

Article

# The Politics of Calendars: State Appropriations of the Contested Iranian Past

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to investigate how commemorative practices, rituals, and holidays are invented, deployed, and recast for political and ideological purposes, to reinforce and sustain a particular narrative of national identity. It argues that the choice of particular moments of a country's past to be commemorated in calendars as national holidays and the way in which the collective past is preserved and remembered both reflect and articulate a country's vision of its present essence, of who its people are. Recognizing the link between the collective memory and national identity, the Iranian states before and after the 1979 revolution made a special effort to articulate their narrative of the past by commemorating a particular set of holidays and rituals. Viewing the calendar as a political artifact, this paper compares changes in the Iranian national calendars in the Pahlavi era (1925–1979) and the Islamic Republic (1979–2018). It examines the inclusion of new religious holidays and the removal of national days associated with the monarchy as well as the assignment of new meanings and celebratory practices to the old ones as the signifiers of a political maneuver to articulate a new shared public memory and narrative of identity since the 1979 revolution. It then examines two nationwide celebrations before and after the 1979 revolution, representing two state-sponsored, competing narratives of Iranian identity: firstly, the 2500-year celebration of the Persian Empire in 1953, and, secondly, the Ashura commemoration, a religious gathering dedicated to the remembrance of Shia Imams. These commemorations provided the state a unique political opportunity to present its own appraisal of the past and, in turn, national identity.

**Keywords:** national identity; commemoration; calendar



**Citation:** Kashfi, Ehsan. 2021. The Politics of Calendars: State Appropriations of the Contested Iranian Past. *Religions* 12: 861. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100861>

Academic Editors: Kristin Joachimsen and Marianne Hafnor Bøe

Received: 16 August 2021  
Accepted: 8 October 2021  
Published: 12 October 2021

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## 1. Introduction

On a fall morning in October 1971, several dozen foreign leaders made a visit to the desert oasis of Persepolis, the ruins of the ancient imperial capital, sixty kilometers outside the city of Shiraz in southwestern Iran. The assembled guests, including nine kings, five queens, sixteen presidents, and nine sheikhs, had all been invited to pay their respects and celebrate the 2500-year anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire. They gathered around the unadorned stone tomb of Cyrus where Mohammad Reza Shah, offering salutations to his ancient predecessor, declared proudly and insolently, “rest in peace, Cyrus, for we are awake, and we will always stay awake.” His speech and the following four days of commemorative ceremonies invoking “the magic of nationalism”, implying continuity with an esteemed past, are all examples of state-sponsored commemorative practices aimed at forging a sense of belonging and attachment, and at articulating a collective past around which a national identity could be constructed.

In the past decades, much attention has been devoted to the construction and ‘imagination’ of the Iranian nation (Marashi 2011; Amanat and Vejdani 2012; Sharifi 2013; Zia-Ebrahimi 2016); scholars from a variety of perspectives have tackled the politics of identity in Iran (Asgharzadeh 2007; Ansari 2012; Saleh 2013; Elling 2013), yet the particular processes of selectively delineating times and spaces for the purpose of commemoration, and of enabling festivity with the aim of reinforcing a sense of belonging continues to remain a relatively uncharted and unexplored area, fraught with analytical difficulties and

ideological controversies. Questions such as what is commemorated in holidays and how deserve much more attention as a significant and relatively accessible source of insight into different attributes of a political system, and particularly into the potent yet tacit manipulation of time and space to articulate a particular narrative of collective past and, in turn, to forge a national identity.

This paper, therefore, seeks to investigate how commemorative practices, holidays, and their associated rituals are invented, deployed, and recast for political and ideological purposes and to reinforce and sustain a particular narrative of national identity in Iran. It argues that the choice of particular moments of the country's past to be commemorated in calendars as national holidays, and the way in which the collective past is preserved and remembered both reflect and articulate a country's vision of its present essence and of who its people are. In McPherson and McCrone's terms, by focusing on the national calendar, this paper investigates how "history is never simply over, but is remembered and reinvented to do work in and for the present" (McPherson and McCrone 2009, p. 7). It examines changes in Iran's national calendars, the inclusion of new religious holidays, and the removal of national days associated with the monarchy as well as the assignment of new meanings and celebratory practices to the old ones as the signifiers of a political maneuver to create a new shared public memory and collective identity since the 1979 revolution.

