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The Politics of National Celebrations in post-revolutionary Iran

Dario Intini
s1385267

Supervisor: Dr. A.A. (Asghar) Seyed-Gohrab

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# Contents

**List of Figures** .................................................................................................................. 3  
**Notes on Transliteration, Translations, and Dates** .............................................................. 4  
**Introduction** ....................................................................................................................... 5  
  The Scope of the Thesis ........................................................................................................ 9  
  Organization of the Thesis .................................................................................................... 10  
  Previous Studies on the Subject .......................................................................................... 11  
**Chapter One: Theoretical Framework** .............................................................................. 13  
  Theories of Collective Memory ............................................................................................ 13  
  Commemorations .................................................................................................................. 15  
  National Celebrations ......................................................................................................... 16  
  Religious and Secular Festivals, Rituals, and Symbols ...................................................... 18  
  Nations, Nationalism, and Iranian Identity ......................................................................... 20  
  Commemorative Narrative, and Master Commemorative Narrative ............................... 23  
**Chapter Two: Iranian Calendar** ....................................................................................... 25  
  Public Holidays ..................................................................................................................... 28  
  The Islamization of the Calendar ....................................................................................... 31  
  The appropriation of non-Islamic commemorations ....................................................... 32  
  The appropriation of western commemorations .................................................................. 33  
  The appropriation of past historicl events ......................................................................... 34  
**Chapter Three: Ceremonies around the death of the Shiite Saint Hoseyn** ...................... 37  
  Official State Narrative ....................................................................................................... 37  
  The Politics of the Commemoration .................................................................................. 39  
  Associated Events ................................................................................................................ 43  
    *Ta’ziye* and other *Moharram* rituals .......................................................................... 43  
    ‘*Ashura* used by opponent groups .............................................................................. 47  
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 49
Chapter Four: The Month of Ramadan

Official State Narrative
The Politics of the Commemoration
Associated Events
  Qods Day
  Qods Day used by opposition groups
  International Quranic Exhibition during Ramadan
Conclusion

Chapter Five: Nowruz or The Persian New Year

Official State Narrative
The Politics of the Commemoration
Associated Events
  Islamic Republic Day
Conclusion

Chapter Six: Celebration of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution (1979)

Official State Narrative
The Politics of the Commemoration
Associated Events
  International Fajr Film Festival
Conclusion

Final Conclusion

Bibliography
List of figures

Figure 1: Iranian solar Calendar.................................................................26
Figure 2: Islamic lunar Calendar..............................................................27
Figure 3: Iranian Public Holidays...........................................................30
Notes on Transliteration, Translations, and Dates

Persian uses the Arabic alphabet and many Arabic words connected to the Islamic religion like proper names, names of months and festivals, etc., are also used in Persian. However, these words are in most of cases Persianized and then, they may be pronounced and transliterated in a diverse form.

In this thesis, I do not refer to any specific transliteration systems. The bulk of my transcriptions from Farsi (Persian language spoken in Iran) to English are basically phonetic and seek to express how the words are daily spoken and pronounced in contemporary Iran. All these words are written in italics. Nevertheless, unless otherwise specified, I have tried to use the familiar English forms of many Arabic and Persian words such as, for instance, Muhammad, Ramadan, and Ayatollah. I do not use diacritical marks with the exception of the letter ‘این (‘) which in Persian is pronounced as a glottal stop.

All translations from Farsi to English drawn directly by the Persian sources which I use in this thesis are my own. I mostly use Common Era (CE) dating throughout the thesis unless explicitly pointed out otherwise.
Introduction

History and memory are the key issues which will be addressed in this work. History is the production of the memory of a specific past that is influenced by socio-political factors. Memory is the production of historical narratives of a determined group identity that changes on the basis of the group’s socio-political needs. Memory can be subjected to unexpected amnesia which might affect the perception of history and the view of the group’s cultural identity. This amnesia is sometimes imposed on community members by the political elites for specific interests and political agenda. One of the methods for achieving this goal is establishing an annual cycle of remembrance characterized by festivities, commemorations, and anniversaries which leads community members to turn their attention to one specific event situated in the past and to neglect many others.

The historian Yael Zerubavel, referring to the concept of collective memory formulated by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, states that “every group develops the memory of its own past that highlights its unique identity vis-à-vis other groups.” Collective memory is fostered by means of different objects, places, and rituals such as scripture, icons, music, monuments, shrines, naming conventions, and ritual observances. With ritual observances, I generally refer to all those activities such as anniversaries, holidays, celebrations, and festivals which characterize the national calendar of a country and determine its cycle of remembrance. Particularly, this thesis is based on the analysis of the production of a collective memory in post-revolutionary Iran taking into consideration the ritual observances’ perspective. In fact, as I explain in chapter one, collective memory becomes evident through different forms of commemoration which include ritual or commemorative observances.

More specifically, this thesis aims to examine the political role of national celebrations after the Islamic Revolution (1979) in Iran; how these celebrations have been used by the Iranian government as an opportunity to produce political discourses and as a tool for changing the society based on the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, strengthening national identity, mobilising ordinary people for different political goals, and supporting the state’s legitimacy. For this reason, in this thesis it is crucial to connect the role of memory and its diverse political implications. As Yael

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2 Ibid.


Zerubavel states, the political elite of a state uses collective memory in order to convert historical events into political myths which “not only reflect the social and political needs of the group that contributed to their formation but also become active agents in molding the group’s needs”\(^5\). In his study about the construction of patriotism in twentieth century United States, John Bodnar argues that public memory is produced by the merger of “official and vernacular cultural expressions” which we may respectively intend as official memories and vernacular memories. Official memories are to be seen as commemorative activities supported by the state whereas vernacular memories as commemorative activities shaped within civil society\(^6\). What is clear is that official memory is more influential on a particular view of the past than the vernacular one. What this means is that any given period of history can be privileged above others, and that a set of narratives, images, commemorations, and symbols are produced in relation to that.

In relation to the Persianate world, a concept which includes geographical regions from the Balkans to the Bengal not only inhabited by ethnic Persians, but also by those who have been influenced significantly by Persian culture, the scholar Kathryn Babayan argues that memory plays a crucial role in the construction of the past, in the interpretation of the present and in the attempt to “anticipate a future through this pastness”\(^7\). For instance, during the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722)\(^8\), various rulers sought to create a new religious identity by selecting and merging old memories, such as the fusion between Alid (Islamic) and Mazdean (Zoroastrian) elements, to suit their specific political interests. In this regard, Babayan explains in her work that at the beginning of the Safavid dynasty, this past was memorized and performed through different elements such as *Futuvvat* (term referring to chivalry and virtue which are necessary to obtain spiritual perfection), *Abu Muslim-name* (a religious epic written about the figure of Abu Muslim (700-755) who overthrew the Umayyad dynasty and for this reason he is presented as the avenger of Imam Hoseyn), Ferdowsi’s *Shahname* (Book of Kings, completed 1010), the solar calendar, and the Persian language\(^9\). According to Babayan, the *Shahname* represents a *lieu de memoire* of the “Persianate ethos” since the image of the valorous heroes and kings of the book have been later transmitted to the cousin of the Prophet and first Imam, ‘Ali (d. 661), and the other Shiite Imams\(^10\). However, since the reign of Shah ‘Abbas

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\(^8\) Dynasty who ruled Persia and other territories.


\(^10\) Ibid., 264.
(1571-1629), the memories of those ideals and beliefs considered heterodox and challenging the mainstream view such as those of the extremist ghulat movements, started to be eliminated and opposed in order to delete the collective memory of their heretical past and privilege the orthodoxy.

Since the late eighteenth century, the “official memory” of the various governments in Iran has been problematic for its ambiguity and duality in “remembering” itself. During the Qajar period (1796-1925), the early Turkic-speaking tribal confederation used to invent genealogies “linking themselves both to ancient Iranian dynasties and to the Shi’i Imams”11. Moreover, the Qajar elites not only considered themselves to be “Protectors of Shi’ism, Keepers of the Koran, Commanders of the Faithful, and Girders of Imam ‘Ali’s Sword”12, but they also became proponents of Moharram ceremonies, in which the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn (626-680) is commemorated, by financing its rituals such as zanjir-zani (flagellations), rowze-khani (recitations), and ta’ziye (passion plays), and the building of places devoted to their performance such as hoseyniyehs (religious centres) and takyeh (traditional theatres)13. At the same time, the Qajars did not forget the ancient Iranian past; they promoted “pre-Islamic Iranian sentiments” through public readings of the Shahnname, Ferdowsi’s Book of Kings, the celebration of Nowruz, the ancient Persian New Year, and the decoration of “their palaces with Achaemenid and Sassanid motifs”14. Certainly, Qajars’ act of remembering (or forgetting) was the result of a political strategy for bridging the gap between state and society and monitoring those powerful elements in society which were overwhelmingly independent from the control of the central government, such as the religious sphere.

Since its emergence, the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) has always presented its official memory by claiming to be the heirs of the ancient Persian Shahs through the promotion of Cyrus the Great as the founder of a “great Persian kingly tradition”15. Reza Shah (1925-1941) not only took the term Pahlavi for his dynasty from the name of one of the pre-Islamic languages of Iran, but he also stressed the “Arianism” of his country as can be seen by the replacement of the name Persia with Iran in 193416. This nationalist revival was influenced by many factors, such as the entrance of certain Western cultural ideals in the country, but also Reza Shah’s desire to secularize the society as the founder of the Republic of Turkey Kemal Ataturk (1881-1931) had accomplished in 1920s and for the portrayal of Iran as more similar to a European nation, choosing to ignore more than thirteen-hundred years of Islamic history in Iran. In fact, as the scholar Kamran Scot Aghaie argues, “Iranians

12 Ibid.,15.
13 Ibid.,16.
14 Ibid.,19.
16 Ervand Abrahamian, A History of Modern Iran, 86.
were forced to rethink some cultural values and identities” trying to combine cultural ideals assimilated from the West and cultural paradigms part of the pre-existing tradition\textsuperscript{17}. Many nationalist historians of that period rewrote the history of Iran claiming that Islam and Shi’ism were “un-Iranian” elements\textsuperscript{18}. Consequently, this form of nationalism helped to foster anti-Arab sentiments and people began to regard the Arab invasion of Iran (633-654) as a tragedy followed by a long period of darkness during of which Persian people were forced to convert to Islam and Persian culture was continually under threat.\textsuperscript{19} Reza Shah’s son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979), continued to preserve the same memory, though he showed less hostility towards Islam than his father, and he adopted the royal title of King of Kings (\textit{Shahanshah}) and Light of Aryans (\textit{aryamehr}). The crucial moment in which the memory of the Pahlavi elite played its commemorative role under Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi is represented by the 2500\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Iranian monarchy sponsored by the state in 1971. This event was strongly condemned by Ayatollah Khomeini who issued a declaration from his exile in Najaf denouncing it as “anti-Islamic” and a waste of money\textsuperscript{20}.

Another crucial event marking what has been called the “Aryan and Neo-Achaemenid nationalism”\textsuperscript{21} is the change of the national calendar from the Islamic solar calendar to imperial calendar. In fact, in 1976, the base of the calendar was converted from the date of Prophet Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina (622) to the date of Cyrus the Great’s coronation (559 BCE). Thus, suddenly, the year 1355 of the Iranian solar calendar (solar \textit{hejri}) jumped to 2535 of the Imperial calendar. Nevertheless, most Iranians did not change their conception of time and the Iranian solar calendar was soon re-established.

In the period after the Islamic Revolution, the memory of the country experienced a drastic change and the view of history began once again to privilege the Islamic period\textsuperscript{22}. Indeed, as it would be easy to deduce, the official memory of the Islamic Republic period (1979-present) strongly refers to the past and present Islamic experience, not only of Iran but of all the Muslim world, mostly involving the Twelver Shi’i branch, the dominant trend of Islam in Iran. Particularly, as it will be seen in this thesis, the Shi’i memory mostly surrounds the theme of the martyrdom, particularly

\textsuperscript{17} Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala. Shi’i Symbols and rituals in Modern Iran}, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 47.

\textsuperscript{18} Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala. Shi’i Symbols and rituals in Modern Iran}, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 56.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{22} Kathryn. Babayan, \textit{Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs}, 165.
referring to Imam Hoseyn, the third Imam and grandson of the Prophet, killed in Karbala (which is situated in contemporary Iraq) in 680. By remembering the sacrifice of Hoseyn, the Islamic Republic recalls the days and the causes of the 1979 Revolution and the struggle against any forms of injustice and corruption. An explanation of this is to be found in the Karbala narrative based on “a historic rebellion against what was perceived to be corrupt leadership” and, since the 1960s, many people started to see this corrupt leadership embodied by Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi23. As will be shown in chapter three, the symbols and rituals produced by the “Karbala paradigm” were used to overthrow the last Shah of Iran and strengthen the ideology of the Islamic Republic. In fact, the cult of martyrdom has overcome the sentiments of society becoming a central point of Iranian identity and a tool of both mobilisation and deterrence from any foreign attacks (in case of war in Iran, millions of people would be ready to sacrifice themselves for the defence of the country as it was shown during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 where also some themes of Islamic mysticism and Persian love poetry were used to spread the cult of martyrdom and mobilise people to go to the frontline24). The ability of the new Iranian system in “Islamicizing” the society has been developing its memory by connecting present occurrences to past events and by redefining non-Islamic events within an Islamic mould.

The Scope of the Thesis

This thesis explores how the national calendar of celebrations has developed along with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the building of a society based on the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. Another question is how Iran has maintained many non-Islamic or secular festivities from the previous official national calendar, and appropriated western models of commemoration by allocating an Islamic meaning to them. Hence, it is interesting to see how the national calendar of celebrations in post-revolutionary Iran has changed in respect to the Pahlavi period but also what has been maintained from the previous political system. In fact, new political states usually invent a new national calendar by erasing the previous one or by maintaining the old one and adding new holidays.

This thesis examines several festivities of the national calendar of the Islamic Republic of Iran such as the celebration of the death of the third Shiite Imam, the month of Ramadan, the Iranian New Year and several other events. The study examines how the production of a commemorative narrative

23 Kathryn. Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 87.
reflected in some of these celebrations has helped the state to consolidate and spread its ideology. It is interesting that in the Iranian calendar there not only have been included the most important Islamic festivals but also commemorations related to Persian culture. In fact, the Iranian calendar contains many public holidays which honour the birth and the death of many historical figures both ancient and modern, but also semi-official holidays related to ancient festivals linked to the Zoroastrian traditions, or devoted to the celebration of Persian poetry. Therefore, nowadays, a multitude of festivities are celebrated officially and semi-officially in the Islamic Republic of Iran and it would be a difficult task to focus on all of them since many of them have less political relevance. For this reason, this study will focus in more depth on some of the main public holidays in contemporary Iran whereas others shall only be mentioned briefly arguing when and why they are celebrated and their narrative. It is worth mentioning that Iran is allegedly the country with the highest number of celebrations worldwide, with more than hundred commemorative days.

**Organization of the Thesis**

The thesis consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, the theoretical frameworks of this work are discussed. Moreover, a brief account of the history of national celebrations is also presented in relation to the phenomenon of nationalism. Yet, this chapter gives room to clarify the usage of some technical terms and concepts (i.e. commemoration, national celebrations, secular and religious festivals, commemorative narrative, and so forth) as defining these terms will allow us to use them appropriately.

The second chapter deals with the “identity” of the national calendar of Iran since 1979, outlining how its cycle of remembrance is structured and what the core of the commemorative narrative built around it is. The production of a commemorative narrative is crucial for the survival of a regime and it reflects the political elite’s construction of the past, which aims to serve its own interests and political agenda in the present time.

Chapters three to six deal with the core of this research, examining four national and public festivities, and their associated events. Chapter three and chapter four deal with Islamic festivities and in particular, they respectively focus on ‘Ashura, and the month of Ramadan. Chapter five deals with pre-Islamic festivities and particularly takes into account Nowruz, the Persian New Year. Chapter six deals with “secular” festivities and particularly examines the festival of 22 Bahman, or

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Victory of the Islamic Revolution. The celebrations chosen represent two festivals which refer to the Islamic lunar calendar26 (i.e. ‘Ashura and Ramadan); and two festivals which refer to the Iranian solar and Gregorian calendar27 (i.e. Nowruz and Victory of the Islamic Revolution). The structure I use in the analysis of each festival accounts for the official state narrative of the commemoration; in this section I include how it is usually seen and celebrated by the Iranian people. The following section concerns the politics of the commemoration; this section may include a short description of the history of the commemoration in the period analysed with some references to any relevant anniversaries not only between 1979 and 2014, but also before the revolution; how the ruling elites show themselves in the commemoration; which political discourses are produced on the occasion of this event; and which implications they may have upon the masses, as well as on domestic and foreign affairs. In the last section, connected to the commemoration examined, I discuss which associated events are organized and promoted by the state for spreading and strengthening the symbolism of the particular commemoration.

This study is written from an historical perspective and it tries to depict the events which have characterized the history of contemporary Iran through the lens of national celebrations. From 1979 up to the present, many celebrations and anniversaries have been marked in Iran every year. This thesis attempts to answer the following research question: Why national celebrations are used as a political tool and as a performance of power in post-revolutionary Iran? This question is also supported by sub-questions which are as the following: a) How do Iranian political agents utilize the cultural dimension of festivals to suit political ends? b) How has the national calendar of celebrations developed along with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the building of an Islamic society?

Previous Studies on the Subject

In the history of modern and contemporary Iran, the various governments have usually used myths, symbols, and discourses in public events, ceremonies, or media in order to bolster the state’s legitimacy, shape social identity, and mobilise the masses. In fact, how it is the case with every new government (as seen, for instance, in the Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic’s period), all regimes develop their own narrative and symbolism in support of their own ideology, beliefs, and political agenda.

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26 Then, they are subjected to annual change referring to the Iranian solar and Gregorian calendar.
27 They always fell on the same day every year.
Although many studies are conducted on the political dimensions that *Moharram* ceremonies have assumed in Iran since the late nineteenth century up to present day, research concerning the political role of national celebrations in post-revolutionary Iran has not yet been dealt with in a unique work. However, there have been several scholarly works produced on the role of national celebrations related to other areas such as the Arab world as it is represented by Elie Podeh’s *The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East*. In this study, the author investigates the role of state ideology in national and religious festivities in five modern and contemporary Arab countries: Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Staying in the Middle East, Yael Zerubavel’s *Recovered Roots* is instead involved in describing the building of Israel's collective memory and commemorative narrative with an extensive section devoted to the analysis of selected festivals and commemorations.

