

Remembering the Past, Forging the Future: Commemorative Memory and Rituals in Post-Revolutionary Iran

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This project seeks to examine the subtle yet potent ways in which identity is molded and manipulated in post-revolutionary Iran, a nation where history, religion, and politics are intricately interwoven. In the past decades, much attention has been devoted to the construction and ‘imagination’ of the Iranian nation (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001, Marashi 2011; Amanat and Vejdani 2012; Sharifi 2013; Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, Steele 2021); scholars from a variety of perspectives have tackled the politics of identity in Iran (Ansari 2012; Saleh 2013; Elling 2013,). This book, however, invites readers to critically engage with the dynamic process of identity formation within the context of post-revolutionary Iran and to appreciate the profound influence of narratives, symbols, and rituals on shaping the identity of a nation in transition. Its primary aim is to delineate the discursive processes and commemorative practices that play a pivotal role in this complex identity formation in post-revolutionary Iran, shedding light on their significance and impact.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic by outlining the research objectives and questions. It reviews major studies on Iranian identity both before and after the 1979 revolution and delves into current debates on the relationship between identity, memory, and commemorative practices and rituals. It also explains the significance of cultural and historical narratives in shaping collective past and identity.

Chapter 2 seeks to present and discuss Ayatollah Khamenei’s views on Iranian identity and nationalism by analyzing his writings and public speeches using discourse analysis. With his leadership spanning over four decades, first as President and then as Supreme Leader, Khamenei’s writings and speeches present arguably the most accurate reflection of what the Islamic Republic deems as an ideal narrative of identity for Iranians. They depict a leader with a steadfast view of identity, nationality, and national identification. This chapter examines the content and themes of his writings and speeches, identifying and elaborating on the three defining cores, or nodal points, around which he articulates his vision of an Islamic Iranian identity, namely the history and core values of Islam, the enduring memories of revolution and war, and the Persian language. It then examines how the creation of difference and opposition to the West, perceived as the ‘other,’ becomes another integral part of his view on Iranian identity.

Chapters 3 to 5 are distinct yet interconnected, each highlighting a different mechanism behind the state-sponsored narrative of identity, as articulated by Khamenei, in post-revolutionary Iran. Together, they offer compelling evidence of the state’s deliberate efforts to weave its chosen narrative into the socio-cultural fabric of the country.

Chapter 3 delves into official calendars, wherein a cycle of official holidays—designed to commemorate selectively marked events—reveals political maneuvering aimed at articulating a particular collective memory, past, and, in turn, national identity. By examining changes in national calendars, such as the inclusion of new holidays and the removal of old ones, one can discern the state's subtle yet powerful attempts to selectively emphasize certain periods as pivotal for the development of the nation's memory and identity, while portraying other periods as times of recession, decline, and collapse. This chapter specifically contrasts Iran's official calendars from the pre-and post-1979 revolution periods, highlighting the introduction of new religious holidays, the removal of national days linked to the monarchy, and the assignment of new meanings and celebratory practices to existing holidays. These modifications are seen as signifiers of a political maneuver in post-revolutionary Iran to propagate the state's preferred narrative of collective history and identity since the 1979 revolution.

Chapter 4 compares changes in Tehran's street names and analyzes the widespread renaming of streets and public spaces in the city after the 1979 revolution as another potent yet tacit manipulation of space undertaken to articulate the state-sponsored narrative of the collective past and, in turn, forge Islamic Iranian identity. I specifically analyze the symbolic value of both the names that were removed and the ones that replaced them. While street names might seem mundane and ostensibly present, they are politically charged, weaving the state-sponsored narrative of identity into the spatial geographic fabric of everyday life.

Chapter 5 critically examines the historical development of Shia rituals and the commemoration of Muharram in Iran, highlighting the rapid expansion of Shia rituals, the broadening of the ritualistic calendar, and the significant growth of religious infrastructure in Iran over the past decade. It particularly focuses on the 'reinvention' of two key commemorations: the Arbaeen Walk in Karbala and the Ghadir Walk in Tehran for ideological and political purposes. It argues that the Islamic Republic recognized the inherent power of these culturally ingrained practices and their potential to shape the collective mindset and foster a distinct identity; it goes on to explain how the Islamic Republic controls, transforms, and manipulates these rituals to shape Iranian identity in line with its ideals.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, brings these threads together and offers a comprehensive perspective on the overarching argument of this book. It highlights how the state-sponsored narrative of identity, as articulated by Ayatollah Khamenei, permeates the very fabric of Iranian society. The manipulation of calendars, the renaming of public spaces, and the appropriation of Shia rituals all serve as tools to foster a collective consciousness aligned with the ideals of the Islamic Republic.