This paper first outlines its theoretical framework for analyzing the dialectical relationship between identity, collective memory, and rituals, as well as the political use of commemorative practices—the ideological appropriation of the past, manifested in the country's calendar. Viewing the calendar as a political artifact, it then describes and compares changes in the Iranian calendars in the Pahlavi era (1925–1979) and the Islamic Republic (1979–today). Particular attention is given to two nationwide celebrations before and after the 1979 revolution as commemorative representations of the two state-sponsored, competing *master narratives* of Iranian identity: the 2500-year celebration of the Persian Empire, a memorial of the nation's *ethnic* heritage, and Ashura, an annual *religious* commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammad.

## 2. Theory

Today, the constructed nature of national identity has become evident; the concept of identity as a sacred, fixed, and unchanging reality has been shattered. Identity and its associated narratives and memories are viewed as selective and subjective constructions of reality serving a particular interest, power relation, or political ideology rather than objective and descriptive representations. There is indeed an inherent link between identity and memory. Defined as a sense of sameness over time and space, identity is articulated and sustained by selectively remembering memories. Collective memories, on the other hand, are constantly revisited and revised in response to the varying needs of the society and the state and to suit their identities. Identity and collective memory are, therefore, in a *dialectical constitutive* relationship (Gillis 1994).

The collective memory of the nation to which individuals belong, its 'remembered' and 'reconstructed' history, fused with individuals' personal biographies, significantly informs individuals' perceptions of who they are and of their national identity. It provides the nation with an account of its origins and historical development, a unique distinct identity vis a vis other surrounding nation, and thus allows it to recognize itself through time (Zerubavel 1995). It is, however, in a permanent state of change, open to "the dialect of remembering and forgetting" (Nora 1989) and vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation and unconscious of its continuous distortion (Halbwachs 1992).

Given its impersonal character, collective memory is restored in 'social' sites of memory (Nora 1989), in history textbooks, museums, archives, media, and furthermore remembered by rites, rituals, and commemorative practices which, in Schwartz's terms, "lift from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary events which embody our deepest and

most fundamental values. Commemoration . . . is in this sense a register of sacred history” (Schwartz 1982, p. 377).

Celebrations of communal festivals, the observance of holidays, and participation in religious pilgrimages all play a key role in articulating a nation’s shared memories of the past. As Yael Zerubavel (1995) noted, long before being formally introduced to their past through the education system, individuals learn about it by observing national holidays and associated rituals. Each act of commemoration narrates a particular segment of the past; therefore, is fragmentary in nature. Nevertheless, altogether they contribute to the articulation of a *master narrative* about the nation’s collective past as well as the formation of sentiment and feelings toward it (Zerubavel 1995).

The power of master narrative does not lie in providing a historically accurate, detailed picture of the collective past, but in reducing the complexity of historical events, creating basic extreme images based on political and ideological stances. To this end, it divides the past into different, distinct stages and selectively and disproportionately assigns them ‘historical significance’. Accordingly, some periods are elevated as positive and essential for the development of the nation’s memory and identity, typically periods of conquest, pioneering, or political struggle for independence, and thus worthy of commemoration, pride, and remembrance, while others are defamed as periods of recession, decline, and collapse, unmarked and suppressed in the country’s master narrative. Therefore, the reconstruction of the collective past entails the dynamics of selective remembering and forgetting (Anderson 2006); it invents, elevates, omits, or conflates historical events (Hobsbawm 2012). In this way, mathematically equal historical periods often differ in their perceived significance (Sorokin 1943). The collective memory consists of marked, historically momentous, worth-remembering periods interspersed with seemingly insignificant, irrelevant, and ignored ones (Lévi-Strauss 1966; Glassie 1982).