In relation to Iran, as aforementioned, many studies have been conducted on the political use of *Moharram* ceremonies since the Qajar era, as can be seen in Kamran Scot Aghaie's *The Martyrs of Karbala*. In this book, the author explains how Shi‘i symbols and rituals, particularly referred to the “Karbala Paradigm”, have influenced the policy of the various modern regimes in Iran since the eighteenth century, and how they have been used, or rejected, by these regimes in order to bolster the state’s legitimacy and to promote each regime’s respective political agenda. Another example of study concerning the production of collective memory which includes images, pictures, stamps, money, murals, and ceremonies in post-revolutionary Iran is *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. In this study, Hamid Dabashi and Peter Chelkowski devote one chapter, “Reconfiguring the Calendar”, to the transformation of the Iranian Calendar after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In addition to the available academic works in this field, the sources of this work are primarily based on the analysis of newspaper articles both in English and in Persian, journals, websites, videos, pictures, political speeches, and religious sermons. This research aims to be a contribution to the cultural history of contemporary Iran, to fill a gap in the field, and to encourage further and more in-depth studies on this topic.
Chapter One

Theoretical Framework

Theories of Collective Memory

The theoretical framework of this study mostly surrounds the theory of collective memory provided by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. According to Halbwachs, memory is strictly linked to the social environment in which it is produced. In this regard, society represents a means through which people acquire, “recall, recognize, and localize their memories”\(^{28}\). Hence, one of the central issues in Halbwachs’s theory is that the memory of the past is strictly linked to the development of the present. In fact, it is important to mention that a set of memories are not produced and connected to each other on the basis of their temporal cohesion but that they are grouped together by the common thought of the social group that actually produces these memories based on their own interests\(^{29}\). Thus, Halbwachs argues that when a group of people are asked to recall their own memories by their social environment, they share these same memories with the other members of their social framework. In this way, collective memory may be defined as a set of thoughts selected, produced, and conglomerated with members of the same social group\(^{30}\). According to this theory, the past is constructed through the present social and historical context, and it is clear that the image of the past “is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society”\(^{31}\). Halbwachs stresses the point that collective memory can be understood within its social frameworks (\textit{cadres sociaux}) and that memories produced by individual thoughts are difficult to understand “unless we connect the individual to the various groups of which he is simultaneously a member”\(^{32}\).

Since the topic of this thesis investigates part of the cultural and political context of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is worth mentioning some of Halbwachs’ concepts related to religious collective memory. In fact, he states that the relationship between religion and memory conducts the individual in constructing the past in a different way since this past is moulded according to the eyes


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 52.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 40.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 53.
of the believers. Halbwachs’ argument about the preservation of new religious memories from the threat of the old ones is developed in the passage as follows:

The memory of the religious group, in order to defend itself, succeeded for some time in preventing other memories from forming and developing in its midst. It triumphed with ease over the old religions, whose memory was so far removed from its own object, and which already for a long time had lived only on their own substance. The new religious memory assimilated all that it could incorporate because of its content, that is, all that was most recent in the older religions.

This passage may be linked to the role of Islamization of many non-Islamic festivities in the Islamic Republic of Iran since the attempt of appropriation of old memories may result in their moulding and then removal.

Following Halbwachs’ approach, the French scholar Pierre Nora states that collective memory has to be found in the realms of memory (les lieux de mémoires) which can be intended not only as places (memorials, archives, cemeteries, and so forth) but also as concepts and practices (rituals and commemorations), and objects (symbols, emblems, monuments, and so forth). According to him, due to the fact that there is not a spontaneous memory, there is a need to “create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies and authenticate documents”.

The issue of collective memory has resulted in a multitude of scholarly works concerning the political and social role of memory. In fact, referring to Halbwachs’ concept of Collective Memory, Yael Zerubavel argues that “every group develops the memory of its own past that highlights its unique identity vis-à-vis other groups”. Furthermore, she points out that memory helps the individual and the social group to recognize themselves in different time stage and to preserve this “knowledge from one generation to another”. For this reason, in order to reinforce itself, collective memory always refers to the history of the past without underestimating the “current social and political agenda” of the individual or social group. In this regard, indeed, it is arguable that memory may be subjected to the control of the ruling elites that mould it depending on their present interests. Barry Schwartz, an outstanding sociologist devoted to study of collective memory and its constructed

33 Maurice Halbwachs, Collective Identity, 87.
34 Ibid., 93.
36 Yael Zerubavel, Recovered Roots, 4.
37 Ibid., 5.
nature, states that the past “is always transmitted by lines of authority”\(^{38}\) and that “cannot be literally construed; it can only be selectively exploited”\(^{39}\).

Collective memory shows itself through different forms of commemorations which, according to Zerubavel, include “the celebration of a communal festival, the reading of a tale, the participation in a memorial service, or the observance of a holiday”\(^{40}\). Hence, the concept of commemoration becomes crucial in understanding the development of shared memories within a society and its link with the establishment of the official collective memory of the state.

**Commemorations**

According to Schwartz, the word commemoration, which comes from Latin *commemorare* (to remember together), “refers to the mobilization of symbols to awaken ideas and feelings about the past”\(^{41}\). The act of “remembering together” is a usual action which finds space both in the private and public sphere. However, it is noteworthy that the act of *commemorare* is more influential in the public sphere rather than in the private one because “commemoration promotes society’s sense of itself by affirming its members’ mutual affinity and identity”\(^{42}\). Schwartz argues that commemorations may be reproduced through different forms such as objects and rituals which embody the past “in physical forms”. He lists different forms of commemoration which can be categorized as a) commemorative scriptures (biographies, eulogies, plays, poems, commentaries), b) music (anthems, hymns, songs linked to historical events), c) icons (paintings, statues, prints, photographs, films, and videotapes), d) monuments (obelisks, temples, and war memorials), e) shrines (including birthplaces, residences, places of death, headquarters), f) naming practices which recall the memory of the past (streets, cities, towns, rivers, and mountains), and g) commemorative observances (anniversaries, holidays, festivals)\(^{43}\). As earlier mentioned, this thesis focuses the commemorative observances category. Schwartz also makes a clear statement about the interwoven relation between history and commemoration stating that “history always reflects the ideals and sentiments that commemoration expresses” and that “commemoration is always rooted in historical

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41 Barry Schwartz, “Commemorative Objects”, 2267.
42 Ibid., 2268.
43 Ibid.
knowledge”\textsuperscript{44}. The powerful aspect of a commemorative observance is that a social group concentrates its remembrance on a determined event located in history in one specific time frame (e.g. day, week, month)\textsuperscript{45}.

Commemorative observances are recorded in the national calendar of celebrations which Eviaatar Zerubavel defines as “the most spectacular site of collective memory”\textsuperscript{46}. The calendar has the function of urging the community members to remember a specific moment in the past and it regulates its activities by controlling their performance\textsuperscript{47}. Hence, it is clear that the establishment of a determined cycle of remembrance is strongly interwoven with the group identity’s formation and this interconnection is mostly shown in national celebrations.

**National Celebrations**

With national, or state celebrations, I mean all those activities which are controlled, inspired, sponsored, and accepted by the state such as religious or secular festivals, commemorative observances, unofficial holidays, and anniversaries. These types of celebrations usually take place in stadiums, squares, and streets and they may be considered as tools of the state’s quest for power, legitimization, and for the mobilisation of its people. The success of state sponsored celebrations is based on a high turnout of ordinary people, and due to this fact, in an authoritarian government, the people’s participation may also be forced. On the other hand, a type of celebration which is not influenced by the direct control of the state but that is organized and celebrated by ordinary people (religious communities and ethnic groups) is mostly characterized by “local festivals, carnivals, sporting events and other forms of entertainment”\textsuperscript{48}. However, these non-state sponsored celebrations may sometimes represent “a challenged to the hegemonic culture”\textsuperscript{49} and an attempt to counter the official memory. Nevertheless, there may be national celebrations which are a combination of the state sponsored and non-state sponsored types when, for instance, a local festival organized by a religious or ethnic community may encounter the support of the state for the purpose of assuring the integrity of its territory. However, the main features which are visible in a celebration, whether it is supported or not by the state, are “the dramatic presentation of cultural symbols”, “ideological

\textsuperscript{44} Barry Schwartz, “Commemorative Objects”, 2269.

\textsuperscript{45} Elie Podeh, *The Politics of National Celebrations*, 16.


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
significance or pragmatic intent”, and “public performance”\textsuperscript{50}.

In summary, a national, or state celebration is characterised by: a) a clear association with the state but also of value to its inhabitants (e.g. Independence Day, Revolution Day, the birthday of the ruler); b) the massive participation of the political elite and of citizens (e.g. speeches, declarations, participation to rallies); c) “the decoration of the public space and the initiation of certain ceremonies and rituals” including state symbols (flags, emblems, anthems, portraits of the ruler), and remarks on “the role of national heroes and some other historical landmarks in the history of the state and its people”; d) “The level of religiosity/secularism of the event depends on the nature of the regime, its level of legitimacy and its historical foundations”\textsuperscript{51}.

National celebrations can be considered as a modern product. Their appearances coincide with the rise of nation-state in Europe in the eighteenth century and from that moment on they spread out to other areas of the world by means of the phenomenon of colonialism. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the revolutionaries created a calendar of festivals, holidays, and anniversaries with the purpose of deleting the memory of the monarchic period and strengthening the memory of the revolution. These festivals and anniversaries were celebrated with new rituals such as military parades, games, concerts, fireworks, and so forth. Many other European states, such as the British monarchy, started to develop a calendar of celebrations which aimed to suit “their particular history and culture”\textsuperscript{52}.

In the introduction of his book \textit{The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East}, Elie Podeh lists a set of reasons why the state holds national celebrations. The first explanation deals with “the desire of the elite to create a national identity, binding the citizen more closely to the state and nation cementing solidarity among community members”\textsuperscript{53}. Moreover, referring to the theories of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, Podeh argues that “the main purpose of commemorations and public festivals was to ensure continuity and serve as a mechanism of social integrations”\textsuperscript{54}. In fact, celebrations and their symbols represent a tool through which every citizen actively and emotionally participates in the life of the community\textsuperscript{55}. The second explanation is summarized in the pursuit of legitimation which is closely connected to the necessity of maintaining the social order\textsuperscript{56}.

\textsuperscript{50} Elie Podeh, \textit{The Politics of National Celebrations}, 25.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 26-27.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
The third of Podeh’s explanations refers to celebrations as performance of the power. In fact, by means of annual commemorations, the ruler has the opportunity to show his or her power for strengthening his or her figure and reinforcing “the reverence of the citizens.” The fourth and last explanation deals with “the emotional role of celebrations.” In fact, celebrations may play a crucial role in the mobilization of people who may consider commemorative observances, and their narrative, as a way of finding a meaning in their life and an opportunity to consider themselves as members of the community.

Therefore, national celebrations can be viewed like tesserae of a great mosaic which reflect the historical narrative of the state. As referred earlier, this narrative is embodied in a national calendar which definitely “tells the story of the nation” and represents its core “belief system.” It is worth mentioning that a national calendar is not something fixed but is subjected to changes and deletions according to the will and policy of the incumbent regime. In fact, a national calendar may also be invented or adjusted in order to establish a strong emotional attachment between the persons of a state and the territory and community in which they live. In this way, the incumbent government may claim a sense of legitimacy and loyalty from its people.

**Religious and Secular Festivals, Rituals, and Symbols**

On the whole, in western countries the distinction between religious and secular celebrations represents the accomplishment of the separation between church and state. Secular festivals are then those celebrations which do not have religious roots and pretend to be independent and unaffected by any religious groups and discourses; while religious festivals, needless to say, clearly refer to a specific religious narrative. Nevertheless, although secular celebrations are commonly linked to the state whereas religious celebrations are tied to independent religious institutions, the separation of the temporal from the religious power does not mean the exclusion of religious festivals from the national calendar of a state. For instance, many western countries celebrate as public holidays, festivities such as All Saints’ Day, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Ascension, and so forth, which in most cases, represent an opportunity for rulers and political figures for showing themselves in public spaces, delivering speeches, and stressing the cultural roots of the state.

However, the dichotomy between secular and religious festivals may be inapplicable to many

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 22.
60 Ibid., 3.
non-western countries where the religious component plays a crucial role in the life of the state (and its legitimation) and society as, for instance, in many Muslim countries. The Islamic Republic of Iran is by no means an exception. In fact, in the case of the country analysed in this thesis, religion and state are interconnected and legitimized by each other, as it was established by Ayatollah Khomeini’s theory of *velayat-e faqih*\(^6\), and it would be a challenging task to define what is secular and what is religious in Iran. Indeed, as will be dealt with in the following chapters, we see that in Iran many celebrations, which in a western country would be categorized as secular festivals, are strongly marked by religious symbols and rituals and that, on the other side, religious celebrations are definitely influenced by secular elements (e.g. parades, rallies, exhibitions, political discourses). For this reason, in this thesis I only refer to national celebrations in Iran without differentiating whether they are secular or religious. In this regard, it is interesting to see that even in 1938, when Iran was still under the pro-secular and modern government of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1940), an Iranian newspaper published an article in which it was reported that “there is no difference between religious celebrations and national celebrations”, since “they both strengthen the sense of brotherhood and of national unity among the population”\(^6\).

I have used the term rituals in relation to celebrations held in Iran. Traditionally, the word ritual has been always utilized in reference to religious activities while the title ceremony has been given to secular celebrations\(^6\). However, given the multitude of meanings, definitions, and differentiations that this term has been allocated by anthropologists, in this thesis I refer to rituals simply as “an often-repeated pattern of behaviour which is performed at appropriate times, and which may involve the use of symbols” and that although religion is traditionally the field in which they perform, “the scope of ritual extends into secular and everyday life as well”\(^6\).

During a celebration, it is also interesting to note the extensive use of symbols. Symbols may be defined as the objects or ideas which recall something by association\(^6\). Political figures may use symbols during determined events in order to refer to the political mainstream, to national history and

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\(^6\) The theory of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, “The Mandate of the Jurist”, was presented as lectures in 1970 when Ayatollah Khomeini was in exile in Najaf. With this theory, Ayatollah Khomeini recovered the *Osuli* opinions which tended to preclude the separation between the temporal and religious authority. Hence Ayatollah Khomeini, rejecting the distinction between religion and politics, stated that the management of the political community is entitled to the qualified jurists, or Shiite religious leaders, since they are the only interpreters of the Sacred Law, during the absence of the twelfth hidden Imam Mahdi. See: Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown. The Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.


state-approved heroes, and to show their future political goals. In fact, it is clear that every government manages a set of symbols, practices, and beliefs which the state uses in order to enhance the spirit of loyalty and allegiance of citizens towards the nation and create a sense of common sharing. Although symbols may be adopted in order to refer to a specific identity, its role is complex from a communicative perspective. In fact, since they may hold different layers of meaning, the same symbols can be differently used to express different ideologies and cultures.

Nations, Nationalism, and Iranian Identity

It is clear that when dealing with national celebrations ipso facto we refer to the phenomenon of nation and nationalism. It has been argued that, referring to the British and French colonial experience in the Arab Middle East, “the European model of the nation-state (... ) was imported, imitated and imposed on the local inhabitants”. Despite the fact Iran was never been under direct colonial domination, nationalist and modernist ideas entered the country around the end of the nineteenth century and they deeply affected and inspired the nation-building and state formation process. However, as Ahmad Ashraf explains, the entrance of nationalist and western ideas in Iran showed that the country already had a deep awareness of its historical and cultural identity. These new ideas were moulded and developed on the basis of this awareness. However, although the cultural consciousness of a Persian past was mostly reflected in policies involving the language and calendar, the identification of an Iranian identity (howiyat-e Irani) took “the form of Iranian nationalism with the chauvinistic flair characteristic of nationalist visions”. Thus, since the end of nineteenth century, pre-modern Iran entered the nationalist era “creating a new Iranian national identity on the basis of its own pre-existing ethnic and territorial ties, historical memories, and commemorations of historical events”. Intellectuals (rowshanfekran), who had political, cultural, and commercial relations with the west, were the main architects of the merger of nationalist ideas with the historical and cultural Persian background. However, it is important to stress that the main goal in building a modern nation-state was firstly economic, in order to utilise all the available resources present in the country; secondly, it was political, that is, defending the autonomy of the

71 Kathryn. Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 489.
73 Ibid.
state from any foreign influences and interferences.

The term mellat, or nation, became less used with the meaning of religious community but to signify the Iranian nation. Another term whose meaning has developed is watan which, while in classical Persian literature it was commonly used in the sense of a “person’s place of birth”, now it refers to the concept of “homeland”. In relation to the latter term, nationalists of Iran, but also of other Muslim countries, found a fertile ground in the Prophet Muhammad’s hadith “hobb al-watan men al-iman” (love of homeland is an article of faith) in order to spread a wide sense of loyalty and devotion towards the patrie in Muslim believers74.

Nevertheless, throughout the twentieth century, four groups of what Ahmad Ashraf defines the “Persian intelligentsia” compete politically, giving different interpretations concerning how Iranian national identity should be conceived. The first group, linked to the elites of the Pahlavi state, “came to adopt the idea of 25 centuries of Persian empire as the foundation of Iranian national identity” representing what has been called “Aryan and Neo-Achaemenid nationalism”. The second group, mainly linked to the political party called National Front, supported the idea that the only way to encourage state formation was connected to the development of the civil society. The third group of intelligentsia, mainly associated to leftist parties, is opposed to the Pahlavis’ view of national identity tending “to shift the question of Iranian collective identity from its ‘national’ perspective to its component peoples” and stressing the point that the concept of different Iranian peoples (khalqha-ye Iran) speaking different languages should replace the concept of an Iranian nation (Melli-ye Iran). The fourth group is represented by the champions of the “Iranian religio-national identity” and supporters of the issue claim that Islam and Iran are so interconnected that is impossible “to search for Iranian identity without Islam or for Islamic identity without a strong Iranian presence within it”. Some of the main members belonging to this category are considered to be the ideologues of the Islamic Revolution such as ‘Ali Shariati (1933-1977), who considered the terms nations and nationalism linked to religion, and Shi’ism one of the main elements of the Iranian identity; Ayatollah Mortaza Motahhari (1919-1979), who related nationalism with Iranian Islamic-national identity if the former brought “cooperation and social ties among people”; and Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995), who claimed that opposing Islam to Iranian nationalism is self-destructive because its denial is the work of propaganda of anti-revolutionary movements75. Needless to say, the Islamic Republic of Iran nowadays strongly supports this idea and its narrative is reflected in national celebrations.

