequality, authoritarianism, and cultural repression in Iran. This research seeks to understand what motivates such anti-Islamic sentiments, how they are articulated online and offline, and how migration and the sociopolitical context of host societies shape, reinforce, or complicate these sentiments and attitudes.

The central research questions guiding this project are twofold: first, what motivates anti-Islamic sentiments among members of the Iranian diaspora, and how are these sentiments expressed through discourse, symbols, and public behavior? Second, how do migration experiences and exposure to both right-wing Islamophobia and liberal multiculturalism in Western societies influence or mediate these sentiments? More specifically, the study examines gender-based critiques of Islam, particularly those emerging in relation to the Women, Life, Freedom movement, investigating the rhetorical and visual strategies used to frame Islam, often in opposition to ideals of feminism, modernity, and secularism. It further explores how members of the Iranian diaspora interact with, adopt, or challenge broader Western discourses of Islamophobia, secular liberalism, and multiculturalism in Europe and North America. It asks whether they adopt language and concepts from Western Islamophobic rhetoric, and how their critiques of Islam reflect or differ from right-wing narratives in Europe and North America. It also examines whether these individuals position themselves in relation to liberal values, whether as defenders of secularism, gender equality, and free speech against perceived threats from Islam, or as critics of Western multiculturalism for being overly permissive toward Islamic practices they view as illiberal.

The research hopes to contribute to ongoing debates in diaspora studies, religious studies, gender politics, and migration research. First, looking at anti-Islamic sentiments within the Iranian diaspora, it highlights the need to move beyond conventional frameworks that treat Islamophobia as primarily an exogenous, Western phenomenon. Instead, it suggests that diasporic critiques of Islam may emerge from complex, internal political struggles rooted in the migrants’ experiences of authoritarianism, gender-based oppression, and cultural displacement in their country of origin. These findings invite scholars to reconsider the binary of “Islam versus the West” by examining how Muslim-majority diasporas engage in internal critiques of Islam that are shaped by both local histories and transnational discourses. Second, the research demonstrates how gender politics, particularly in light of movements like “Women, Life, Freedom,” play a central role in shaping diasporic identity and discourse. By foregrounding gendered critiques of Islam, it expands understandings of feminist expressions within diasporic communities and contributes to debates about how gender, religion, and secularism intersect in contexts of forced migration and exile. The study also reveals how gendered resistance is not only directed at the Iranian state but is entangled with broader ideological frameworks, including liberal secularism and Western feminist discourses, thus complicating simplistic narratives of emancipation. Third, the study has important implications for understanding how diaspora

groups interact with the political cultures of host societies. It shows that diasporic critiques of Islam are not only rooted in pre-migration experiences but are also refracted through local ideologies, such as right-wing Islamophobia and liberal multiculturalism, leading to hybrid or contradictory political positions. This challenges assumptions that diaspora populations passively assimilate into host-country ideologies, instead revealing how they selectively adopt, adapt, or resist dominant discourses based on their own political histories and identity negotiations.