The master narrative also selects and sometimes adds particular moments to collective memory and presents them as symbolic markers of changes in the nation’s historical development—as *turning points* worthy of celebration in great emphasis and elaboration. The remembrance of certain moments as turning points emphasizes the political and ideological doctrines underlying the master narrative and its appropriation of the past. It also elevates them as *political myths* to serve as a lens through which the past and present are perceived for the future (Zerubavel 1995).

A country’s national calendar is perhaps the most revealing site of collective memory (Zerubavel 2003), where a cycle of holidays and associated rituals, designed to commemorate selectively marked events, displays a political maneuver aimed at the articulation of a master narrative about the country’s past and its national identity. Although the calendar also serves to reaffirm individuals’ commitment to various ahistorical and social norms such as family (Mother’s Day), nature (Spring and Fall Solstice), and work (Labor Day), through the institutionalization of commemorative holidays, it mainly establishes an annual cycle of remembrance to help individuals recollect particular ‘sacred’ events from their collective past (Zerubavel 2003) in order to maintain that memory *forever*. The calendar also ensures that remembrance of a particular moment will be done *collectively*, so an entire community focuses and commemorates the very same event in the past. Thus, examining what historical events are selectively marked in a calendar and when and how they are commemorated sheds light on ‘sacred’ periods from a country’s collective past around which its national identity is narrated.

Commemorative practices have also long concerned social scientists; there is considerable dispute in the field about how ritual is to be defined and interpreted (Etzioni and Bloom 2004). Scholars agree in viewing rituals as rule-governed, patterned, recurring activity reaffirming particular norms, values, and social bonds (Lukes 1975; Kertzer 1988). In this sense, a ritual involves normative and binding pressure on its participants through redundancy and recursive communication. However, scholars disagree whether a ritual must be inherently linked with religion or a mystical or supernatural being or power, as there are ancient commemorative practices wherein references to religious or mystical aspects

are absent or less significant and, more importantly, religion often plays little or no role in modern politically charged and ideologically driven rituals. The noninstrumental or irrational character of ritual has also been singled out by some anthropologists (Goody 1961); however, given the difficulty of identifying nondisputable criteria of rationality, its expressive or symbolic nature would seem most profitable to follow. Accordingly, symbolism is defined as having a special significance or social value within the lives of the relevant social group toward which the attention of participants is drawn through the medium of ritual (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). This paper thus, following Lukes, takes rituals as a “rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which, they hold to be of special significance” (Lukes 1975, p. 291). It also focuses on public rather than private commemoration and takes commemoration as a social and political practice that involves the coordination of individual and group memories and values (Gillis 1994). Holidays also refer to days of festivity or celebration when routine, profane, and daily activities are suspended to commemorate a particular symbolic event. Following Durkheim’s functional approach (Durkheim 1995), holidays serve to foster social integration by reinforcing shared values, reaffirming individuals’ commitment to social norms; serve to sustain social bonds and a sense of belonging within a given society; and play a key part in the formation of a nation’s sense of self, being chosen as a reminder of unity and heritage (McPherson and McCrone 2009). As regular and recurring dates, national holidays give a nation a way to express its collective consciousness and participate in a mobilization of membership (Etzioni and Bloom 2004).

### 3. Myth and Memory-Making in the Pahlavi Era (1925–1979)

The political reality of the years after the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1909) was an increasing sense of urgency about the country’s sociopolitical decline after a short-lived hope for political change and reform; the continuing ‘decay’ of the Qajar state apparatus (1789–1925), particularly its powerlessness to protect the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and to confront the growing number of ethno-linguistic separatist movements, whose political aims were indistinct but nevertheless posed a threat to the central government (Asgharzadeh 2007; Saleh 2013), coupled with the European economic encroachments demanding more trade concessions, indeed heightened a sense of urgency and in turn contributed to a growing awareness, mainly among intellectuals and elites, of the importance of organized action to ‘relieve’ the situation, to liberate the country from the impact of centuries of decay and domination, and to assume a more active role in changing the course of history (Abrahamian 2018).