75 Ibid., 528.
Therefore, besides the creation of newspapers, the reform of education, and the role of literature, national celebrations were a further tool used by nationalists to foster the sentiments of the Iranian modern state. And, as mentioned in the introduction, particularly since the Pahlavi era, the intensive use of symbols and narrative during the performance of rituals and ceremonies was combined with the rehabilitation of historical places observable in museums and archaeological sites and in the recovery of ancient architectural designs, music, and dress.\textsuperscript{76}

Thus, the discussion over the role of national celebrations has to be considered in connection with the phenomenon of nationalism. In fact, Smith argues that “we cannot understand nations and nationalism simply as an ideology or form of politics but must treat them as cultural phenomena as well” and they must be linked to national identity including “language, sentiments and symbolism”\textsuperscript{77}. According to Smith, indeed, nations and nationalism have to be investigated by the perspective of “historical ethno-symbolism” rather than the perennial, primordial, or modernist perspective. Smith’s ethno-symbolic perspective mostly focuses on the historical and popular context of nations; myths; memories; symbols; and traditions.\textsuperscript{78} Referring to the process of nation building in Arab states and to their political, economic, and cultural relationship with western states, Podeh states that the national calendar of celebrations of those colonised countries was deeply affected by the calendar of celebrations used in the respective colonising nation. Nevertheless, according to the aforementioned ethno-symbolic theory of nationalism of Anthony Smith, the national calendar of celebrations may also refer to rituals, celebrations, and symbols used in the pre-nation state period.\textsuperscript{79} The same concept may be applicable to contemporary Iran where, as we will see in the next chapters, its national calendar of celebrations is constituted by rituals and ceremonies which were already performed since ancient times (e.g. Nowruz, ‘Ashura) but also by western models of celebration of the state (e.g. Victory of the Islamic Revolution, Islamic Republic Day). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the establishment of a shared collective memory is not only settled on the basis of its continuity with the past but it is also selected, created, and moulded during the process of state formation. Furthermore, during this process, the invention of traditions and the re-interpretation of history are crucial in the construction of the image of a united society since, as the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm states, they try “to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which implies continuity with the past.”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{78} Anthony Smith, Myths and Memories of the Nation, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-27.
\textsuperscript{79} Elie Podeh, The Politics of National Celebrations, 3.
Commemorative Narrative, and Master Commemorative Narrative

One of the tasks carried out by the producers of commemorative symbolism is to mould the sentiments of the users and to serve the specific interests of the dominant class. In fact, besides the definition which I have given earlier, commemoration is conceived “as a reflection of power distributions” which changes depending on interests and needs. But what is more noteworthy is that the role of commemoration is not only to be intended as “a model of society” but also “a model for society” that is seeking to guide it towards common goals and perspectives in the future.

In her work about the construction of collective memory in Israel, Yael Zerubavel states that every commemoration is characterized by a supporting narrative that is the official story of a specific event of the past which is then not only recalled through the performance of its rituals but also soaked in a moral message for all the members of the community. Consequently, all the forms of commemorations collectively determine the master commemorative narrative which is basically a general narrative about the values and virtues of a social group of a common and shared past characterizing it as unique, well-defined, and distinct in respect to the past of other groups. In fact, what mostly constitutes the master commemorative narrative is its focus “on the event that marks the group’s emergence as an independent social entity”. A society may privilege specific periods of the past “to remember” which enhance the identity of the dominant group as opposed to other periods, as they could be considered irrelevant and should consequently be forgotten (commemorative density). Indeed, the formation of a master commemorative narrative automatically implies the act of remembering and forgetting determined events and collective memory plays a crucial role in this selection.

The commemorative narrative may be spread through different tools such as education, historiography, archaeology, national holidays, and the mass media. Depending on the system of the government and on the impact they have on society, Podeh classifies different types of commemorations: consensual commemoration, which is characterized by the sharing of the commemoration from the majority of community members; multivocal commemoration, which is characterized by the sharing of the commemoration from community members with different views of the past; imposed and controlled commemoration, which is characterized by the coercion to

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81 Barry Schwartz, “Commemorative Objects”, 2269.
83 Yael Zerubavel, Recovered Roots, 6.
84 Ibid., 6-7.
85 Ibid.
86 Yael Zerubavel, Recovered Roots, 9.
perform commemorative activities of all community members; *fragmented commemoration*, which is characterized by “multiple narratives and ceremonies held at diverse times and in assorted spaces”\(^88\).

Chapter Two

Iranian Calendar

The Iranian calendar is the result of the adoption of many calendars used for over two millennia in Greater Iran. The modern Iranian calendar is the official calendar both in Iran and Afghanistan. Throughout the history of Iran, the calendar has been modified many times for suiting political, administrative, climatic, and religious purposes\(^{89}\).

As figure 1 shows, the modern Iranian calendar is a solar calendar with months having ancient Persian names but based on the Hegira of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. This calendar was legally adopted on the 31th of March 1925 under the early Pahlavi and it was indicated by law that the beginning of the year on the vernal equinox is based on astronomical calculations (Nowruz) fixing the number of the months which previously varied by year. Indeed, basing the New Year on Nowruz is an ancient practice. Although being a festival rooted in the Zoroastrian tradition (the ancient religion of Persia), which did not necessarily coincide with the first day of the year and with the vernal equinox (the beginning of the spring), the 11th century reforms of the calendar “during the reign of the Saljuq sultan Jalāl-al-Dawla Mo’ezz-al-Dīn Abu’l-Faṭḥ Malekšāh (465-85/1072-92)”, for fixing the beginning of the calendar year, established Nowruz as the first day of the year in the vernal equinox\(^{90}\). However, according to the Persian poet Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) in his Nowruz-name, the festival of Nowruz was already celebrated as the first day of the year from the legendary king, Kay Khosrow, depicted in the Shahname until the reign of the last Sassanid king Yazdegird III (r. 632-651)\(^{91}\).

It is noteworthy how the changing of the base of the national calendar from the Iranian solar calendar to the Imperial one in 1976, based on Cyrus the Great’s coronation and no longer on the Prophet’s journey from Mecca to Medina, represented one of the crucial moments in which the Pahlavi regime’s loss of legitimacy was clearly shown, as many Iranians ignored this change.

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\(^{89}\) Reza Abdollahy, “Calendars” in Encyclopaedia Iranica, Vol. IV, Fasc. 6-7, 671.

\(^{90}\) Ibid.

Fig. 1: Iranian solar Calendar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month Number</th>
<th>Month Name</th>
<th>Days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Farvardin</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ordibehesht</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Khordad</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tir</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mordad</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Shahrivar</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mehr</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Aban</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Azar</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dei</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Bahman</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Esfand</td>
<td>29/30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even more interesting is to witness how this crisis of legitimacy worsened when, after that the uprising in Iran had already prevailed, the Shah attempted to appease the situation by re-establishing the Iranian solar calendar on 2 September 1978.

In the contemporary Iranian solar calendar, the first six months have 31 days (Farvardin-Shahrivar), the following five have 30 days (Mehr-Bahman), and the last one has 29 or 30 days (Esfand) depending on leap years. The national calendar in post-revolutionary Iran is bizarre because although its perception of time officially refers to the Iranian solar calendar (hejri), it is common to refer to two other calendars: the Islamic lunar calendar and the Gregorian calendar, also known as the Christian or Western calendar. For example, the 1st of Farvardin 1394, Shanbeh, the first day of the year according to the Iranian solar calendar (Nowruz) in 2015 Western calendar, is equivalent to the 21st of March, Saturday, and to the 30th of Jumada al-thani 1436, yawm as-sabt, according to the Islamic lunar calendar (Fig. 2).

However, although the Iranian and Gregorian calendar, being solar, are almost always synchronized, the Islamic lunar calendar is ten days less than the solar calendar. This factor strongly affects Iranian life and daily activities since many Islamic festivities fall in different months every
year and they may collide with celebrations of different moods. For instance, the Islamic month of *Moharram*, which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn, represents the most mournful and holy months for Shi’i Iranians. Nevertheless, it may coincide with the month of *Farvardin* in which the joyful Iranian *Nowruz* (New Year) is celebrated for thirteen days by all Iranian people. The same collision may occur with the month of *Ramadan* (the month of fasting) which can concur also with the festival of *Nowruz*, which is problematic as eating, drinking, and partying are essential components of this festival. On the other hand, the coincidence of the birthday of the Prophet or an Imam, *‘Eid-e Ghadir-e Khumm* (the day in which ‘Ali was appointed Prophet Muhammad’s successor), and *‘Eid-e Fetr* (the festival which marks the end of the month of fasting) with *Nowruz*, for instance, may represent an opportunity in which “the Iranian and the Islamic identities may perfectly match and reinforce each other in a happy and positive way”\(^\text{92}\). Yet, a mournful commemoration such as the martyrdom of Imam ‘Ali may coincide with Ramadan, enhancing the solemn spirit of this month. Furthermore, a national celebration such as *Students Day*, in which the death of three students killed by Shah’s police in 1953 is commemorated, may coincide with *Moharram* connecting the mournful mood of this month with the political message of the

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\(^{92}\) Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 251.
commemoration. Thus, Iranian people today must harmonise the rhythm of their lives by referring to diverse and at times opposing time conceptions.

**Public Holidays**

As mentioned in the introduction, Iran is one of the countries with the highest numbers of celebrations worldwide with more than a hundred commemorative days. The identity of the new calendar established in the Islamic Republic of Iran not only acknowledges the Islamic character of the revolution but also connects “the whole history of Iran into this new mode”93. Not considering those commemorative days that have a little prominence in public society, it is arguable that there are around 23 public holidays in Iran which we can conveniently divide in religious and non-religious, or secular, celebrations (Fig. 3). The former are celebrated every year at a different date according to the Iranian solar calendar since Islamic festivities refer to the Islamic lunar calendar whose days, as has been shown, are ten fewer than the solar calendar. The secular festivals always fall on the same day according to the Iranian solar calendar. However, even non-religious festivals hold a sacred value since their commemorative narrative refers to the ideals of the revolution which, when seen as the struggle of oppressed people against tyranny, already own a holy cause. The first holiday of the year is represented by **Nowruz**, the Persian New Year which lasts two weeks starting from March 21st (1st of **Farvardin**). The next significant celebration is the Proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (**Ruz-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami**) on the 1st of April (12th of **Farvardin**). The following day represents the end of the Persian New Year’s holiday also called Nature Day (**Sizdah Bedar**). Yet, the subsequent fixed public holiday falls on the 4th of June (14th of **Khordad**), the anniversary which commemorates the passing of Ruhollah Khomeini (**Dargozasht-e Emam Khomeini**). The day after commemorates the anniversary of the uprising against the Shah (**Ghiyam-e Panzdah-e Khordad**). The 11th of February (22 **Bahman**) marks Islamic Revolution Day, the anniversary of the Victory of the Revolution. The last public holiday of the year is represented by the Nationalization of the Oil Industries which falls on the 19th of March. The official religious public holidays are the Martyrdom of Fatima (**Shahadat-e Hazrat-e Fateme**), daughter of the Prophet, wife of ‘Ali, and mother of Hasan and Hoseyn; the anniversary of Imam ‘Ali (**Milad-e Emam ‘Ali**), the fourth of the “Rightly Guided” Caliph and first Shia Imam; the Mission of Muhammad (**Be'sat-e Payambar**); the anniversary of Imam Mahdi (**Milad-e Emam Zaman, roz-e mostasafin**), the twelfth Imam who went into hiding in 874 AD; the martyrdom of Imam ‘Ali (**Shahadat-e Emam ‘Ali**); the end of Ramadan (**‘Eid-e-Fetr**), the holy month

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93 Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 259.
of fasting; the martyrdom of Imam Sadeq (*Shahadat-e Emam Sadeq*), the sixth Shia Imam; the festival of Sacrifice (*Eid-e-Qorban*), the festival which remembers the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael as an act of obedience to God’s will; ‘*Eid-e Ghadir*, the festival which celebrates ‘Ali’s appointment as successor of the Prophet at the pond of Khumm; *Tasu’a-ye Hoseyni*, the eve of the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn; martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn (*‘Ashura*);

Fig. 3: Iranian Public Holidays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (Gregorian Calendar)</th>
<th>English Name</th>
<th>Persian Name</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21-23 March</td>
<td>Persian New Year</td>
<td><em>Nowruz</em></td>
<td>Zoroastrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Tuesday</td>
<td>Wednesday Feast</td>
<td><em>Chaharshanbe Suri</em></td>
<td>Zoroastrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 April</td>
<td>Islamic Republic Day</td>
<td><em>Ruz-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami</em></td>
<td>Political /Islamic Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 April</td>
<td>Nature Day</td>
<td><em>Sizdah Bedar</em></td>
<td>Zoroastrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>Martyrdom of Fatima</td>
<td><em>Shahadat-e Hazrat-e Fateme</em></td>
<td>Islamic / Jumada al-thani 3, 632 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 June</td>
<td>Anniversary of the Passing of Ruhollah Khomeini</td>
<td><em>Dargozasht-e Emam Khomeini</em></td>
<td>Political /4 June 1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 June</td>
<td>Anniversary of the Uprising Against the Shah</td>
<td><em>Ghiyam-e Panzdhah-e Khordad</em></td>
<td>Political /6 June 1963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>Mission of Muhammad</td>
<td><em>Be’sat-e Payambar</em></td>
<td>Islamic / Rajab 27, 609 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>Anniversary of Imam Mahdi</td>
<td><em>Milad-e Emam Zaman</em></td>
<td>Islamic / Sha’aban 15, 869 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>Martyrdom of Imam ‘Ali</td>
<td><em>Shahadat-e Emam ‘Ali</em></td>
<td>Islamic / Ramadan 21, 661 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>End of Ramadan</td>
<td><em>‘Eid-e Fetr</em></td>
<td>Islamic / Shawwal 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>Martyrdom of Imam Sadeq</td>
<td><em>Shahadat-e Emam Sadeq</em></td>
<td>Islamic / Shawwal 25, 765 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Type</td>
<td>Event Name</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>Sacrifice Feast</td>
<td>'Eid-e-Qorban</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td></td>
<td>Islamic / Dhu al-Hijjah 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>'Eid-e Ghadir</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Turkish / Dhu al-Hijjah 18, 632 CE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>Martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn</td>
<td>'Ashura</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Varying</td>
<td></td>
<td>Islamic / Moharram 10, 680 CE</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying</td>
<td>Arba’în</td>
<td>Arba’în-e Hoseyni</td>
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<td>11 February</td>
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Arba’în (40th day after ‘Ashura) (Arba’în-e Hoseyni); demise of Prophet Muhammad and martyrdom of Imam Hasan, the second Shiite Imam; the martyrdom of Imam Reza, the eight Shiite Imam; anniversary of Muhammad and anniversary of Imam Sadeq, celebrated on the same day.

With the commemoration of several births and deaths of figures belonging to the Shiite tradition, it is clear that in the aftermath of the revolution, the aim of the newly established regime was to Islamicize the Iranian calendar of celebrations. However, as Dabashi and Chelkowski rightly point out in their work, “events in early Islamic history were given renewed and appropriate significance”. One of the main bases of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the theory of velayat-e faqih, the mandate of the jurist who has the juridical competence to rule on behalf of the hidden Imam. Although Shi’ism had opted for political quietism for centuries, this theory marks the merger

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between religion and politics and the reciprocal usage of both spheres. In fact, national celebrations in post-revolutionary Iran should be seen from this perspective, where a religious anniversary is used as an opportunity to discuss political issues, and a political, or secular, commemoration is used to promote religious values which bolster the state’s legitimation of the Islamic Republic. In this way, many associated public events or socio-political themes are organized and linked to the cultural and historical dimension of the anniversary. For instance, “The Week of Unity”, which promotes the worldwide solidarity among Muslims despite their divergences, inaugurates the week in which the birthday of Prophet Muhammad is celebrated. Yet, the birthday of the Mahdi, the twelfth Imam gone into hiding in 874 AD, is also acknowledged as “The International Day of the Down-Trodden” because of his eschatological symbolism to establish justice in the moment of his reappearance at the end of time. Although Ayatollah Khomeini never claimed to be the Mahdi, but presented the Islamic Revolution as “a vanguard movement anticipating more global changes in the world”, the matter of establishing universal justice was dear to Iranian revolutionary ideals, which aimed not only to struggle against the despotism and corruption of the Shah but also to export the same ideals to those countries where people were oppressed by the injustice and cruelty of Imperialism. Thus, as has been the case with many other Shiite commemorative events which have been re-inscribed in the Iranian revolutionary dimension, “a significant aspect of Shi’i eschatology is globalized as a political event of universal appeal”95. Another instance of this is the day which celebrates the birthday of Imam Hoseyn whose commemoration is known as “The Guardians of the Revolution Day”. With this commemoration, it is clear that there is a strong link between the “Prince of Martyrs”, Imam Hoseyn, and the military arm Pasdaran, the militia also known as “The Guardians of the Revolution” created in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution.

The Islamization of the Calendar

The Islamization of the calendar in post-revolutionary Iran not only means the celebration of a multitude of Islamic festivities but also the appropriation of non-Islamic and western commemorations, which are allocated an Islamic significance. Furthermore, in the calendar of celebrations of the Islamic Republic of Iran there are not only remembrances of figures from early Islamic history but there are also specific commemorations which are related to central figures of the modern and contemporary history of Iran. Indeed, it is arguable that the “identity” of the calendar of celebrations of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on a meticulous parallelism between both

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95 Chelkowski and Dabashi, Staging a Revolution, 252.
present and past historical events and figures where there is “a specific contraction of a historical and fictional narrative to generate and sustain a revolutionary self-understanding”\textsuperscript{96}. Thus, its master commemorative narrative is mostly grounded in the commemoration of a multitude of martyrs of the past (early stages of Islam) and martyrs of the present (revolution and post-revolution), and in days on which the oppressed are remembered and are given the chance for redemption.

The appropriation of non-Islamic commemorations

The act of Islamicization of the calendar also involves the appropriation of non-Islamic festivities from opponents. An example is represented by the day on which is celebrated “The Nationalization of the Oil Industry” on 29 Esfand (19 or 20 March). The main figure who led the country to the nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was Muhammad Mosaddeq (1882-1967), the leader of the political party Jebhe-yeh Melli (National Front of Iran). Prior to becoming Prime Minister (May 1951- August 1953), as leader of the National Front, Mosaddeq presented the bill of nationalization to the Majles, the Parliament, on 8 March 1951. Eventually, on the eve of the Iranian New Year, on 20 March 1951 (29 Esfand 1329), the bill received the final approval from the Senate and the oil industry was nationalised. Facing many troubles \textit{vis-a-vis} the Pahlavi elites and the British and American government, Mosaddeq was overthrown by a \textit{coup d’etat} orchestrated by the CIA in 1953. Although the nationalisation of the oil industry has been always supported by the religious elites and its remembrance has been maintained in the post-revolutionary period, any references to Mosaddeq’s figure are currently avoided. The reason for Mosaddeq’s exclusion from this event has to do with the desire of the Islamic revolutionary movement to appropriate all the accomplishments of the revolution. In fact, the pro-Khomeini group strove for a monopoly on power by opposing all other political groups which had actively participated in the revolution against the Shah (e.g National Front, Mojahedin-e Khalq, Fedayyn, Tudeh) and that wanted to have a voice in the subsequent regime. When the Shah left Iran in 1979, the National Front supported the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini as the political leader of Iran as well as the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, Ayatollah Khomeini refused to include the word “democracy” claimed by the National Front in the joint statement for the future of the country and it became clear that the political model planned by Khomeini would be a theocracy based on Islamic sharia law. Following political confrontations and protests, the National Front was suppressed in 1981.

