

Fellowship Project and Research Interests

As an Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellow, I will complete two projects. One, I will finish the book manuscript edits to *Contending Visions of Iran: The Battle for the Sacred Nation-State, 1941-1983*, which is forthcoming from Stanford University Press. Significantly delayed by COVID-19 and archive accessibility issues, *Contending Visions* is a revision of my Columbia University dissertation. Two, I will finalize remaining edits to *The Jewish Exemption Claim: Histories and Narratives of Jewish Iranians during the Iran-Iraq War*. This second major project is an outgrowth of *Contending Visions*, and I have completed its research during the impasse with my first project. Both projects focus on the historical relationship between secular utopias, conflict and political mobilization, and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88; “the War”).

The Iran-Iraq War has interested scholars in history, religion, comparative literature, and international relations. But this research does not ask why Iran’s diverse, marginalized communities volunteered to fight when the War started. They were not Shi’a; they were politically moderate or leftists; and often they had means to avoid fighting. *Contending Visions* moves beyond the conventional attention given to the idioms of “Shi’ites and Shi’ism” and a “culture of martyrdom.” It also moves beyond a wan, generic nationalism. Instead, it shows how political actors within and against the Pahlavi monarchy—including moderates and leftists—used sacrificial rhetoric and imagery for decades during the mid-twentieth century and how it impacted minority communities as well as the broader society. *Contending Visions* explains why those opposed to both the Pahlavi monarchy and to Khomeini’s Republic joined the initial War efforts and the many ways in which individuals came to have an emotional connection to Iran. *Contending Visions* explains the decades-long desire for a better, more perfect, even “ideal” Iran. In so doing, the book shows how secularists can be religious in their conception of and attachment to the nation-state, and, ultimately, why Iran is—surprisingly to many—like countries the world over in that the most popular religion is the religion of the nation-state.

The Jewish Exemption Claim builds on the inclusive scholarship in *Contending Visions* to unsettle the Jewish Exemption Claim (“the Claim”) that asserts Jewish Iranians received a battle front exemption from 1980 to 1986 during the War. Contrary to the Claim, I show that well-educated, professional—leftists, moderates, and Orthodox—Jews as well as the uneducated remained in Iran because of their belief in Iran, as a nation, as their home. During the War years, Jews were not different than other Iranians: some left and some stayed in Iran; they were at the battle fronts from the start of the War to the end of the War; some served in the military due to the draft and others

volunteered; they constituted high-ranking officers and low-ranking ground soldiers in the military. Some families gave significant amounts of money in fundraising efforts and others did not. This project is the first to address the Claim and the first scholarly work to include Jewish Iranian veterans in their own words on the subject of the War and the issues that concerned them. In doing so, this book project, the research for which is complete, helps undo exclusionist representations of how Iranian and Jewish pasts are archived, accessed, and narrated.

Significance of Projects

Contending Visions works across the social sciences and humanities to make four contributions. One, *Contending Visions* adds to nationalism studies by arguing that what exactly constitutes the sacred is contentious and that battles over the future—the construction and meaning-making of the battles themselves by participants—help produce the nation-state but, crucially, they may also destroy it.

Two, within Iranian studies, *Contending Visions* contributes to the discourses of the left from 1941 to 1957 by mobilizing underutilized primary sources. These include *Shuresh*, *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, and *Mard-e Emruz*. Also, by using undiscussed primary sources and re-interpreting the poetry of Committed Literati members Ahmad Shamlu and Mehdi Akhavan-Sales during the “Period of Strangulation” (1953-1958), the book provides an alternative lens through which to view the extent of leftist intellectual output. Analyzing sensory tools used to reach multiple literacies, *Contending Visions* provides a more nuanced understanding of the impact these writings had across society.

Three, *Contending Visions* enriches political theology by demonstrating how the decades long production of sacrificial discourse, imagery, and rhetoric across both the religious and political spectra occurred in Iran. In doing so, the work unsettles the insistence that only the political right mobilized such devices. Ultimately, in contributing to the debate on the secular nature of the state, *Contending Visions* shows why and how Iranians—previously engaged in a battle against each other—mobilized to protect their mutual sacred during the Iran-Iraq War.

Four, in the arena of minority studies, the book shows that not all government interactions with diverse communities have been repressive or inhibitory, as is often portrayed. By focusing on the roles, words, and texts of religious minorities, I contribute to a new body of work on the War that challenges the dominant literature by providing a history outside “Shi’ites and Shi’ism” and a “culture of martyrdom.” In showing a more complex and interactive history, I provide a view of religions in which they are not essentialized political and social forces. In doing so, *Contending*

Visions explains minority participation in the Iran-Iraq War and contributes to the scholarly history of the War from the point of view of its participants.

The Jewish Exemption Claim makes three contributions and does so in the disciplines of anthropology and history. One, the book works to unsettle the assertion that the Islamic Republic gave a battle front exemption to Jews from 1980 to 1986 by using a convergence of sources. These include *Tamuz*, *Ofeq Bina*, *Ettela'at*, *Jomhuri Eslami*, *Kayhan* and the production of Jewish oral histories from those who served at the war fronts. Two, moving beyond a cursory examination of Jews in the War is important to the fields of Iranian, Middle Eastern, and Jewish studies because the place and status of minority communities are intertwined with national imaginaries. The Claim undermines Jewish Iranian nationalism and notions of loyalty and “home”, which is an anti-Semitic trope. The book’s source materials shows the opposite to be the case. Three, *The Jewish Exemption Claim* helps undo exclusionist representations of how both Iranian and Jewish pasts are archived, accessed, and narrated.