Heavily influenced by Western interpretations of political development according to which the long-awaited goal of progress was realized solely through the eventual and inevitable development of a ‘nation’ (Ansari 2012), Iran’s reform-minded intellectuals and ruling elites found the inculcation of patriotic pride as well as national ethos among the masses to be a necessary step towards modernization and progress. In spite of their diversity, encompassing a wide range of political, social, and religious views, they shared a fundamental view of the Iranian past and the present; they first assumed the existence of an Iranian nation as an ontological and historical reality and the key category through which to study their past (Vejdani 2014), and thus believed in an urgent need to promote a form of ‘national’ revival. Consider the following quotation from Hussein Kazemzadeh, one of the leading Iranian intellectuals and the publisher of the famous nationalist magazine *Iranshahr*:

*The realization of such progress and developments requires a number of revolutions in political establishments, in ideas, beliefs, and ideals . . . first, national feelings and sentiments should be promoted to shake the downhearted Iranian soul, to awaken Iranians from the epochal sleep. All Iranians should be aware and proud of their centuries-old traditions and heritage. (Kazemzadeh 1925)*

In the Pahlavi era, the need to commemorate arose from the ideologically driven desire to break with a ‘decadent’, ‘backward’ past and to articulate a distance between

the 'new' Pahlavi, which aimed at modernization and the development of the country (Atabaki and Zürcher 2017), and the old, corrupted Qajars. Exaggerating the old regime's backwardness and injustice, the new regime claimed to set out a new era, representing remarkable economic, political, and, more importantly, cultural leaps forward. It thus needed to create a cult, a nationalist ideology of 'new beginning' with a whole set of commemorative practices, rites, and rituals. This nationalist ideology, which can be seen in the works of Constitutionalist intellectuals, including Fathali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, as well as thinkers of the later period such as Mahmoud Afshar and Shojaeddin Shafa, firstly sought to rediscover the collective Iranian self through history, archeology, and literature, tracing the country's roots in a golden 'recovered' or 'invented' past, to unearth the 'authentic' culture and identity buried under the foreign accretions of the centuries (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016). These recovered collective roots, forming a new national identity, become a driving force for political and economic transformation. It also highlights the compatibility of Iranian national culture with the demands of modernity in order to portray Iranians not as backward and rigidly incapable of perceiving and acting toward progress, as depicted frequently in the European orientalist narrative of the time, but as its pioneers and forerunners (Ansari 2012).

In regard to the society, it sought to mediate the relationship between the state and society in order to generate political support and legitimacy for the newly established regime of Pahlavi with no legitimate claim to the throne by forging a symbolic continuity with the distant 'golden' past and with the Persian Empire. The Pahlavi Shah was presented as Cyrus' successor, a benevolent ruler, a father to the Iranian people, and the guarantor of its glory and magnificence (Steele 2020). It further sought to create unity, eradicating all cultural and linguistic differences to forge a uniform, homogenous nation. Informed by the dominating rhetoric of European nationalism of the late nineteenth century, a strong nation was viewed as constituting a single homogenous identity, of which the state is not only the embodiment but also has a historical mission in promoting and consolidating its language, culture, and traditions (Saleh 2013). Thus, integral cultural homogeneity and authenticity seemed required to have or craft a unified state. Accordingly, it sought to integrate diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups and tribes into the Iranian state's imagined community and to create citizens whose loyalty to the nation and the state outweighed that to other ethnic and linguistic groups to which they also belonged.