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\textsuperscript{96} Chelkowski and Dabashi, \textit{Staging a Revolution}, 259.
The opposition against the National Front also included the appropriation of “the anti-colonial memory of the nationalist movement”\(^\text{97}\). In order to appropriate this memory, the ideologues of the Islamic Revolution planned to give more relevance to religious personalities, though of less predominance, rather than others who played a more central role in the history of modern Iran. More specifically, the figure of Ayatollah Kashani (1882-1962), who is historically less influential than Mosaddeq, is more privileged in post-revolutionary Iran rather than the architect of the nationalization of the oil industry. Ayatollah Kashani, indeed, was a contemporary of Muhammad Mosaddeq, and being the chairman of the Parliament of Iran between August 1952 and March 1953 and one of the few clerics supporting the nationalization of the oil industry, Kashani was Mosaddeq’s ally in the idea of nationalism and anti-imperialism. However, Kashani turned against Muhammad Mosaddeq at the outset of the 1953 coup d’état declaring that “Mosaddegh deserved to be executed because he had committed the ultimate offense: rebelling against the shah, ‘betraying’ the country, and repeatedly violating the sacred law”\(^\text{98}\). As the historian Ervand Abrahamian points out, in contemporary Iran there is a wilful neglect of the figure of Mosaddeq as much as possible for the reasons aforementioned. In fact nowadays, although the figure of Mosaddeq is widely known among Iranians, Ayatollah Kashani is considered as the real leader of the oil nationalization campaign\(^\text{99}\).

### The appropriation of western commemorations

An instance of western commemoration which has entered the revolutionary calendar is represented by “Women’s Day”, an international festival usually celebrated as an official holiday in many western countries on March 8 every year. Although its commemorative focus may be different depending on the area and historical stage (e.g. Soviet Russia), the most substantial narrative refers to the 1908 strike of the International Ladies’Garment Workers’ Union in America\(^\text{100}\). In Iran, “Women’s Day” is celebrated but neither on March 8 according to the Gregorian calendar nor referring to the 1908 strike. “Women’s Day” and “Mother’s Day” coincide with the birthday of Fatima (605-633), one of the five significant figures in early Islamic history and Shiite memory. In fact, Fatima is not only the Prophet’s daughter but she is also ‘Ali’s wife and the mother of Hasan

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\(^{97}\) Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 256.


\(^{100}\) See: http://www.un.org/events/women/iwd/2008/history.shtml
and Hoseyn, and considered to be the ideal Islamic woman\textsuperscript{101}. Essentially, the reason why “Women’s Day” is celebrated on the day of Fatima’s birthday is due to the fact that Fatima represents “a model revolutionary figure for contemporary Iranian woman”\textsuperscript{102}.

In this regard, one of the most revolutionary and visible hallmarks of Iranian women in the Islamic Republic is the compulsory use of the veil (hejab) and in this sense Fatima embodies the image of the pure and veiled woman. The hejab has become a significant symbol of power and control by the regime in society because it shows that Islamic state system has overcome the secular one. During the revolution, women of different political groups deliberately wore scarves and veils as a sign of solidarity with Ayatollah Khomeini and of protest against the Shah. Nevertheless, it only became compulsory afterwards with Ayatollah Khomeini’s decree on March 7, 1979, a day before International Women’s day.

Thus, in post-revolutionary Iran, the compulsory use of the veil not only represents an act of subordination for Iranian women and the desire of the Iranian government to create a new identity for them in respect to Islamic tenets, but it also constitutes an opposing image in respect to women during the Pahlavi period. The use of the veil has been politically exploited both before and after the revolution. In fact, its wearing was prohibited by Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944) in 1936 according to his policy of secularization and modernization of Iranian society. However, many women considered the wearing of the veil as something linked to their tradition and honour and some of them even refused to leave their houses, while others ignored the ban, going out into the streets covered. The ban was removed after Reza Shah’s abdication in 1941 but the veil continued to be seen as an anti-modern and backward element also during Muhammed Reza Pahlavi’s reign and “Women’s Day” continued to be celebrated on the day that Reza Shah had prohibited it.

\textbf{The appropriation of past historical events}

Besides the controversial remembrance of Mosaddeq and Ayatollah Kashani mentioned above, it is interesting to see how during the “Islamicization” process of the calendar of celebrations, the ideologues of the Islamic Republic at the same time celebrate and condemn historical figures and events. Another instance of this remarkable historical selectivism can be seen with regards to the anniversary of the Persian Constitutional Revolution (14 Mordad/5 August 1906), when several

\textsuperscript{101} Fatima is one of the five most important figures in Shi’ism part of the “Panj Tan-e Ahl-e Aba” that is “The Five Persons of the Mantle” (The Mantle of the Prophet).

\textsuperscript{102} Chelkowski and Dabashi, \textit{Staging a Revolution}, 252.
revolutionary groups called for the creation of an elected parliament in Persia during the Qajar dynasty (1781-1925).

Like many other revolutions, the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) was rooted in the protests of various social groups such as merchants (bazari), the religious elite (‘ulama), intellectuals, who all strove for different objectives, such as the end of any foreign influences (i.e. Russia and Britain) in the country and the royal corruption of the Qajar elites, but also the circulation of new ideas such as nationalism, pan-Islamism, liberalism, and secularism. The only solution available was the limitation of the power of the ruler, the writing of a fundamental law code and the establishment of a parliament. On August 5, 1906, Mozaffar ad-Din Shah (1897-1906) issued a decree for setting up a national consultative assembly, and, just days before his death, he ratified the Fundamental Law on December 30, 1906103. Nevertheless, the secular constitutionalists prevailed over religious constitutionalists by changing the name from the “Islamic Consultative Assembly” to the “National Consultative Assembly” and starting a policy of exclusion of the ‘ulama by the political sphere. At this stage, many religious opposition figures started to emerge, who challenged the Constitutionalists, and saw Parliamentarianism as an enemy of Islam and Sacred Law. One of these opponents was Shaykh Fazlullah Nuri (1843-1909) a predominant Shia cleric in Iran who strongly opposed the separation between politics and religion. In October 1907, Nuri presented an amendment to the Constitution in which it was proposed not only that Shia Islam would be the state religion but also the establishment of a panel of five expert clergymen with the right of veto, who would be in charge of verifying the compatibility of the laws with Islamic principles. The amendment was not accepted and Nuri then moved to mobilise many constitutionalist ‘ulama in order to make the constitution compatible with Islamic tenets, as up to this stage, it was seen as a threat to Islamic traditions (but above all to religious interests of the Iranian religious elite). However, Nuri was strongly against the constitution and he supported Muhammad ‘Ali Shah (r.1907-1909), who was also against the constitution, when he staged a coup against the parliament with the assistance of Russia in 1907. Nevertheless, the constitutionalists regained power, and after that they marched on Tehran and deposed Muhammad ‘Ali Shah in 1909, Nuri was arrested and executed as a traitor on July 31, 1909. On this day the Islamic Republic of Iran remembers this event with “The Anniversary of Shaykh Fazlullah Nuri’s Martyrdom”.

The remembrance of Nuri in the memory of the Islamic Republic shows how he is currently seen by authorities as a model since he resisted the secularization prompted by constitutionalists and

fought for Islam. Moreover, Nuri’s amendment was recovered by Ayatollah Khomeini with the creation of the Guardian Council of the Constitution, but formed by twelve experts instead of five (six experts in Islamic Law appointed by the Supreme Leader and six jurists in different areas of law elected by the Parliament), which aims at, among different tasks, supervising the compatibility of law with Islamic tenets.

Nevertheless, although the Persian Constitutional Revolution is viewed negatively by the Iranian government of the Islamic Republic, this commemoration has been Islamicized in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. In fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran celebrates the anniversary of the Constitutional Revolution on 14 Mordad /5 August every year, although it remains largely ignored within the calendar of celebration. However, in order to link the memory of present events with past occurrences to be appropriated, this anniversary has been linked to the anniversary of “The Martyrdom of Dr. Sayyid Hasan Ayat”, a member of Parliament of Iran in the first assembly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and member of the 1st Assembly of Experts, who was assassinated by the People’s Mojahedin (mojahedin-e khalq) of Iran on the very same day of the anniversary of the Constitutional Revolution (5 August 1981).
Chapter Three

Ceremonies around the death of the Shiite Saint Hoseyn

Official State Narrative

This chapter examines how Moharram ceremonies, which end with the day of ‘Ashura on the tenth day of the month of Moharram are perhaps the most important and politicized festivities in contemporary Iran. The commemorative narrative of this festival refers to the death of the third Shi’i Imam Hoseyn, martyred in the desert of Karbala, in southern Iraq, along with around seventy-two companions in 680 CE. According to Shi’i chronicles, Imam Hoseyn, who was in Hijaz (a region in present-day western Saudi Arabia), was called by the people of Kufa to intervene against the Umayyad caliph Yazid (r. 680-683). Imam Hoseyn’s caravan was surrounded in the desert of Karbala by Yazid’s army and after ten days in which Imam Hoseyn and his seventy-two companions refused to give their oath of allegiance (bey’at) to the ‘Umayyad caliph a massive slaughter occurred, to the detriment of the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and his relatives and followers. This event strongly exacerbated the sectarian division between Shi’is and Sunnis whose origin can be found in the struggle over the legitimate succession of the leading of the Islamic community after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. In fact, those individuals, later known as Shi’is, supporting the succession of ‘Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law and cousin, were the champions of the leadership of the Islamic community led by a descendant of the Prophet and of the institution of the Imamate104. On the other hand, those who opted for the leadership of the institution of the Caliphate, known as Sunnis, believed that the leader did not necessarily have to be a relative of Prophet Muhammad, or have the qualities of infallibility which Muhammad had held105. Subsequently this succession crisis evolved into political and theological disputes which saw the Shi’i imams opposing the Sunni caliphs and, as Kamran Scot Aghaie argues, “For much of their early history, Sunnis have been associated with the state and the ruling elites, while Shi’is were more often associated with political opposition to the Sunni rulers and elites”106.

Every year, the ceremonies of Moharram are celebrated in Iran and in other countries in which Shi’i communities are predominantly present (e.g. Iraq, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, Bahrain, and

104 Shi’at ‘Ali (Partisans of ‘Ali), from which derives the term Shi’ism.
105 Sunnism takes the name from Sunnah (Prophetic Tradition).
so forth) for commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn on the first ten days of Moharram, the first month according to the Islamic lunar calendar. The day of ‘Ashura, the name of which comes from the Arabic root referring to the number ten, represents the peak of these commemorative and mournful observances. However, the period of mourning is not just related to the first ten days but to the entire month.

What is clear is that the first ten days of Moharram are not a time for festivities but represent a sorrowful period. People usually participate in mourning processions, beating their chests and showing their devotion to Imam Hoseyn. They congregate in squares and mosques attending poetic recitations and passion plays which reproduce the tragedy of Karbala, chanting sorrowfully to the beating of drums “Ya Hoseyn”. Throughout the month of Moharram, it is common to distribute free meals, consecrated in the name of Hoseyn (Nazri), to people who participate to the mourning ceremonies and to their own neighbours.

As Scot Aghaie states, “the symbols derived from interpretations of the seventh-century Battle of Karbala have historically been used by Shi’is to articulate a wide range of political, ethical, and cultural values”. Indeed, whereas Hoseyn stands for all those virtues and qualities such as goodness, truth, justice, piety, courage, self-sacrifice, honour, and devotion to God; on the other side Yazid represents all those negative qualities such as evil, moral corruption, injustice, cruelty, pride, and obsession with the material world. In addition to Imam Hoseyn and Yazid, other figures who participated in this event acquired a deep symbolism. For instance, one of Yazid’s soldiers, Shemr, who killed Hoseyn, is also represented as evil and immoral while Imam Hoseyn’s sons, ‘Ali Asghar and ‘Ali Akbar, also symbolise courage and truth. Yet, the women who experienced the dramatic events of Karbala, particularly Zeynab (Imam Hoseyn’s daughter), became the symbol of the perfect woman supporting their male relative, suffering the indignation of captivity with dignity, educating and preparing their sons to follow the path of Hoseyn, willingly sacrificing their male loved ones to martyrdom, and serving as spokespersons for the cause after the men were martyred. For instance, the symbolism of Zeynab became crucial for many wives and mothers who encouraged their husbands and sons to go to the frontline during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).

Since the late nineteenth century, the commemoration of ‘Ashura has been heavily utilised by various governments in order to build strong bonds between state and society and to promote a specific political agenda though some groups have continued to use its rituals and symbols

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108 Kamran Scot Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala, xi.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., 9.
independent of the political agenda of the state or of any other political movements.\footnote{Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala}, xii.}

The role of Shi’i symbolism, particularly referring to the story of Imam Hoseyn and in what Scot Aghaie calls the “Karbala Paradigm”, was fundamental for the subversion of the Pahlavi system, the end of the monarchy, and the stability of the newly established Islamic Republic, as we shall presently see. In fact, Shi’i symbolism played a crucial role, first, in the mobilisation of people before, during, and after the revolution, and subsequently in the promotion of the state’s legitimacy. After the Islamic Revolution, the ideology and politics of the Islamic Republic have been characterized by the utilization of these symbols and rituals.\footnote{Ibid., xi.} In fact, the lack of support for Shi’i rituals, such as the ceremonies of \textit{Moharram}, represented one of the elements that caused religious and political legitimacy crises for the Pahlavi government. In order to understand the power that \textit{Moharram} celebrations had at the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution and in its aftermath up to the present, it is necessary to discuss the role of \textit{Moharram} ceremonies in the pre-revolutionary period since the 1960s.

\textbf{The Politics of the Commemoration}

Although at the beginning of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi’s time in office (r. 1941-1979) he was more tolerant towards \textit{Moharram} rituals than his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941), he began to oppose the ceremonies, discontinuing financial support for the rituals, and prohibiting those that could become a political threat. It is arguable that the month of \textit{Moharram}, after Muhammad Shah Pahlavi’s White Revolution in 1963\footnote{The White Revolution was a set of reforms advocated by the Shah in 1963 with the scope of modernization and westernization of the country. Some elements of the program dealt with land reforms, the extension of the right to vote to women, and education reforms.}, marks the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini on the political scene and the beginning of the struggle against the Pahlavi government. During the \textit{Moharram} ceremonies of that year, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered that “orators should give non-political sermons for the early part of \textit{Moharram}, and then after the seventh of \textit{Moharram}, as the climax of the ritual season approached, they were to change their sermons to include anti-government themes.”\footnote{Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala}, 79.}

Besides stressing in his \textit{Moharram} sermon in 1962 the necessity of using sermons and lectures as tools of informing public opinions concerning political issues, Ayatollah Mortaza Motahhari (1919-1979) argued:

\begin{quote}
Some people who were rational, wise, and pious suggested that since these rituals [\textit{Moharram} rituals] are always being held in the name of the Prince of the Martyrs, and since people
\end{quote}
already gather in the name of Imam Hoseyn, why not use them for another purpose?\textsuperscript{115}

In his celebratory speech delivered at \textit{Fayziya} seminar in Qom, which had been attacked by Shah’s agents the previous March, in the afternoon of ‘\textit{Ashura} on June 3, 1963, Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) stated:

If the Umayads and the regime of Yazid ibn Mu’awiya wished to make war against Husyan, why did they commit such savage and inhuman crimes against the defenseless women and innocent children? (…) A similar question occurs to me now. If the tyrannical regime of Iran simply wished to wage war on the maraji’, to oppose the ‘ulama, what business did it have tearing the Qur’an to shreds on the day it attacked Fayziya Madrasa? (…) We come to the conclusion that this regime also has a more basic aim: they are fundamentally opposed to Islam itself and the existence of the religious class. (…) Mr. Shah! Dear Mr. Shah, I advise you to desist in this policy and acts like this. I don’t want the people to offer up thanks if your masters should decide that you must leave. I don’t want you to become like your father\textsuperscript{116}.

What is clear is that Ayatollah Khomeini was using \textit{Moharram} ceremonies to trigger opposition to the Shah and he encouraged more oppositional activities on the occasion of the ritual season by means of speeches, sermons, slogans, and chants which had a political content and “a symbolic connection between the Battle of Karbala and the protest movements underway in the 1960s and 1970s”\textsuperscript{117}. Many intellectuals like ‘Ali Shariati (1933-1977) and Salehi Najafabadi (1923-2006) also argued that “Muslims should follow Hoseyn’s example by actively rebelling against corrupt rulers”\textsuperscript{118}. In this regard, one of Shariati’s emblematic slogans, adopted by Khomeini and nowadays still commonly used in Iran, is “Every place should be turned into Karbala, every month into \textit{Moharram}, and every day into ‘\textit{Ashura}’”\textsuperscript{119}. Thus, throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, \textit{Moharram} ceremonies became a stage where different political groups and the government violently clashed\textsuperscript{120}.

On the eve of the Islamic Revolution, the annual commemoration of the martyrdom of Hoseyn became a more powerful tool of political mobilization of people. In fact, as Chelkowsky says, “the “revolution” itself was in effect the ultimate outcome of a series of successfully organized and staged demonstrations”\textsuperscript{121}. In November 1978, indeed, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a declaration from Neauphle-le-Chateau, a village in the suburb of Paris where he was staying in the last period of his exile, one week before the beginning of the month of \textit{Moharram} through which he urged people

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{115} Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala}, 74.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Ruhollah Khomeini, “The Afternoon of ‘\textit{Ashura}’ in \textit{Islam and Revolution}, 177-180.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala}, 81.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 94.
\item \textsuperscript{119} \textit{Ettela’at}, 8 September 1982.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala}, 83.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Chelkowsky and Dabashi, \textit{Staging a Revolution}, 70.
\end{itemize}
to continue the struggle against the Shah whose government was coming to an end:

With the approach of Muharram, we are about to begin the month of epic heroism and self-sacrifice – the month in which blood triumphed over the sword, the month in which truth condemned falsehood for all eternity and branded the mark of disgrace upon the forehead of all oppressors and satanic governments; (...) the month that proves the superpowers may be defeated by the word of truth; the month in which the leader of the Muslims taught us how to struggle against all the tyrants of history, (...) Advance together, with a single voice and a single purpose, to the sacred aim of Islam – the abolition of the cruel Pahlavi dynasty, the destruction of the abominable monarchical regime, and the establishment of an Islamic republic based on the progressive dictates of Islam! Victory is yours, nation arisen in revolt!\(^{122}\)

On the first day of *Moharram*, on December 2, 1978, thousands of people poured onto the streets of Tehran demanding the end of the Pahlavi dynasty and the return of Khomeini. On December 10, millions of people marched in the street, chanting “Death to the Shah”, “*Allah-o Akbar*” (God is great), and carrying posters with the image of Ayatollah Khomeini and banners with ‘Ali Shariati’s quote “The Martyrs are the heart of history”. The following day, on the day of ‘*Ashura*, the demonstrations were more crowded and at the end of the day a resolution was produced claiming “the Shah’s abdication; return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran; political freedom, and economic justice for all”\(^{123}\).

On January 15, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a further declaration from Neauphle-le-Chateau, in France, on the occasion of the Fortieth Day after ‘*Ashura*, since according to Shiite tradition, the fortieth day, as it is also the seventh, after the passing of a person is considered a day of mourning:

> The Fortieth-day commemoration of Imam Husayn has an exceptional and ideal meaning this year. It is our religious and national duty to organize great marches and demonstrations all across the country, our great people must bury once and for all this stinking carrion of monarchy. They must proclaim their opposition to the illegal Regency Council and declare, once again, their support for the Islamic Republic\(^{124}\).

On the other hand, if *Moharram* rituals represented a mobilisation tool before the revolution, the first commemoration of *Moharram* after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 represented a crucial event in terms of reinforcing the ideals and the memory of the revolution. An Iranian newspaper described the atmosphere of *Tasu’a* and ‘*Ashura* in this way:

\(^{122}\) Ruhollah Khomeini, “*Muharram: The Triumph of Blood Over the Sword*” in *Islam and Revolution*, 242-245.


The day before yesterday and yesterday (Thursday and Friday), on the occasion of Tasu’a and ‘Ashura, the cities (…) were in mourning and lamentation while the entire city was in black. Various shops and the bazar of the cities were closed from Friday morning, the cities had a sorrowful and mournful appearance. The start of the great processions and the groups of sinezan and zangiran assumed the shape of marches and demonstrations in the main streets of the cities and the assembly of mourners chanted slogans instead of reciting the Marsiye<sup>125</sup> and the Nowhe<sup>126</sup>. The bulk of the slogans were like always about the strengthening of the Islamic Republic, the support of the guide of the Revolution Imam Khomeini and against the imperialism of America<sup>127</sup>.

Moreover, the same newspaper article reported that during those days (i.e Tasu’a and ‘Ashura) many marchers and companies of sine-zan<sup>128</sup> and zangir-zan<sup>129</sup> passing by Taleqani Street shouted antagonist slogans while they were opposite the former American Embassy<sup>130</sup>. Moreover, many mourners wearing shrouds had written on their own chest: “I prefere death to disgrace” and “We have come for martyrdom”. Besides the traditional lamentation invoked by mourners “Ya Hoseyn, Ya Hoseyn” (“Oh Hoseyn, Oh Hoseyn”), many groups of girls and women wearing shrouds were also seen in the middle of the marches while chanting slogans: “Aircraft-carriers no longer have any affect, Carter is ignorant about the Jihad and the martyrdom”<sup>131</sup>. It is also interesting to mention the presence of Iranian Azeri (living in Tehran) during the demonstrations and chanting slogans in Turkish such as “We do not give our religion up if the world gets destroyed. We hold the Koran, but you hold cannons and tanks. The Pahlavi court must be annihilated at one stroke, must be annihilated” or “Lord of the time (…) made pleasant this religion today, today we carry on the court the Shah, we annihilate Carter today”<sup>132</sup>. Many soldiers also wore burial shrouds and some of them carried a placard on their hats on which was written “Moharram is the month of war to infidelity and of faith, the time of the death of America in Iran”. Other soldiers also carried a placard with the following content: “The army of the Islamic Republic has a great supreme leader whose name is Khomeini and consider (him) an hero of the nation”. They chanted slogans such as: “We are the army of the Revolution, we are ready to Jihad, we are the follower of Imam ‘Ali the guardian, Khomeini Ruhollah”. Moreover, in the demonstrations there were visible standards of cloth in Farsi

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<sup>125</sup> Elegy, funeral poem or song especially in Moharram.<br><sup>126</sup> Dirges.<br><sup>127</sup> Ettela’at, Newspaper, Tehran, 10<sup>th</sup> Azar 1358/1<sup>st</sup> December 1979.<br><sup>128</sup> The mourners who beat their chests.<br><sup>129</sup> The mourners who beat their shoulders and backs with the chains.<br><sup>130</sup> Ettela’at, Newspaper, Tehran, 10<sup>th</sup> Azar 1358/1<sup>st</sup> December 1979. United States were one of the main allies and supporters of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.<br><sup>131</sup> Ettela’at, Newspaper, Tehran, 10<sup>th</sup> Azar 1358/1<sup>st</sup> December 1979. Jimmy Carter was the then president of United States (r. 1977-1981).<br><sup>132</sup> Ettela’at, Newspaper, Tehran, 10<sup>th</sup> Azar 1358/1<sup>st</sup> December 1979.
and in English which read “Long live Khomeini, Death to Carter” and “We fast against the economical blockade” since ‘Ashura Day is considered to be a voluntary fasting day\textsuperscript{133}.

It is noteworthy to point out that in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, but also in the pre-revolutionary period, \textit{Moharram} rituals were not all politicized. In fact, those religious rituals which were sponsored by the state continued to be characterized by political content whereas those religious rituals sponsored by other organizations were “less focused upon issues related to the state, the revolution, imperialism, or the West”\textsuperscript{134}.

The extensive use of the “Karbala paradigm” has characterized the 1980s and 1990s during which “the shah, the United States, and Israel, and Iraq (and sometimes other nations) were equated with Yazid, and the Islamic revolution regime and its supporters with Hoseyn and his followers”\textsuperscript{135}. Particularly, the symbols and myth of Karbala were used in terms of jihad and martyrdom and to mobilize Iranians in the struggle against Iraq, which had recently invaded the country\textsuperscript{136}.

Every year, many sermons delivered during the ritual season aim to link the revolutionary message of Hoseyn to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and to encourage society to act in accordance with these ideals. Moreover, these sermons also have a social scope aimed at “encouraging family planning, discouraging drug use, mobilising the people for defense of the country, discouraging violations of hijab regulations” and encouraging people to participate in the electoral processes and any kind of activities which, according to the government, would have been accepted by Imam Hoseyn and approved of by Khomeini\textsuperscript{137}.

\section*{Associated Events}

\textit{Ta’zīye} and other \textit{Moharram} rituals

In post-revolutionary Iran, one of the most relevant and symbolic ceremonies politically utilised by the Islamic Republic in their pursuit of legitimization, mobilization of the masses, and performance of the power is the \textit{ta’zīye}. The \textit{ta’zīye} is a Shi'ite drama ritual acted out each year during the \textit{Moharram} commemorations and it represents a unique instance of drama in the Islamic world.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ettela’at}, Newspaper, Tehran, 10\textsuperscript{th} Azar 1358/1\textsuperscript{st} December 1979. According to some traditions, Prophet Muhammad found Jews fasting during his migration to Medina on the 10th of \textit{Moharram}. He asked why and he was answered that on that day Jewish people were delivered from slavery by God and led by Moses to modern Israel. Therefore, Moses fasted on that day as a sign of gratitude to God. Prophet Muhammad replied saying that he was worthier of Moses than them and he ordered Muslims to fast too on that day. Afterwards, the fast of ‘Ashura was abrogated and replaced with the month of Ramadan but it has remained a voluntary fasting day.

\textsuperscript{134} Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala}, 140.

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid.}, 132.

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Ibid.}, 133.

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ibid.}, 134-135.
The meaning of this Arabic word denotes an expression of sympathy and mourning\textsuperscript{138}. In fact, the plot of this play reproduces the dramatic and melancholic events which led Imam Hoseyn, along with seventy-two followers, amongst whom were Hoseyn’s relatives and companions, to be cruelly murdered by the ‘Umayyad caliph Yazid on the plain of Karbala.

History shows that \textit{Moharram} rituals and \textit{ta’ziye} performances have been used for many political purposes since the 16th century. Indeed, the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722) used Shi’ism, which had been established as the state religion, as a tool “to unify the country”\textsuperscript{139}. \textit{Moharram} rituals such as \textit{sine-zani} (beating one’s chest), \textit{zangir-zani} (beating oneself with chains), \textit{rowzeh khani} (reciting mourning sermons), \textit{qameh-zani} (cutting oneself with swords or knives) but also the practise of cursing enemies became official rituals of the empire\textsuperscript{140}.

The Qajar dynasty (1796-1925) also appropriated Shi’i religious symbolism as a means of establishing their own political legitimacy. Nevertheless, whereas the Safavids mostly fostered \textit{Moharram} processions, the Qajars also supported the \textit{ta’ziye}\textsuperscript{141}. In fact, under the long reign of the most important patron of this theatrical ritual, Naser al-Din Shah (1848-1896), an amphitheatre known as the \textit{Takyeh Dowlat} was built exclusively devoted to the performance of the \textit{ta’ziye}. Remarkably, even the architecture of this place had a subliminal political purpose. For instance, the structure of the \textit{Takyeh Dowlat} in Tehran was made up of three floors, with the top floor being reserved for the Shah, sat in a central position, and other social elites whose presence could contribute to reinforce the Shah’s legitimacy. However, the \textit{ta’ziye} performances did not only exist to praise the Shah and show his magnificence to local theatre-goers, but also a method of displaying his power to foreign diplomats who were regularly invited to attend the ceremonies. Thus, what is striking and innovative in the \textit{Moharram}’s performances in the Qajar period is the combination of veneration of Hoseyn and of his descendants along with praise of the Shah\textsuperscript{142}. At this stage, the \textit{ta’ziye} represented not only a mourning play capable of reinforcing “Shiite beliefs and piety”, but also a platform where power could be shown. However, it was only since the Constitutional Revolution period (1905-1911) that the practise of comparing present enemies with the ‘Umayyads in \textit{Moharram} sermons and rituals began.

During the Pahlavi period (1925-1979), the relationship between \textit{ta’ziye} plays (as the other


\textsuperscript{141} Kamran Scot Aghaie, \textit{The Martyrs of Karbala}, 16.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 27.
Moharram rituals), and the government dramatically changed. Western influences encouraged the government to strive for the country’s modernization and also to call previously held social values into questions. Religious rituals, considered reactionary for the modernization plan of the country, were not exception to this. Whereas Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941) opposed any Moharram rituals, his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979), exclusively banned the ta’ziye because he believed that the strength of its symbolic discourses and visual struggle against oppressors could promote disaffection towards the regime. In the 1960s-1970s, following the failure of the modernization reforms, Moharram rituals took a new direction and assumed an opposing function to the Shah’s regime. Ayatollah Khomeini was able to mobilize the masses through a clever use of Shi’i symbolism and rituals. In fact, the “Karbala paradigm” was not only a crucial vehicle for the building of religious (and political) legitimacy, but also a religious rhetoric used to make people aware of the necessity of gaining their redemption from their oppressor.

Celebrations around ‘Ashura played a crucial role in the mobilisation of the masses for the Pahlavi’s overthrow. It is at this stage, indeed, that political issues were strongly reflected in Moharram observances and that the self-identification of revolutionaries with the martyrdom of Hoseyn triggered the cult of the martyrdom among believers. During the Moharram commemorations of 1978 on the eve of the Iranian Revolution, the Shah and the USA were strongly equated to Yazid, whereas Khomeini and the revolutionaries were compared to Husein and his followers.

Moreover, the same comparison occurred during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) in which the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein’s military forces stand for Yazid’s army, whereas the Iranians at the frontline represented Imam Hoseyn’s followers willing to be “God’s witnesses”143. It is interesting to note how the Iran-Iraq conflict can be seen as a deadly and real ta’ziye performance. Exactly 1300 years after the events surrounding Imam Hoseyn, on an authentic stage not far from the Karbala plain, Imam Hoseyn /Ayatollah Khomeini encouraged his followers to seek justice against the tyrant Yazid/Saddam Hussein (the latter of whom, besides the United States and other Western countries, was backed by Sunni Arabic regimes). Along with the real geopolitical purpose, the war between these two countries may be considered as a showdown between Sunnis and Shi’ites powers begun fourteen centuries earlier. However, although the Iran-Iraq War was not a religious conflict, religious discourses were certainly used for mobilising people.

Another interesting aspect is that the symbolism embodied in ta’ziye performances would have been used on the occasion of the national referendum for adopting the Islamic Republic as the

143 The term Shahid, used to indicate a martyr, literally means “being witness”.
Iranian political system in April 1979. In fact, just as both actors and spectators of \( \text{ta'ziye} \) can witness the association of the colour green with Hoseyn and his followers, and the colour red with Shemr and his army, so too the voters would have noticed the green ballot to vote “Yes” for the Islamic Republic and the red ballot for “No”. Thus, it is possible that, opting for the Islamic Republic, voters were subconsciously called to choose if “fighting alongside the Imam Hussein” whereas not supporting the Islamic Republic it would sound like “fighting in the army of Shemr against Imam Hussein”\(^{144}\).

In this way, **Moharram** rituals have become an integral part of post-revolutionary Iran. Each year, television programs broadcast \( \text{ta'ziye} \) performances and interviews with commemorators and actors throughout the country. The Ministry of Culture and Religious Guidance and the Ministry of Pious Endowments began to sponsor religious rituals which are performed in cultural centres funded by the states, mosques, and hoseyniyehs (religious buildings where are mostly performed rituals connected to ‘Ashura) and consisting, in addition to \( \text{ta'ziye} \), also of rowzekhani rituals, sermons, and lectures since the establishment of the Islamic Republic\(^{145}\). In the evenings of the first ten days of **Moharram**, mourning rituals are organized at Khomeini’s shrine in southern Tehran by different hey’ats (religious organizations), and consisting in rowzeh sermons, processions, chants, but also speeches and sermons on behalf of Ayatollah Khomeini, “the martyrs of the revolution and the war, and other followers of Khomeini’s message”. In fact, Scot Aghaie states that “These rituals have had the effect of preserving Khomeini’s political message while at the same time allowing a means for believers to express their piety and devotion to the Shi’i imams”\(^{146}\).

Nevertheless, many **Moharram** rituals are also supported by religious organizations external to the state and free from political influence. In this regard, **Moharram** rituals not only serve as a tool for keeping the memory of Hoseyn and his message alive for those who are eager to get the spiritual salvation through his example but they also serve as a vehicle of socialisation and promotion of social and cultural ideals\(^{147}\). In fact, **Moharram** rituals and symbolism are crucial for connecting the state and social groups from all walks of life, though, in recent years they have become increasingly associated with more rural and traditional areas. However, **Moharram** rituals continue to be central to the governmental strategy of mobilization of the masses on behalf of the regime’s ideology and policies\(^{148}\). Nevertheless, in the Islamic Republic there has been a continuity from the Pahlavi period

\(^{144}\) Chelkowsky and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 75.


\(^{146}\) Ibid., 139.

\(^{147}\) Ibid., 146.

\(^{148}\) Ibid.
which can be shown in the 1994 law banning the practise of *game-zani* (self-flagellation). In this regard, the incumbent supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, stated that “this practice [*qameh zani*] is wrong…This is ignorance. These things are contrary to religion”\(^{149}\).

### ‘Ashura used by opponent groups

Power of ‘Ashura also derives from the combination of actual events with legends who stirred up great revolts against the corrupt ruler. In fact, *Moharram* commemorations have always acquired political significance whenever people were subjected to the despotism of the incumbent rulers, or any external enemy, who were associated to the enemies of Imam Hoseyn. ‘Ali Shariati’s slogan “Every day is ‘Ashura, everywhere is Karbala” was interiorised by people who started to link the tragedy of the martyrdom of Hoseyn in 680 with any forms of injustice, cruelty, and despotism in the present. However, forms of injustice and despotism were not limited to pre-revolutionary Iran, and many opposition groups under the present political system have also felt similar oppression. For instance, the Iranian Green Movement, a youthful social movement developed within Shia culture demanding reforms and freedom of expression, emerged during the post-election protests which lasted between 2009 and 2010 when large protests were organized on the days of national celebrations, like ‘Ashura Day, with the purpose of hijacking the official memory and linking the political message of the protesters with the symbolic narrative of the commemoration\(^{150}\).

In 2009, *Moharram* 10 fell on the 28\(^{th}\) December and the Green Movement saw the day of ‘Ashura as a fantastic opportunity to link the symbolic significance of the day against oppression with their demands for justice. During the protests, besides the re-adopted revolutionary slogans “*Allah-o Akbar*”, which was actually shouted in all post-election demonstrations, the famous phrase usually chanted on ‘Ashura Day embodying the sorrow and mourning of believers towards Imam Hoseyn “*Ya Hoseyn, Ya Hoseyn*” (Oh Hoseyn, Oh Hoseyn) was politicized and converted in “*Ya Hoseyn, Mir Hoseyn*”, a clear reference to Mir-Hoseyn Mousavi, the opposition leader and the Green

\(^{149}\) Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala*, 53.

\(^{150}\) On 12 June 2009, after that Iranian people were called to cast their ballot, the President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (r. 2005-2013) was reconfirmed the election winner with nearly 60 per cent. The reformist opposition candidates Mir-Hoseyn Mousavi (b.1941) and Mehdi Karroubi (b.1937) denounced irregularities and that the votes had been manipulated. Despite the official appeal against the result of the Guardian Council on 14 June and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s order of investigation about likely fraud, the elections were declared regular and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reconfirmed President of the Islamic Republic. Since the 13\(^{th}\) of June, millions of Mousavi’s supporters took to the streets for peaceful protests in many cities of the country but in the following days the violence grew and clashes broke out with police and *basij*, a paramilitary organization responding to the orders of the military corps the Guards of the Revolution (*Pasdaran*) provoking several deaths, injured, and arrested. Although the government prohibited any form of rallies across the country and slowed down the Internet access, protesters continued to take to the streets.
Moreover, the commemoration of ‘Ashura coincided with another crucial anniversary which enhanced the intensity of the remembrance and of the protest. In fact, the day of ‘Ashura marked the 7th day of the passing of Grand Ayatollah Hoseyn ‘Ali Montazeri (1922-2009), a controversial figure in the history of post-revolutionary Iran. Considered to be one of the most influential political figures in post-revolutionary Iran and, along with Ayatollah ‘Ali Sistani (b. 1930), the Grand Marja-e taqlid (source of emulation), the main religious authority of Shi’i Islam, Ayatollah Hoseyn ‘Ali Montazeri was designated by Ayatollah Khomeini as his successor in the role of supreme leader of the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, this appointment was revoked for his increasing criticism both of domestic and foreign policy and also his activism in human rights issues since the eighties. In 1997, following his criticism of the authority of the supreme leader ‘Ali Khamenei, he was put under house arrest until 2003. In 2007, he openly criticised the economical policy of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and in June 2009 he spoke out against the President’s controversial re-election, showing his support for the reformist and democratic groups. Tehran Bureau, an independent news organization on Iran and the Iranian diaspora hosted by the British newspaper The Guardian, reported his statement rejecting the outcome of the election:

Over the last several days I have been witnessing the glowing presence and the lively and sacrificial efforts of my dear and dignified sisters and brothers, old and young, in the campaign for the 10th presidential election. Our youth also demonstrated their presence on the political scene with hope and good spirit, in order to achieve their rightful demands. They waited patiently night and day. This was an excellent occasion for government officials to take advantage of and establish religious, emotional and nationalistic bonds with our youth and the rest of our people.