To these ends, history and myths are integrated and manipulated; the Iranian state, with the help of nationalist intellectuals, articulated a master narrative of the collective past, dividing the Iranian past into two main periods: firstly, the glorious antiquity, the pre-Islamic period, when Iran was a unified world superpower spreading from the Indus River to the Mediterranean, worthy of national pride and dignity, and secondly, the "period of somnolence" (Gellner 1997) covering mostly post-Islamic centuries, when Iranians lost their national consciousness under the successive invasions of Arabs, then Turks, and finally the British and Russians.

In this reconstruction, the national past begins with the conquest of the ancient Medes, Lydia, and the Neo-Babylonian Empire and the founding of the Achaemenid Empire as the first Persian Empire, the embodiment of the country's grandeur (Steele 2020). It is a period in which the Persian civilization thrives, enjoying political, social, and cultural growth; when Iranians "sanctified" by "divine blessing" are "free in their country, respected in foreign lands, and the prestige and grandeur of the kings of Iran were well-known in the whole world" (Akhundzadeh 2006, pp. 276–77). This is thus seen as the 'golden' age to which the nation wishes to 'return' to recover its lost spirit and reclaim its long-neglected Persian authenticity. It further serves as an inspiration for the new modern era ahead. Consider the following quotation from Mohamad Reza Shah's book, *Toward the Great Civilization*:

*Twenty-five centuries ago, the Iranian monarchy, entering the scene of world history, inaugurated a new era in the evolution of human civilization. Why should it not be possible for our efforts of this day to inaugurate another new era? ... why should it not*

*be our nation's aim to set foot on the stage of the 'Great Civilization' at the dawn of the third millennium? (Pahlavi 1994, pp. 120–21)*

This period of glory, victory, and authority worthy of remembrance and celebration is then contrasted with a highly negative image of the post-Islamic one, the “period of somnolence” (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016), which began with the fall of the Sasanian empire, the Muslim conquest of Iran and the eventual decline of the Zoroastrian religion. It covered thirteen centuries when Iranians lived as a minority under ‘foreign’ rulers, losing their collective experience as a unified nation. It is articulated as a long, dark period of surrender, submission, and suffering, imbued with humiliation and disgrace. Accordingly, the ‘imposition’ of an ‘alien’ Arab culture turned Iranians into oppressed and weak people who passively consent to their destiny, relying on miracles and hoping to be saved by Shia Imams. Islam is purposely associated with backwardness and superstitions, which fosters cowardice, submissiveness, and passivity and thus is an obstacle to progress and development. It is also blamed for collective amnesia of the ancient past and the deliberate suppression of Persian heritage. Ironically, this narrative often seems to incorporate orientalist stereotypes about the East as having ‘static,’ unchanging, backward culture and traditions.

In the search for national origins and roots, the master narrative thus turns to the seemingly suppressed memories, symbols, and legends of the ancient Persian past as the reminders of the nation’s glory and grandeur, the very constituting cores of Iranian identity. The Persian literature and traditions are thus elevated as authentic and as historically conserving the essence of Iranian identity (Kia 1998). It then constructed others as deviant and inauthentic, or relegated them to minorities, not worthy of remembrance.