Unfortunately, however, this opportunity was wasted in the worst possible way. Such election results were declared that no wise person in their right mind could believe, results that based on credible evidence and witnesses had been altered extensively, and after strong protests by the people against such acts -- the same people who have carried the heavy weight and burden of the Revolution during eight years of war and resisted the tanks of the imperial government [of the Shah] and those of the enemy [Iraq] -- they attacked the children of the same people and nation right in front of national and foreign reporters, and used astonishing violence against defenseless men and women and the dear [university] students, injuring and arresting them. And now they are trying to purge activists, intellectuals, and political opponents by arresting a large number of them, some of whom have even held high positions in the government of the Islamic Republic.152

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In this regard, it is clear that Ayatollah Montazeri was considered the spiritual father of the Green Movement for many demonstrators, though they did not refer to any particular individuals or groups. His death also contributed to recall the memory of his criticism of the Iranian government, to boost the growth of protests against the government who many still saw as an illegal regime, and helped to spread the demonstrations to other cities.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the memory of the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn in Karbala occurred in 680 CE has been shaped, re-interpreted and used according to the political and social development and ambitions of present Iran. In fact, the Islamic Republic’s government has been able to use *Moharram* rituals and symbolism in order to foster and solidify the state’s legitimacy and articulate its policy combining the remembrance of Imam Hoseyn (embodying the image of a valorous hero who strove and sacrificed himself for the defence of the faith and social justice) with the remembrance and strengthening of the Islamic Revolutionary’s ideals which includes the struggle and sacrifice of people on behalf of the defense of the country, the Shiite faith, and the Islamic political system. This shows that the memory of the past is moulded and influenced by the occurrences of the present.

It has to be borne in mind again that according to Shiites the death of Hoseyn symbolizes all human tragedies and whenever they are subjected to an injustice or a tragedy, the memory and the example of the third Imam is contextualised. Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers have been able to build a society mostly with a common thought of the past and of the present based on these values and symbols.

Lastly, in my opinion, the resounding success of Ayatollah Khomeini in establishing an official memory surrounding the events of Karbala (in line with present events) and in instilling a sense of redemption against injustice among Iranian people meant that in certain circumstances, Iranian opposition groups have been able to appropriate these ideas in order to counter and delegitimise the Iranian government who had previously made use of these same ideas.
Chapter Four

The Month of Ramadan

The month of Ramadan is that in which was revealed the Quran; a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance, and the criterion [of right and wrong]

(Quran, Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayeh 185)

In this section I will deal with one of the most important rituals in the Muslim world which drastically affects the lifestyle of all people in Iran today: the month of Ramadan. The full month of Ramadan is not a public holiday in Iran, with the exception of its last day, ‘Eid-e Fetr. However, within this month there are some important religious anniversaries which enhance the spiritual atmosphere. Apparently, this holy month, which is mostly known in Iran by the term Ramezan, would not seem to be utilized politically. On the other hand, several aspects may demonstrate how, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian government has found in Ramadan a further ideological tool to strengthen its theocratic system.

Official State Narrative

Ramadan is the ninth month according to the Islamic lunar calendar in which more than a billion of Muslims all around the world are obliged to fast (sawm) from dawn to sunset. However, the obligation to fast may be skipped by people who are undergoing a disease, children, pregnant women, old people, those travelling for more than 45 kilometres and other circumstances. The name of this month, which is the only one mentioned in the Quran, comes from the Arabic root r-m-d “which refers to the heat of summer”\textsuperscript{153}. The month of Ramadan lasts 29-30 days depending on the lunar observation as it is stated in several hadiths, or sayings of the Prophet. Fasting is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and the number of prayers (salat) and recitations of the Quran, and the endowing of alms (zakat) usually peaks during this annual observance. Hence, Muslims should refrain from doing anything which may invalidate their fasting such as eating, drinking liquids, smoking, having sexual relations, and by assuming a simple behaviour through self-discipline.

Allegedly, the month of Ramadan is not only the month of fasting but also the month in which the Quran was revealed by the angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632). Although this event, known as the *Laylat al-Qadr* or the Night of Power, is alleged to have occurred on the 27th of the month, this date is not certain and the bulk of believers celebrate it “all the odd nights of the last ten days” of this month. The Night of Power is considered to be the most sacred night of the year by Muslims because of the belief that God forgives all sins during this night. In this regard, it is worthwhile to mention a connection between the clemency of God and the clemency commonly performed in the Islamic Republic of Iran during this month. In fact, every year during the month of Ramadan, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic grants amnesty for hundreds of prisoners convicted of different crimes, with the exception of “armed struggle against the country, armed or organized drug trafficking, rape, armed robbery, arms smuggling, abduction, bribery and embezzlement”.

Besides the Night of Power, many occurrences happened within the month of Ramadan which are commemorated in present day Iran. For instance, the birthday of Imam Hoseyn (626-680) is celebrated on the 6th; the day of the death of Khadija (d. 620), the first wife of Prophet Muhammad, is commemorated on the 10th; the Battle of Badr (624), the decisive battle between the Muslim of Medina led by Muhammad and the Quraish of Mecca which occurred in the early years of Islam, on the 17th; the day of the death of Imam ‘Ali (d. 661) is mourned on the 21st.

During Ramadan, the pattern of life of Muslim Iranians, and not-Muslims, drastically changes. Religious people usually go to the mosque or stay at home to pray. Meanwhile, people who refuse to fast must also abstain from eating, drinking, or smoking in public in order to avoid detention. Police patrol the main streets and highways of cities daily and check whether anybody is breaking or not respecting the fasting. All the restaurants and *sofre-khanes* (traditional tea rooms) are closed during the fasting hours, but many bakeries and groceries are opened for those who are not able to fast. During this month many Iranians do charitable works. The government and relief organizations also take some measures like distributing food to poor families and the unemployed for making their fasting easier. Reciting the Quran and deliberating its verses are essential parts of Ramadan prayers. Indeed, many Muslims in Iran during Ramadan read the Quran more often and deeply, even trying to recite it entirely.

As mentioned, the last day of Ramadan is ‘*Eid-e Fetr* which is a public holiday in Iran. Nevertheless, in comparison with other Muslim countries which considers the end of Ramadan one

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155 See: http://en.trend.az/iran/2297926.html
of the most important festivals of the year and lasts from three to ten days, in Iran ‘Eid-e Fetr’ is a national holiday lasting from one to two days. During ‘Eid-e Fetr’, people go to mosque for the ‘Eid’ sermon and the congregational prayer, and the rest of the day is characterized by celebrations, socializing, meals, and gift-giving.

The Politics of the Commemoration

The politicization of Ramadan in post-revolutionary Iran is mostly remarkable in some of its associated events (see next sections). However, as for many other events, both in the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods, sermons and declarations delivered by many religious and political figures (in most of the cases there are not major differences between the two spheres) during this month represent one of the main political tools used with the purpose of criticising the incumbent government, and dealing with domestic and international issues.

For instance, Ayatollah Khomeini delivered a message from Najaf, in Iraq, on the occasion of ‘Eid-e Fetr’, the end of Ramadan, on September 6, 1978, another day in which there were massive demonstrations organized in Iran “demanding the ousting of Shah Pahlavi and the installation of an Islamic government”:

This year’s ‘Id al-Fitr has been an epic celebration of heroism for all segments of our population. It was a day that demonstrated to the whole world the intellectual and practical maturity of our people, and declared with the utmost clarity that the wish of the entire nation is for the Shah to leave, and for his regime of oppression and exploitation of our Muslim people to be abolished156

After congratulating “the courageous Muslim people of Iran”, he recalled the socio-political situation of the country stating that the past month of Ramadan saw the ferocity of the Pahlavi’s government and that it was a month of sacrifice for the sake of God157. Then, he made a link between the religious duties of month with the political duties of the present:

After performing the ‘Id prayer, the Muslim people of Iran performed another valuable act of worship by uttering thundering cries of protest against this tyrannical bandit regime and demanding a government of divine justice. To struggle for the sake of these goals is one of the greatest forms of worship, and to make sacrifices for them is in conformity with the customs of the prophets, particularly the Most Noble Messenger of Islam and his great successor, the Commander of the Faithful158.

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156 Ruhollah Khomeini, “Declaration on the occasion of ‘Id al-Fitr” in Islam and Revolution, 233-236
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
Yet, the message presents a section in which Ayatollah Khomeini, stressing the emotional feelings that the holy month of Ramadan may bestow to believers, seeks to mobilise people and encourage them to continue the struggle against the Shah:

Noble people of Iran! Press forward with your movement and do not slacken for a minute, as I know full well you will not! Be certain that, God willing, victory and triumph are near. Let no one imagine that after the blessed month of Ramadan, his God-given duties have changed. These demonstrations that break down tyranny and advance the goals of Islam are a form of worship that is not confined to only certain months or days, for the aim is to save the nation, to enact Islamic justice, and to establish a divine government on the firm basis of justice. At every available opportunity and on every occasion, organize meetings in mosques and public places on an even wider scale than before, and defend the Qur’an and Islamic justice

‘Eid-e Fe-tr’s messages have also been used at other times, once the Islamic Republic fully established itself and had an opportunity to reflect on certain international issues. For instance, during the ‘Eid-e Fe-tr’s sermon on June 29, 2014, the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei (b. 1939), after congratulating believers for the end of Ramadan, devoted his speech to the situation of Palestinians in Gaza, stating that this struggle represents “the first issue of the Islamic world and of the world of humanity” and that “[The presence of] the wolf-predators called Zionist regime in Gaza is catastrophic and humanity must react to the crimes of this bloodthirsty regime of infidels”

‘Eid-e Fe-tr is sometimes an opportunity for Shiites to stress their differences with Sunnis. In fact, while in the Sunni world the end of Ramadan is marked by the viewing of the new crescent moon in the sky, Shiites usually refer to astronomical calculations. For this reason, the day of ‘Eid-e Fe-tr in Iran is, in most cases, different from that of other countries, not only for referring to the solar calendar, but also because according to Shiites, there is no need to view the new moon for marking the end of the holy month of fasting, triggering controversy in the Sunni world which accuses Shiites of alienating themselves from the rest of the Muslim world.

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159 Ruhollah Khomeini, “Declaration on the occasion of ‘Id al-Fitr” in Islam and Revolution, 233-236
Associated Events

Qods Day

Qods Day, or International Jerusalem Day, was inaugurated by the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 with the purpose of expressing solidarity to Palestinian people, opposing Zionism, and denouncing the occupation of Jerusalem and Palestine by Israel. It is celebrated every year on the last Friday of Ramadan in Iran and in other Arab and Muslim countries. However, in recent years, rallies and demonstrations were organized in support of Palestinians on this day in other countries such as the UK, Germany, Sweden, South Africa, and others. The Iranian government sponsors the organization of rallies and parades in Iran and some Iranian leaders deliver speeches that condemn Israel and US. What is politically crucial on this day is that “Any politician who hopes to establish their credentials has to be seen and hope to be heard delivering a tirade against Israel.” In fact, Qods Day is an event in which Iranian politicians must participate since “It confirms their loyalties and reiterates their identification with what has become an unshakable tenet of Iran's foreign policy.”

Ordinary people participating in the rally usually shout slogans such as “Death to Israel” and “Death to America”.

On August 7, 1979, on the last Friday of Ramadan, Ayatollah Khomeini delivered a speech stressing the religious duty of all Muslims to support the Palestinian cause and the liberation of Jerusalem:

I invite Muslims all over the globe to consecrate the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan as ‘Quds Day’ and to proclaim the international solidarity of Muslims in support of the legitimate rights of the Muslim people of Palestine. For many years, I have been notifying the Muslims of the danger posed by the usurper Israel which today has intensified its savage attacks against the Palestinian brothers and sisters, and which, in the south of Lebanon in particular, is continually bombing Palestinian homes in the hope of crushing the Palestinian struggle. I ask all the Muslims of the world and the Muslim governments to join together to sever the hand of this usurper and its supporters. I call on all the Muslims of the world to select as Quds Day the last Friday in the holy month of Ramadan - which is itself a determining period and can also be the determiner of the Palestinian people’s fate - and through a ceremony demonstrating the solidarity of Muslims world-wide, announce their support for the legitimate rights of the Muslim people. I ask God Almighty for the victory of the Muslims over the infidels.

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161 Nationalist and political movement of Jews that has supported the re-establishment of a Jewish State in the Holy Land.
163 Ibid.
Originally, indeed, the idea of establishing a day devoted to the support of Palestinian people and to condemn Israeli Zionism was not conceived by Khomeini but by Ebrahim Yazdi (b. 1931), Foreign Minister during the interim government of Mehdi Bazargan (r. February 1979 – November 1979). In fact, he himself proposed the celebration of *Qods Day* to Ayatollah Khomeini, who strongly supported his suggestion.

Throughout the three decades of celebration of *Qods Day* in Iran, the narrative of this event has always stressed the illegitimacy of the Israeli state and on the crimes the Iranian government claims that have been perpetrated against Palestinian people on Palestinian land. During Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s two presidential terms (r. 2005-2013), the denial of Holocaust was an additional narrative that was also inserted\(^\text{165}\). However, it is noteworthy to point out that although the narrative of this event has always concerned the suffering and the injustices experienced by Palestinians, “Jerusalem Day has turned into an occasion that says more about the political mood in Iran than the Palestinians' own situation”\(^\text{166}\).

**Qods Day used by opposition groups**

Although in the first two decades of the existence of the Islamic Republic millions of young Iranians usually took part in the rallies in various Iranian cities, in the last ten years the figure of people under thirty years old participating in this event has dramatically decreased. In fact, during many rallies since 2003 held at Tehran University calling for a more democratic system, many students declared that “the Arab-Israeli dispute is ‘nothing to do with us’” and that the government should “forget about Palestine [and] think of us”\(^\text{167}\).

During the post-election protests in 2009, the Green Movement also used this day to exploit the official rally for protesting the re-election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Although the government tried to prohibit the exploitation of this pro-Palestinian day as a pretext for demonstrations, many protestors took to the streets and banners appeared in Tehran with pictures of Mousavi and the slogans “Qods Day, Green Day”. During this day, many mass media outlets reported the recitation of revolutionary chants in central Tehran such as “Death to Dictator” and the slogan “Neither Gaza, nor

\(^{165}\) The Holocaust, also known as Shoah, was a genocide of Jewish people perpetrated in Germany and their occupied territories by Nazi Germany and their allies between 1941-1945. Its denial, supported by many states and scholars, is based on the following thesis: Nazi Germany intended only to deport Jewish people and not to exterminated them; concentration camps and gas chambers were not used to kill people the figure of Jewish killed was much lower than the official number (5 to 6 million). According to Holocaust revisionists, the Holocaust would have been a pretext to foster the interests of Jewish people like the foundation of the state of Israel.


\(^{167}\) Howard Roger, *Iran in Crisis?*, 49.
Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran”, alluding to the economical and military support that the Iranian government supplies to Hamas (Palestinian Islamic organization with a military wing) and Hezbollah (Shiite military group and political party) respectively in Palestine and Lebanon\(^{168}\). Moreover, when people participating in the officially and permitted rally shouted “Death to Israel”, protesters in their counter-rally responded with “Death to Russia” because of Russia’s prompt acceptance of the electoral outcome\(^{169}\). In fact, Russia was the first country to acknowledge the legitimacy of the electoral outcome and for this reason many anti-Russian slogans were shouted during various demonstrations throughout 2009 and 2010. Furthermore, while during the official rally the marchers shouted “The blood in our veins is a gift to our leader,” protesters responded with “The blood in our veins is a gift to our nation”\(^{170}\).

Hashemi Rafsanjani (b. 1934), president of Iran between 1989 and 1997, normally used to lead the Friday prayer on Qods Day, but he was replaced by Ayatollah Seyyed Ahmad Khatami (b. 1960), a conservative cleric very close to Ahmadinejad and member of the Assembly of Experts, a council in charge of electing and dismissing the supreme leader\(^{171}\). In fact, videos and pictures circulated on the Internet showed Rafsanjani among the protestors, as well as the reformist candidate Mousavi, the former president Muhammad Khatami (r. 1997-2005), and the other reformist opposition candidate Mehdi Karroubi (b. 1937). Nevertheless, referring to the current situation, Ayatollah Seyyed Ahmad Khatami declared in his sermons:

No one doubts that unity is an absolute necessity for our Islamic country and that discord and lack of unity will only lead to destruction. The Islamic establishment is not opposed to the expression of different opinions and in the Islamic system difference of opinion is not a crime\(^{172}\).

On the other hand, Ahmadinejad simply ignored the protests related to the disputed election and giving a pre-sermon speech at Tehran University he stated:

Criminal Zionists usurped Palestinian land with the help of the British. The pretext (Holocaust) for the creation of the Zionist regime (Israel) is false ... It is a lie based on an unprovable and mythical claim\(^{173}\).
International Quranic Exhibition during Ramadan

During the month of Ramadan, the Islamic Republic of Iran holds several Quranic exhibitions in different cities across the country, but the most important is the International Quranic Exhibition hosted in Tehran which I am going to examine below. The reason why many events related to the Quran are organized during the month of Ramadan is due to the fact that, as I have mentioned earlier, the holy book was allegedly revealed in this month.

Before and during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini played a crucial role in spreading a Quranic culture among demonstrators in order to show the “immorality” of Shah Pahlavi and his government. In the aftermath of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini has built an Islamic government based upon the tenets of Quran which, according to Muslims, provides guidelines on every aspect of human life as, for instance, how to dress properly. In this regard, the hejab, a common name to indicate the Islamic veil, has turned out to be a delicate issue and a strong symbol of power and control in contemporary Iran after the veiling of hair became compulsory in public for all women with the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

The International Quranic Exhibition takes place every year since 1992 where many experts show the role of the Quran in building an Islamic lifestyle. The inauguration ceremony is usually attended by some political figures such as the President of the Republic and the Minister of Culture and many figures who are considered as contributors in spreading the values of the Quran such as reciters, memorizers, artists presenting their Quranic artworks, and researchers, not only from Iran, but also other countries. Each year, the exhibition is characterized by a particular topic which is linked to one aspect of the holy book. For instance, the 21st Exhibition, which occurred between July and August 2013, was focused on “The Quranic Way of Life”. Anticipating the beginning of the exhibition the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei stated on the first day of Ramadan in 2013 the following words:

Quranic guidance and an Islamic lifestyle should be dominant in an Islamic society… The Western culture does not constitute a model or [good] reason to follow, in an Islamic society. 174

During the inauguration speech of this edition, a deputy Minister of Culture responsible for Quranic affairs, Hamid Mohammadi, stated that continuous efforts should be made to make Quran part of the culture in order to base people’s lives on the Holy book175. During the same ceremony, the outgoing President of the Republic, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was honoured by Mohammadi for his aid in

174 “Ramadan and Quranic Exhibition in Iran “, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8YkJvmiTBI
175 Ibid.
funding Quranic researches and events despite the economical crisis throughout the country. Ahmadinejad stressed the importance of the Quran in the elaboration of a way of life, stating that the Quran is the book of mankind’s movements from earth to God which aims at realizing all the capabilities of mankind, and that “without the book, without the law, without the plans, it is impossible for mankind to reach his peak”\(^{176}\). Abolfazl Sajedi, an Islamic expert, during an interview in a television programme concerning Ramadan and Quranic exhibitions in Iran broadcasted by the English language channel *Press TV* was reported saying the following words:

> One basic institution that can guide society, guide people that can train positively or negatively people is the government, is the politics, is the mass media. So, we see that after revolution because of Islamic revolution we see that there are various kind of activities that has been done in Iran, in TV, in the radio\(^{177}\).

Inside the exhibition pavilions of the 21\(^{st}\) edition, many Quranic works and products were shown to visitors in different sections such as the Digital Media Section (among which was displayed software which looks like videogames for children containing information about the lives of the twelve Imams, Mecca, the Quran, etc.), the Consultation Section (where visitors were able to ask questions to religious experts in relation to the Quran), the Quranic Lifestyle section, and the “Honouring *Hejab* section” where they were presented the latest models of chadors.

One part of the exposition was devoted to the “Islamic Awakening section”, the official Iranian government interpretation of the revolutions, known in the West as the Arab Spring, which broke out in many Arab countries since December 2010. In fact, one full section of the 21\(^{st}\) International Quranic Exhibition was entirely devoted to those countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain, whose revolutionaries, according to the official view of the Iranian government, “have fought for freedom and democracy inspired by the tenets of the Quran” and are Muslims who desire to emulate Iran’s Islamic Revolution accomplished in 1979\(^{178}\). It is interesting to notice how Bashar Al-Assad's Syria, the main ally of Iran in the Middle East, is not included in the list of countries experiencing Arab revolutions, but amongst those Muslim countries such Iraq and Pakistan which are experiencing violence by terrorist groups.

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\(^{176}\) “Ramadan and Quranic Exhibition in Iran”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8YkJvmiTBI

\(^{177}\) Ibid.

\(^{178}\) Ibid.
Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the festival of Ramadan is another instance of celebration politically used by Iranian authorities in post-revolutionary Iran in order to recall the established Islamic collective memory. In fact, through the performance of its rituals and associated events, the month of Ramadan is an opportunity for authorities to remind Iranian people that their post-revolutionary society is strictly based on Islamic law, as the political system implemented after the 1979 Revolution has been a theocracy based on Islam. Moreover, due to the fact that the Quran was allegedly revealed during this month and that Ayatollah Khomeini spread a Quranic culture in order to build an Islamic society and undermine opponents, many political speeches and sermons dealing with domestic and international issues, which occur during this month, usually make references to the tenets and duties connected to the month of Ramadan.

Lastly, many concurrent events such as Qods Day and the International Quranic Exhibition have been inserted into this month not only to strengthen the remembrance of a religious duty but also in order to link the spiritual and cultural spirit of this celebration with contemporary political issues so that the legitimacy of the political system is enhanced and political power is manifested.
Chapter Five

Nowruz or The Persian New Year

Islam, which cleansed the colors of nationality and revolutionized traditions, gave Nowruz a shinier polish, made it firm, and, bestowing it with a strong protective covering, saved it from decadence in the time that Iranians became Muslims (‘Ali Shariati).\(^\text{179}\)

Official State Narrative

Nowruz is the annual celebration marking the New Year in the Persian world and an example of non-Islamic festivities maintained in the national calendar of celebrations of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The term Nowruz is indeed combined by two words: now meaning new, and, ruz meaning day. So, the “New Day”.

The Persian New Year is the most important ritual celebrated by all Persian people despite their religion or ethnic group, for over three thousands years. In fact, although it is a festival rooted in the Zoroastrian tradition, Persians of other religious beliefs such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Baha’ism, or merely atheists consider Nowruz the most important holiday of the year.

In Iran, on the first day of Nowruz, families usually gather around the Haft Sin table. The haft sin are seven items which start with an S in the Persian language symbolising the hopes for a successful and happy new year such as Senjed: dried fruit which symbolises love; Sir: garlic symbolising protection from illness and evil; Serkeh: vinegar symbolising patience and longevity; Sonbol: hyacinth flowers symbolising blossoming spring; Sekkeh: coins symbolising prosperity; Sabzeh: green wheat sprouts symbolising abundance; Samanu: sweet pudding symbolising sweetness of life; Somaq: Sumac berries symbolising a new dawn; and Sib: apples symbolising health and beauty. Traditionally, people may put on the table the Shahname of Ferdowsi (The Book of Kings) or collection of poems (Divan) of other great Persian poets. However, many families place the Koran on the Hafte Sin table. Over the twelve days of Nowruz, people usually visit relatives and friends, organize large parties, and share pastries, cookies, nuts, fruit and tea. On the thirteenth day, or Nature Day (Sizdah Bedar), people enjoy the beauty of the spring with a picnic in the countryside.

The festival of Nowruz is preceded by Chaharshanbe Suri (Wednesday Fire)\(^\text{180}\), which occurs


\(^{180}\)
on the night before the last Wednesday of the year. Unlike the festival of Nowruz, which is basically an indoor festivity celebrated in private among relatives for 13 days, Chaharshanbe Suri is an outdoor festival celebrated in public where people eat, dance, and talk. Culturally, it is an ancient Persian fire festivity which introduces the awakening of nature on the eve of the spring equinox. Fire is one of the four sacred elements for Zoroastrian and ancient Persians and it is supposed to transmit to people energy and warmth for the coming new year and draw away all the problems and sicknesses of the year ending. From sunset of this day, people light bonfires on the street and jump over them by pronouncing the traditional phrase “Give me your fiery red colour and take back my wintry sallowness”\(^{181}\).

This celebration has acquired a new significance for opposition groups and it has become a further opportunity to perform anti-government demonstrations in recent years. Fire is now a symbol of the anger “over the Islamic Republic’s restriction”\(^{182}\). On 18 March 2010, the last Wednesday of 1387 according to the Iranian solar calendar, this festivity again became a chance for protestors to use a cultural tradition in order to promote the struggle against the government. The opposition leader Mir-Hoseyn Mousavi showed his support for this festival seen as a “feast of light against darkness”. On the other hand, Zahra Rahnavard, Mousavi’s wife, urged people to cherish the memory of those killed during post-election protests and to avoid violence, though it was later reported that violent clashes occurred between protestors and police and many Molotov cocktails had been thrown in the streets of Tehran and other cities\(^{183}\).

### The Politics of the Commemoration

The only moment where the political use of Nowruz was remarkable before the Islamic Revolution was when Ayatollah Khomeini urged people to boycott the Iranian New Year’s celebrations of March 1963 as a form of protest against the Shah’s policies, reflected in the White Revolution of the same year\(^{184}\). In fact, until 1979, Nowruz was not seen as a “politically imposed celebration” but a universal festival where human beings rediscover nature\(^{185}\). ‘Ali Shariati (1933-1977), one of the main ideologues of the Islamic Revolution, wrote an article describing this festival not only as an

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\(^{182}\) Ibid.


\(^{184}\) See footnote number 113 in chapter III.

opportunity to rest but also “a vital food for a nation”. He makes a detailed discussion about the story and the myth of this festival since ancient Persia, and how this festival, rooted in the Zoroastrian tradition, has been accepted and integrated by Muslims, and above all, Shiite Muslims. It is arguable that the festival of Nowruz became a strong political opportunity just after the Islamic Revolution, when the established Islamic Republic had to manage their position vis-à-vis non-Islamic festivities. In fact, after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the government was inclined to start a policy of suppression of pre-Islamic festivals and rituals such as Nowruz, including Chaharshanbe Suri. In the latter case, for instance, many ayatollahs were afraid that “people might worship the sun as an idol during the festival instead of Allah”. However, the main reason may be connected to the desire to establish a full Islamic society. During the first and second decade of the Islamic Republic, the government censored many of these festivities and rituals since the act of dancing in public and the meeting between boys and girls was considered “deviant behaviour” and thus, forbidden. As Kourosh Zaeim, the spokesman of the old opposition party Iran National Front, stated, the Islamic Republic sought to prohibit all Iranian rituals even attempting to replace Nowruz with ‘Eid-e Fetr’. Zaeim tries to explain this matter with the words as follows:

It was obvious that they were extremely ideologist [after the revolution]. They did not consider themselves Iranians and sought customs of another culture. [However], “Today, after three decades of resistance by Iranians, the Islamic Republic has stopped explicit opposition against Iranian rituals, but still makes excuses to prevent cultural happiness.

For instance, every year many warnings are issued by officials stating that the use of fireworks may be dangerous but also that serious legal action will be taken against those “who disturb people’s comfort”. In 2011, Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, a Shia Iranian marja’, issued a fatwa concerning Chaharshanbe Suri: “Chaharshanbe Suri is a superstitious tradition. We should not revive a superstitious tradition.” Likewise, the Grand Ayatollah Nouri Hamedani stated in 2010: “Chaharshanbe Suri is an example of superstition and what people do in this day disturbs public comfort and, therefore, [attending it] is haram.”

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189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
191 Marja’ literally means “source of imitation”, that is, “religious reference”.
193 Ibid.
Likewise, the Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami stated:

Enemies try to show that national symbols outweigh religious expressions, in an attempt to weaken religion in society. They highlight Chaharshanbe Suri, Nowruz, etc. to achieve this goal.194

On the other hand, Mohsen Kadivar, a religious dissident, argued that rituals such as those of Chaharshanbe Suri had another meaning in ancient times while nowadays, the act of jumping over fire has acquired the aspect of merely a cultural and leisure activity and for this reason it cannot be considered religiously haram.195

It is clear that one of the likely reasons in opposing Chaharshanbe Suri, or generally Nowruz, by the hardliners is settled in the ideology of the Islamic Republic and constant attempts to establish an Islamic memory. Indeed, since those festivities belong to the Zoroastrian tradition, the Islamic Republic of Iran focus its identity on its Islamic and Shiite tradition and then in everything related to Iran of the post-Zoroastrian era. Nevertheless, despite the multitude of warnings and prohibitions against celebrating Nowruz by officials, there has been noticed a boost in the attendance of this ritual in the post-revolutionary period. This trend can be explained by the fact that there is a kind of silent war between the religious sphere and the public sphere which increases whenever the clerics oppose pre-Islamic rituals, which then become a form of resistance for the Iranian people.196 The situation became less strict when the reformist Muhammad Khatami became the Islamic Republic President for two terms (1997-2005). His office, indeed, was characterized by the softening of social and cultural restrictions and the reduction of pressure on society, including the opportunity for people to perform celebrations related to the ancient Persian culture publicly.

Due to the fact that the officials of the Islamic Republic have become aware that it was overly presumptuous and unattainable to eliminate more than two thousand years of Persian traditions, they started to opt towards giving “an Islamic and revolutionary flavour to these observances”.197 One of the narratives adopted by Islamic Republic ideologues for the Islamicization of Nowruz deals with a statement that the sixth Shiite Imam Ja’far Sadeq allegedly made on the occasion of the spring equinox referring to past events which occurred on this day:

195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
197 Chelkowski and Dabashi, Staging a Revolution, 130.
The sun attained its brightness, the wind started to blow, the Ark of Prophet Noah stopped near Mount Joudi and was saved from drowning, Prophet Abraham broke the idols of his community, Archangel Gabriel brought the first revelation to our Prophet (Muhammad -SAWA), the Prophet lifted Imam Ali (AS) on his shoulders so that he could topple the idols from the Ka’ba, and the Prophet announced Imam Ali (AS) as his successor at Ghadir-e Khom.198

In fact, as this passage reports, it is interesting how Shiite Muslims strongly believe that the day of Nowruz both coincided with when the Prophet Muhammad nominated ‘Ali as his successor at Ghadir Khumm (632) and when the same ‘Ali (559-661) was nominated the fourth and last Caliph after the killing of the third Rightly-Guided caliph ‘Uthman (d. 656). The story of Ghadir Khumm, a pond between Mecca and Medina, is the most important event which Shiite beliefs are grounded. In fact, according to Shi’ism, ‘Ali was nominated by the Prophet Muhammad as his successor and the first Imam, while Sunnis denied that the Prophet Muhammad pronounced these words. Thus, stressing the coincidence of the day of Nowruz with important events for Shiite Muslims, it is claimed that the ancient Iranian people, after preserving the tradition of this day since the days of Cyrus the Great, have transmitted the significance of Nowruz to Islam. According to an editorial published in the Iranian newspaper Kayhan, Nowruz started to be calculated “by early Muslim scientists and astronomers from the 1st of Rabi al-Awwal (first day of spring), the day on whose eve the Almighty’s Last and Greatest Messenger, Prophet Muhammad (SAWA), left his hometown Mecca for Medina by instructing his cousin, Imam Ali (AS), to sleep on his bed, so that he could migrate undetected from the prying eyes of the pagan Arabs hovering around the abode of divine revelation”199. What is interesting is the fact that, as proof of the theoretical Islamization of the festivity, this editorial notes that many Muslim people fast on Nowruz, as they do for the month of Ramadan and other commemorations as a form of thanksgiving to God, neglecting the fact that Nowruz is a festival during which people spend much of their time eating and drinking. The last, but not the least important narrative built by Shiite Muslims, is that, according to some eschatological narrations, it is believed that the twelfth hidden Shiite Imam Mahdi, will reappear on Nowruz “to fulfil the prophecy of establishment of the global government of peace, prosperity, and justice”200.

Throughout the decades of the existence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it has become common both for the supreme leader and the Republic’s presidents to deliver speeches of congratulation to the nation. At the same time, it is interesting to see how these speeches set the political agenda for the country for the coming year by associating the year with a specific issue. For

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198 Kayhan International; March 19, 2015.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
example, on the occasion of Nowruz 1392 (solar hejri) [2013 CE], the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei stated that the coming year would be dubbed as “the year of politic and economic epic” (alluding to the solution of the nuclear issue with western countries and to the economic sanctions), while the previous years had been named “the year of domestic production” and “the year of economic jihad”\textsuperscript{201}.

For Nowruz 1394 (solar hejri) [2015 CE], Ayatollah Khamenei has given the name to the starting year as “the year of the government and of the nation, sympathy and compassion” whereas President Hasan Rouhani’s message argued that the objective of the new year is the prosperity and stability of the country, the increase of non-oil exports, and the creation of new opportunities of employment, especially for young people, academics and university graduates\textsuperscript{202}.

### Associated Events

**Islamic Republic Day**

Many pre-Islamic festivities were given an Islamic and revolutionary meaning in order to be included in the national calendar of the Islamic Republic. In the meantime, other relevant events had to be associated with Nowruz, both to add a sense of legitimacy and sacredness to the national holiday, as well as to belittle the importance of pre-Islamic festivities. For instance, within Iranian New Year’s holiday, Iran celebrates “the Day of the Islamic Republic” on the 1\textsuperscript{st} of April, a day earlier than Nature Day (Sizdah Bedar), the last day of the holiday of Nowruz. In fact, after declaring invalid the constitution promulgated in 1906 during the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) which was still in use until the 1979 Revolution, on the 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} of the month of Farvardin 1358 (solar hejri) (30\textsuperscript{th} and 31\textsuperscript{st} March 1979 CE) the people of Iran were called to cast their votes in the national referendum for choosing “Yes or No” to the establishment of the Islamic Republic. On the 12\textsuperscript{th} of Farvardin (1\textsuperscript{st} April) the results showed the overwhelming victory of the Islamic Republic with around 98.2\% of votes\textsuperscript{203}. Since then, Iran yearly celebrates Islamic Republic Day on this day, with rallies and various educational activities for young people about the history and culture of the country.


\textsuperscript{202} “Rahbar-e Iran dar payam-e nowruz khabar ‘hamdeli va hamzabani’ dowlat o mellat shod”, \textit{BBC Farsi}, accessed March 21, 2015 / Farvardin 1, 1394,

http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2015/03/150320_u14_iran_leaders_norouz_message

\textsuperscript{203} “Islamic Republic Day”, \textit{Islamic Republic News Agency}, accessed April 1, 2014 (11:02),

http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81105139/Poltic/Islamic_Republic_Day
During the 34th Anniversary, the Republic’s President, Mahmud Ahmadinejad (r. 2005-2013), delivered a speech stressing the fact that the establishment of the new system was in line with the motto shouted during the 1979 Revolution “Independence, Freedom, and Islamic Republic”, and he argued that, “On this day, the blood of thousands of martyrs that prepared the ground for the establishment of the Islamic state bore fruit”

One of the tools used for spreading this new view combining the Persian New Year and the Persian New Constitution was education, since the creation of a new identity and memory had to be established at a tender age. In this regard, some textbooks for children present readings concerning this matter as follows:

Each year we celebrate the Spring of Freedom together with the Spring of Nature. Concurrent with Now Rouz, we celebrate the Day of the Islamic Republic. During Now Rouz, we Iranians go to the tombs of the martyrs and give praise to those who gave their lives for Islam and the freedom of Iran.

This passage is very important in terms of explaining the acceptance of the Persian New Year festival in the national calendar of celebrations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, underling its official memory and master commemorative narrative. In fact, in the first two sentences of the quote from this textbook, there is a clear link and combination between Nowruz (Spring of Nature, i.e. the renaissance of the nature) and Islamic Republic Day (Spring of Freedom, i.e. the renaissance of Iranian nation) whereas in the last sentence there is a connection between Nowruz and the essence of the Islamic Republic memory (the remembrance of martyrs of past and present revolutions) and Iranian people are urged to use the long time off in this holiday as an opportunity to remember those who sacrificed themselves for Islam and Iran.

In another passage, there is a further focus expressing the union between Nowruz and the newly established ideological system:

Imam Khomeini, our beloved leader, named this day the Day of the Islamic Republic. He asked the nation to celebrate this day and to offer congratulations to each other for the victory of Islam and the Islamic Republic…From this year on we have celebrated Now Ruz and the Day of the Islamic Republic to be the most beautiful day since it is the day of freedom and the spirit of freedom…

204 “Iran marks Islamic Republic Day”, Press TV, accessed April 1, 2013 (4:19 AM) http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/04/01/295997/iran-marks-islamic-republic-day/
205 Chelkowski and Dabashi, Staging a Revolution, 130-131.
206 Ibid., 131.
With this passage, it clearly emerges that now, according to the goals of Ayatollah Khomeini, the celebrations of Nowruz and Islamic Republic Day are definitely interwoven and it seems that they could not be separated from each other since, according to the official memory, they are both seen as the most beautiful days of the year, expressing a deep sense of renaissance and freedom.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how one of the policies pursued by the Islamic Republic of Iran was the attempt to integrate pre-Islamic festivities such as Nowruz into the Islamic national calendar of celebrations. Although many hardliners have tried to prohibit the celebration of Nowruz and Chaharshanbe Suri, the Iranian government has realized that it is an arduous task to delete the memory of thousands of years of Persian traditions. The solution found has been the appropriation of these ancient memories by giving a Shia Islamic tint to these festivals, producing, at the end, one of the tesserae of the official collective memory of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the case of Nowruz, indeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran has accepted and integrated the memory of Persian New Year into Shia Islam, spreading the following narratives allegedly occurred, or will occur, on the occasion of this festival: the sixth Shiite Imam Ja’far Sadeq celebrated Nowruz by recalling past events rooted in the Islamic tradition; Imam ‘Ali nominated the Prophet Muhammad’s successor at Ghadir Khumm; and, the hidden Imam Mahdi will reappear to re-establish justice.