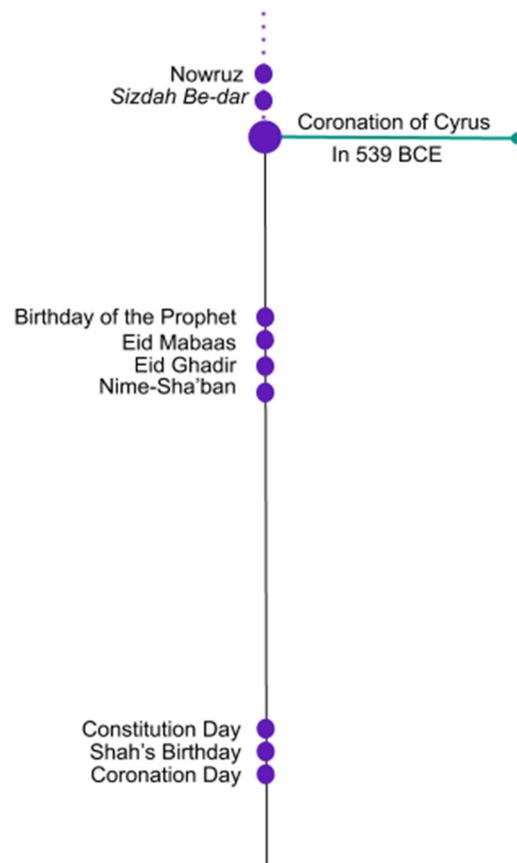
In its periodization of Iranian history, the nationalist master narrative, highlighting the contrast between the two major periods, accentuates the perception of a ‘great divide.’ Despite its historical distance and absence in the present perception of the Iranian collective past, the narrative elevates the founding and fall of the Persian Empire as historically significant turning points with haunting consequences for the nation. It also imposes a sense of uniformity within each period by grouping many centuries into one era, overlooking significant social, political, and cultural differences in each period (Ansari 2012). Obviously, this periodization requires a highly selective representation of the collective past and, in turn, ignores the historical developments that do not fit the ideological principles underlying this nationalistic narrative. It disregards the Islamic Golden Age, dated from the eighth century to the eleventh century, a period of cultural, social, and scientific flourishing to which many Iranian scholars and intellectuals contributed considerably, or the Safavid Dynasty (1501–1722), when a form of national consciousness emerged in spite of the country’s ethnic and linguistic diversity as the dynasty, after centuries of political disintegration, unified the country and established Shia Islam as the state religion (Newman 2012). This periodization, creating a divide in the Iranian collective past, imposes an irreconcilable rivalry between the nation’s nonreligious Persian and its religious Shia traditions, rites, and rituals, an enduring falsifying, fabricated dichotomy that continues to dominate the Iranian political narrative.

The emphasis on a great divide, playing the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods against each, other is also used to articulate an equally important contrast within the post-Islamic past, particularly the ‘old’ Qajar and the ‘new’ Pahlavi, marking the beginning of the new national period. It paves the way for a seemingly radical departure from the immediate past, ending the period of decadence. It portrays the Pahlavi as the spiritual as well as the political leaders who awakened Iranians from their slumber of apathy and indolence and led them towards the gates of ‘the great civilization’.

#### 4. The Pahlavi’s National Calendar

The Pahlavi makes abundant use of commemoration, viewing public celebrations and national days as political opportunities for presenting its own appraisal of the past and history. Reflecting the binary ‘great divide’ within the state narrative of the Iranian

past, the country's first cluster of commemorative holidays is associated essentially with a mythical 'prehistoric' past and with the myths and legends of the country's Persian and Zoroastrian origins, including *Nowruz* (New Year Celebration) and *Sizdah Be-dar*, an outdoor celebration marking the thirteenth day of the new year and the end of *Nowruz*. This is followed by a separate cluster of historical events associated with the early days of Islam, covering Mohammad's birth (Birth of the Prophet), his first revelation (*Eid Mabaas*), and his death in the seventh century, as well as the martyrdom of Ali and Hussein (Ashura), two historically significant Shia imams. It further includes two religious festivals, *Eid Qurban* and *Eid Fitr*, devoted to the celebration of the obedience of Abraham to God's command and the end of *Ramadan*, respectively; these are events and periods with deep roots in the nation's religion which cannot be ignored despite the state's attempt to relegate them to alien and inauthentic traditions with roots in Arab culture. Following a seemingly uneventful 1320-year historical lull associated with practically no national holiday comes a third cluster marking four relatively recent political events, namely, the country's transition to constitutional monarchy in 1905 (Constitution Day), the accession of its current ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah, in 1967 (Coronation Day), and Mohammad Reza Shah's birthday (Figure 1). Thus, in the pre-1979 calendar, a total of 6 out of 16 national holidays<sup>1</sup> are directly related to Persian heritage or mark imperial events.