Lastly, as for many other festivities, many associated events related to the days of the Islamic Revolution have been included within the Persian New Year holiday (i.e. Islamic Republic Day), in order to minimise the memory of an old Persian tradition (but in the meantime, to give legitimacy to its celebration) and to perpetuate the official collective memory of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
Chapter Six

Celebration of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution (1979)

This chapter deals with the celebration of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution which represents an instance of secular state celebration principally taken as a model from western-style state celebrations which, being integrated into the calendar of national celebrations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, acquired a religious essence.

Official State Narrative

The day on which the anniversary of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution is celebrated, also known in Iran as 22 Bahman, occurs every year on the 11th February. This day is considered to be one of the most significant celebrations in post-revolutionary Iran because the ideals and the memory of the 1979 Revolution and the allegiance to the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989), are reconfirmed. Moreover, the Victory of the Islamic Revolution has been seen as an important event not only for Iran, but also for other Muslim countries. The reason for this importance in the Muslim world is due to Ayatollah Khomeini’s religious struggle against the Shah and the west, where he sought to combine religious discourses with political activities which had been traditionally detached from Shi’ism.

The historical event which marked the beginning of the struggle against the Pahlavi government, culminating with the Iranian Revolution, was the bill, known as the White Revolution, promoted by Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-1980) in 1963 which undermined the influence of Islam in society. Hence, Ayatollah Khomeini called for a national uprising and many clashes occurred with the Shah’s forces. On 22 March 1963, on the occasion of the commemoration of the martyrdom of the sixth Shiite Imam Sadeq, the Savak, the secret police of the Shah, burst into the Feiziyeh School in Qom and attacked seminary students, many of whom were killed or injured. Following this event, Ayatollah Khomeini’s inflammatory speech on the day of ‘Ashura of the same year strongly condemned not only the Pahlavi regime but also the US and Israel, preparing the field for the following demonstrations. On 5 June 1963, Ayatollah Khomeini was arrested and transferred to Tehran but he was released on the 7th of April 1964 after many bloody demonstrations. Nevertheless, Ayatollah Khomeini resolutely continued with his anti-governmental speeches and lectures and on the 4th November 1964 he was sent into exile first to Bursa in Turkey, then
transferred to the Iraqi city of Najaf. When he was in Najaf, Ayatollah Khomeini continued to delegitimize the Pahlavi regime and started drafting the theoretical foundations of the Islamic Republic by developing the theory of the *Velayat-e Faqih* (The Mandate of the Jurist) which was announced in lectures recorded and spread throughout Iran. In addition to this, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini’s son, attributed to the Shah’s agents, and the publication of a newspaper article attacking Khomeini on the 6th January 1978 represents the beginning of the final phase of the revolution.

From this moment onward, the Pahlavi government practically lost control of the situation by violently suppressing many demonstrations throughout the country, such as those in Tabriz and Yazd. The proof that the Pahlavi system was slowly dissolving was the establishment of a national government of reconciliation, the dissolution of the *Rastakhiz* Party, which had been introduced in 1955 as the only legitimate party in the country, and the cancellation of the Imperial calendar. Uprisings continued despite the imposed curfew in the cities and on the 8th September 1978, remembered as “The Black Friday” in the history of the Iranian Revolution, hundreds of people were shot dead during the demonstrations. On October 6, Ayatollah Khomeini decided to go to Neauphle-le-Château, a village in the suburb of Paris, where he could have more international visibility. At this stage, the situation in the country fibrillated. Many employees of oil companies, telecommunications, *Bank Melli* (National Bank), TV and radio, went on strike alongside the protests of students in universities and schools.

The demonstrations on the day of *Tasu’a* and *‘Ashura* represented an indicator of legitimacy of the monarchic rule during which people supporting Ayatollah Khomeini chanted slogans on behalf of freedom, independence, and the Islamic Republic. The government of the last Prime Minister under Muhammad Reza Shah, Shapour Bakhtiar (in office between January 1979- February 1979) represented the last resort for the survival of the Pahlavi regime since, being a member of the National Front (although he was afterwards dismissed by his party for his support for the Shah), he promoted social democratic issues and through these meseaures, the Shah hoped to ease the situation in the country. Nevertheless, in the end, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi opted for going into exile on January 16, 1979. Soon after, Ayatollah Khomeini expressed his desire to return to Iran upon Muhammad Reza Pahlavi’s escape.

Thus, after fifteen years living in exile since 1964, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran on the 1st February 1979 when millions of people showed up at the airport to welcome him. The first symbolic act Ayatollah Khomeini did was to go to *Behesht-e Zahra*, the largest cemetery in Iran, located in southern Tehran, to pay homage to the martyrs of the revolution. At *Behesht-e Zahra*, Ayatollah Khomeini also gave his first speech after his arrival in which he considered Bakhtiar’s
government illegal and illegitimate. After establishing a Council on Islamic Revolution, he appointed Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995) as the Prime Minister of the interim government on February 5, 1979. Three days later, the personnel of the Air Force pledged allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini. Allegedly, the army was preparing a military coup but Ayatollah Khomeini ordered his followers to prevent this. Therefore, on the 11th February 1979, people attacked TV and radio stations, garrisons, police stations, government and military centres, and took them over. With the army’s declaration of neutrality, the Islamic Revolution achieved victory on February 11, 1979.

Thus, the day on which Ayatollah Khomeini came back from exile represents the start of the ten day Dawn celebrations (Daheh Fajr) which culminate with massive nationwide rallies on 11 February, marking the triumph of the Islamic Revolution and the end of 2,500 years of monarchical rule in Iran. The official ceremonies usually started on February 1 at 9:33 at Mehrabad Airport in Tehran, the exact time when the leader of the Iranian Revolution and the founder of the Islamic Republic set foot in Iran after fifteen years in exile. During the 33rd anniversary in 2012, the army of the Islamic Republic of Iran produced a cardboard cut-out of Ayatollah Khomeini, which during the official ceremonies, was carried out of an aircraft by two uniformed military men in order to reproduce the act of disembarkation. The cut-out was then honoured and greeted by guards set in line and by a military marching band. In the same day, another cut-out representing Ayatollah Khomeini appeared at Refah School in Tehran, where he had established his headquarters thirty-three years earlier, in a ceremony organized by the Education minister.

During these ten days, political figures such as the supreme leader and the president visit the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini in southern Tehran in order to renew their allegiance to the leader of the Islamic Revolution and the founder of the Islamic Republic. Moreover, many social and cultural activities are organized in connection with the theme of this national celebration. TV stations repeatedly broadcast programmes about the time of the revolution showing people chanting in massive street demonstrations, the Shah’s departure from Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini’s return to Iran at Mehrabad Airport and his first speech at Behesht-e Zahra, etc.

On February 11, official ceremonies, massive rallies, and military parades (similar to those performed in western celebrations such as on Bastille Day on July 14 in France or Republic Day on June 2 in Italy) in which the defence capabilities of the country are shown. These take place throughout the country. In fact, 22 Bahman represents the national celebration in which the government portrays its own power to the nation and to foreign countries as a form of deterrence.

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208 Ibid.
Entire families pour onto the streets and march with posters of the founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Khomeini and the incumbent supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Slogans shouted during the revolution such as “Down with Israel”, or “Death to America” are usually repeated. People at these demonstrations wave flags of the Islamic Republic of Iran and banners such as “Ya Hoseyn” and with political messages referring to present issues such as economic sanctions (tahrim) and energy nuclear rights.

The Politics of the Commemoration

According to the official and state narrative, the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, which the state attempted to export to other countries, are based on freedom from suppression and oppression; social justice for oppressed people; the strengthening of brotherhood among all Muslims; struggle against external colonial powers, but also against imperialism and Zionism; and last, but not least important, the independent identity based on the motto “Neither East nor West”. In this regard, indeed, Ayatollah Khomeini stated the following:

The other revolutions were associated with the East or the West, but the Islamic revolution of Iran relied on Islam and carried out signs of prophets and had not been associated with any power except God.209

The political symbolism surrounding this national celebration refers to the memory that the Islamic Revolution has been a unique revolution in respect to previous social revolutions elsewhere. In fact, it is arguable that although the Islamic Revolution has many common features with other national revolutions which have occurred throughout history, such as those against poverty, domestic and foreign exploiters, corruption which is the cause of economic problems, etc., the Islamic Revolution introduced a new motive for revolution, based on the desire to present a new worldview constituted by the relationship between politics and religion with Islam at the heart of society. This new worldview also resulted with the introduction of new concepts for revolution such as martyrdom, resistance, and struggle for God for the sake of the nation. Thus, the strong support of Ayatollah Khomeini for political Islam influenced other Muslim societies and activities that during the 1980s and 1990s opposed the west and its allies by taking as a model the Islamic Revolution in Iran (e.g. Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon). In this regard, every anniversary of the Victory of the Islamic

Revolution in Iran not only serves as a remembrance of the days which led to the collapse of the monarchy and the victory of the Islamic Revolution, but also to recall and to raise awareness about the struggle of oppressed people against the west, or generally against a different ideology, not only in Iran but also in many other Muslim and third world countries. In fact, in some cases such as the Arab revolts which began in 2010, the Iranian government has always depicted uprisings in those Muslim countries as an “Islamic Awakening” inspired by the ideals of the Islamic Revolution promoted in Iran.

This celebration is also an opportunity for political figures to discuss present political issues and to deliver speeches to the nation. For instance, President Hasan Rouhani’s speech during the official ceremony of the 36th Anniversary in 2015, besides stating that the rallies prove the reaffirmation “of the Iranian nation’s allegiance to the Islamic Revolution”, referred to the current nuclear talks with P5+1 states and to the imposed sanctions on Iran. However, he added that Iran wants a “constructive interaction” with the rest of the world though “the Islamic Republic will continue to protect its interests and remain committed to the Revolution’s principles and ideals.”

Associated Events

International Fajr Film Festival

One of the main associated events which contributes to enhance the celebration of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution is the International Fajr Film Festival. In fact, cinema, which has always been a traditional form of cultural entertainment in modern Iran, represents a tool for visually strengthening the collective memory of the Islamic Revolution and spreading the new ideology.

Iranian cinema is believed to have started during the Qajar dynasty, when Mozaffar al-din Shah’s (1853-1907) photographer Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkas Bashi (1874-1915) introduced the first cine camera in Persia. For many years, the bulk of movies showed in Iran were imported from other countries and dubbed in Farsi or were imitations of foreign movies. Since the 1950s, Iranian cinema developed the genre of the documentary but it is only since the end of the 1960s that the cinema started to be seen an art form like literature or theatre, introducing topics related to rural and tribal societies, the urban poor, and political issues in the shape of allegorical films of protest. Before the Islamic Revolution, Iranian movies were generally rejected or ignored by clerics for themes.

considered morally offensive and ethically corrupting. However, after the Islamic Revolution, movie plots started to have “revolutionary” features representing the value of sacrifice and martyrdom; the dialogues of characters acquired a vivid religious vocabulary; many movies dealt with the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, and biographies of historical religious figures such as the Prophet Muhammad or Shiite Imams. In regard to cinema, Ayatollah Khomeini expressed these words:

> We are not opposed to cinema, to radio, or to television: what we oppose is vice and the use of media to keep our young people in a state of backwardness and dissipate their energies.\(^{212}\)

Thus, in the first years of the 1980s many state-sponsored agencies, as the *Farabi* Foundation, were founded under the direction of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance which aimed to supervise and distribute movies according to the values of Islam and of the revolution. Thus, Iranian cinema has become a further tool of propaganda aiming at building a collective consciousness of the new social, cultural, and political system of the country. The *International Fajr Film Festival* represents an event in which this collective consciousness is reinforced.

The *International Fajr Film Festival* starts on February 1 and lasts until February 11, the day of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution. It has occurred every year since 1983 (the year of the first edition) under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and for this reason both the opening and closing ceremonies are usually attended by the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Head of Cinematic Organization.

This festival has become an institutionalized forum for Iranians interested in cinema by replacing the pre-revolutionary *Tehran Film Festival* where many foreign film-makers used to participate. Nevertheless, the festival usually includes a competitive section devoted to the screening of foreign movies which respond to the general thematic priorities such as “justice, peace, Islamic Awakening, anti-violence and anti-radicalism, ethical and religious values, transcendental lifestyles, anti-oppression, human and moral virtues, importance of family, cultural diversity and humanitarianism, etc” which are definitely connected to the ideals and official discourses of the Islamic Revolution\(^{213}\). Officially, the festivals aims at building a connection between the national cinemas of the east with the national cinemas of the west, but its true primary function is to act as a platform to focus on and spread specific religious and revolutionary values. In fact, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, ‘Ali Jannati (b. 1949), stated on the occasion of the closing ceremony

\(^{212}\) Ruhollah Khomeini, “Address at Bihisht-i Zahra” in *Islam and Revolution*, 258.

of the 33rd edition that the festival is an opportunity for Iran’s cultural diplomacy\textsuperscript{214}. In recent years the festivals have become an opportunity for developing critical discussion within press conferences about the role of western cinema (which I will not discuss here) in particular referring to Hollywood movies which, according to officials, “manipulate public opinion” and promote violence\textsuperscript{215}.

During the festival, besides the different competitive sections of the festival (e.g. Salvation Cinema, Eastern Panorama, “Art and Experience) many documentaries showing the days of the 1979 Revolution, the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran, and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) are screened in the non-competitive section in order to keep the memory of the victory of the Islamic Revolution alive.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the ten day celebrations which peak with the great rally of 22 Bahman represent the most of important event aiming at strengthening the memory of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution and a secure pillar for the official collective memory of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although the manner of performance of this celebration seems to follow the secular and western pattern of commemorating an event linked to the achievement of independence and liberation of a state from an occupying entity, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to ground the celebration of the Victory of the Islamic Revolution in the Iranian Islamic collective memory, giving this event a spiritual nature. In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini strongly emphasized that the 1979 Revolution was different from any other revolutions which had happened throughout history because, according to the Iranian state narrative, politics and religion have been put at the centre of society as is the will of God. However, this celebration continues to be an instance of western-style celebration appropriated by the government which acquired an Islamic aura, as is also shown by the establishment of an International Film Festival which aimed not only at maintaining the memory of 1979 Revolution, but also at emphasizing the official culture of the country.

Lastly, as for many other national celebrations, political speeches and sermons are produced on the occasion of this anniversary showing the parallelism between the state narrative of the celebration and concurrent political issues demonstrating that the memory of the past can only be built and exploited according to the political agenda and needs of society.

Final Conclusion

This thesis has shown how after the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iranian government has strongly fostered the development of a new memory among its citizens by linking present events, connected to the revolutionary experience, with past occurrences strongly rooted in the Iranian Islamic culture. What is interesting is that the pursuit of a new official memory had already started before the 1979 Revolution and the discourses produced by the ideologues of the Islamic Revolution and the future Islamic Republic of Iran represented a counter-memory which aimed at replacing the official memory in effect during the Pahlavi period and becoming the official narrative. Both before (as a counter-memory) and after the revolution (as an official memory), national celebrations have been one of the most efficient tools adopted by the Islamic Republic’s supporters in order to establish the new collective memory and to spread a sense of sharing between state and society. Furthermore, this thesis has also briefly referred to some instances of counter-memory built by opposition groups in post-revolutionary Iran (i.e. ‘Ashura, and Qods Day) with the purpose of hijacking the official collective memory of the state and replacing it with their own view. In fact, serving as an indicator of legitimacy and stability of the political system, the role of national celebrations is crucial because on the very same day, all community members focus their remembrance on one specific moment of the past which has been “imposed” through the official memory and opposition groups see these remembrance days an opportunity to challenge the validity of the official memory.

This thesis has sought to answer the question of why national celebrations are used as a political tool and a power performance in post-revolutionary Iran, and it has been deemed that, as it was for other periods of the history of modern Iran, national celebrations are principally used by the Iranian government with the purpose of building and preserving the official collective memory of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The importance of establishing a strong collective memory is fundamental for the rule of a state due to the fact that, as it was seen through the analysis of some national celebrations in post-revolutionary Iran, this collective memory helps the ruling elites in achieving different purposes such as the strengthening of national identity, the retention of social order, the mobilisation of masses, the reinforcement of state’s legitimacy, the possibility to present the political agenda concerning domestic and foreign affairs, and also the opportunity to spread the Iranian revolutionary ideology to other countries.

Some of the methods adopted for building, shaping, and preserving the new official memory concern the production of doctrinal discourses by religious and non-religious figures involved in
politics, and their emphasis of historical events which connect the present with the Shiite tradition on the occasion of national celebrations. In fact, both before and after the Islamic Revolution, religious revolutionary movements appropriated the memory of Shiite myths, rituals, and symbols (such as the martyrdom) which were re-interpreted and used for mobilizing people ready to face death in the struggle against the Pahlavi government, during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and in the consolidation of the Islamic Republic’s ideals.

Through the analysis of some of these national celebrations, it emerges that the political use of the cultural sphere reflected in some festivals has been crucial in terms of the pursuit for legitimacy of the state and de-legitimacy of the other. This process of the pursuit for legitimacy, through the establishment of a given collective memory, includes the attempt to extend the scope of power not only over different parts of society, but also over different kind of memories. In fact, we have seen that many festivals with a non-Islamic or western origin were incorporated into the calendar of the Islamic Republic of Iran and given an Islamic and revolutionary narrative.

As a last remark, it is worth mentioning that the establishment and preservation of an official collective memory, which in most cases is the cause of the politicization of national festivals (even when the concept of “nation” did not exist), is an aspect which characterises all modern countries, no matter if in the west or east, north or south. Nowadays all states, in their attempt to reaffirm their identity and memory, have a calendar full of public holidays and semi-official commemorations, during which political elites reconfirm the official historical memory and culture of the nation. In fact, the communal feature which all states share is that festivals are an opportunity to manifest the state’s power through public political discourses and messages to the nation, participation in rallies, parades, and official ceremonies. However, it may be also true that the politicization of festivals is in greater evidences in those societies, compared with others, which depend on the degree of legitimacy and stability that the ruling elites of those given countries would require and on the degree of political consideration that citizens would give to the state. Nevertheless, the influence of politics is present everywhere and it seeks to permeate every aspect of society, despite the fact that some segments of the cultural sphere still resist this exploitation. For this reason, as this thesis has sought to demonstrate, the analysis of the national calendar of celebrations is important for understanding the political and social role of the ruling elite and the relationship between state and society in any given country.
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