**Figure 1.** The Pahlavi's National Commemogram.

Recognizing the importance of a separate calendar for a distinct national identity, the Pahlavi also made two significant changes in the country's national calendar. First, it officially replaced the centuries-old lunar Islamic calendar generally used in the Muslim world to determine the times of Islamic holidays, rituals, and practices with a solar calendar in March 1925. Although the solar calendar shares a starting point with the lunar calendar, dated from the Hegira of Mohammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, the calendars are not related otherwise; the year counts between the two calendars differ substantially. The solar calendar also fixes the beginning of the new year (*Nowruz*) at the vernal equinox,

21 March, marking the beginning of spring. *Nowruz* has been practiced for years by all Iranians, regardless of their ethnicity, language, or religion, as the festival of the new year, celebrating a reawakening after a barren winter. The state, however, cherished it mainly as part of a common Persian cultural heritage, a reminder of a Zoroastrian legacy carrying centuries-old traditions.

The new calendar also fixes the number of days in each month, which varied previously by year with the sidereal zodiac. The first six months are thus thirty-one days long, the next five months are thirty days, and the last one has twenty-nine days. The months are also Persianized and named after the *Amesha Spenta*, deities of ancient Persia and Zoroastrianism, replacing the Arabic names of the twelve constellations of the zodiac. It also revoked the duodecennial animal cycle with Chinese-Uighur roots, in which the years are named after each of twelve animals in turn. The changes are altogether indications of the state's effort to distance itself from the past shaped by non-Persian tradition and to return to glorious Persian heritage.

In March 1976, the state made another dramatic and extraordinary gesture by removing the solar calendar with the Hegira of Mohammad as the starting point and inaugurating a new 'royal' calendar beginning from the coronation of Cyrus in 539 BCE. Allocating 2500 years for the presumed length of the Iranian monarchy and 35 years for the present monarch, the country jumped overnight from the Islamic solar year of 1353 to the imperial year of 2535, while just five years earlier, it had witnessed the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire. The state documents and publications are dated according to the new royal calendar, which conceivably created much confusion and, more importantly, caused resentment, particularly among religious segments of society. On this change in the national calendar, Asadollah Alam, one of the most influential figures of the Pahlavi era, the shah's close friend, Prime Minister from 1962 to 1964, and later Minister of Royal Court, writes:

*The shah pushes for this change. He is a man of history; he changed history and thus rightfully wants to be the starting point of history . . . the solar calendar is indeed the fabrication of an Umayyad Caliphate and wrongfully imposed on us as the national calendar. (Alam 2003, pp. 478–79)*

Nothing, however, exemplifies the Pahlavi's desire to make a radical break with the immediate past and with the Qajar era, as well as the intuition to connect with the 'golden' forgotten distant past and its 'lost' imagined Persian heritage better than the 2500-year celebration of the Persian Empire, when in October 1971, emperors, kings, presidents, and sheikhs from all over the world were invited for four days of extensive and lavish ceremonies amidst the ruins of Persepolis, the ancient imperial capital, to commemorate the accession of Cyrus and the foundation of the Achaemenid Empire. The ceremonies commenced with Mohammad Reza Shah, 'light of the Aryans', in full military uniform covered with medals, delivering a eulogy at the simple stone tomb of Cyrus in which he proudly called out to the spirit of the founder of the Persian Empire:

*O Cyrus, great King, King of Kings, Achaemenian King, King of the land of Iran. I, the shah of Iran, offer you salutations from myself and from our nation . . . we are here to acclaim Cyrus, the Great, the immortal of Iran, the founder of the most ancient empire of the world; to praise Cyrus, the extraordinary emancipator of History; and to declare that he was one of the most noble sons of the humanity.*

He brazenly continued, "the Iranian flag is flying today as triumphantly" as it flew in your time, urging Cyrus to rest in peace as "we [Iranians] are awake, and we will always stay awake" (Curtis 1971). The next two days saw numerous grand galas and parties and, more importantly, a parade of imperial warriors from the different eras of the nation's past: Achaemenid 'Immortals,' Parthian horsemen, Sassanid archers, Safavid infantry, and modern units of Iran's imperial army, while the shah insisted on the significant meaning of the ceremonies, testifying to the validity of the country under his rule as the heir and upholder of the Achaemenids:

*On this historic day, when the whole country renews its allegiance to its glorious past, I, the shah of Iran, call history to witness that we, the heirs of Cyrus, have kept the promise made two thousand five hundred years ago. We have remained loyal to our mission; we have made our culture an instrument of peace and love.*

The ceremonies concluded with the inauguration of the Shahyad (Shah's Memorial) Tower in Tehran, home to the Museum of Persian History, where the Cyrus Cylinder, promoted by the shah as "the first human rights charter in history" was borrowed from the British Museum and displayed for the first time in the country, followed later by the royal family paying homage to Reza Shah Pahlavi, the founder of the Pahlavi, at his mausoleum. The four days of commemorative ceremonies were designed to help the Pahlavi, coming from a rural, nonroyal background, with no ties to prominent, well-known Iranian families, establish a symbolic line of descent connecting them to the Achaemenid Empire as the founding ruling dynasty of the country. This further distinguished them as a 'true' noble Persian family who seized back the throne from the Qajars, ending the long political rule of Turkic dynasties over the county. Drawing a parallel between the Pahlavi and the Achaemenid, the Pahlavi were portrayed as 'the successor' to and 'inheritor of' the celebrated Persian Empire, invoking a blessing from ancestral glories.

The use of and changes in the national calendar, celebration of new holidays, and the commemoration of the founding of the Persian monarchy to invoke the magic of nationalism were all state-sponsored commemorative strategies aimed at forging a sense of belonging, clearly designed to mark the Cyrus coronation as *the* turning point in the nation's long history and to highlight the nation's historical distinct ethnic identity, demonstrating that its ethnic roots date back to ancient times.

##### 5. The Shia Collective Past in the Islamic Republic (1979–Present)

The radical political change in 1979 launched a complex process of forgetting and remembering that was vital to the reconstruction of a new national identity. The calendar and the celebrated memories and heritage associated with the previous regime were deemed 'toxic', requiring redefinition and even renunciation. The revolutionary state once again assumed the responsibility of re-writing the past history, which manifested particularly in the country's national calendar, to 'correct' the long-lasting conflict over collective memory and identity.

It accused the Pahlavi regime of distorting Iranian history by wiping out the memory of Iran's post-Islamic past, deliberately suppressing commemorations of religious Shia sacred events, and replacing the memory of Shia Imams with praise for mythical and secular heroes and icons with no 'roots' in present Iranian culture. Consider the following quotation from Morteza Motahhari, the prominent clerical ideologue of the revolution:

*with the twenty-five-hundred celebration of the Persian empire, they wrongfully and vainly sought to imply the continuity of [the Persian] culture, that we established a culture twenty-five centuries ago with a unique [ethnic] soul that has continued to exist to the present time. This is a brazen and scandalous lie. (Motahhari 2006, p. 143)*

The Pahlavi's narrative was condemned as submission to and imitation of the Western nation-making model, and was claimed to obscure the 'authenticity' of the country and to have led to a 'blind' and 'empty' historical consciousness. It was denounced as a worldly and secular narrative devoid of any religious quality and cloaked in 'falsely promising' terminology of progress and development:

*we need to deconstruct all distorted and westoxficated frameworks that have been imposed on the nation in the past fifty years . . . we ask Iranians to rely on their Islamic roots and reject the corrupting west and its alienating culture. (Khomeini 1999a, p. 123)*

The religiously orientated narrative received its primary impetus from the desire to break from the imperial past and its exclusive appropriation of the country's ethnic heritage, seen as a direct assault on the country's religious heritage. It has been defined, particularly

in its early manifestation, in reaction to the vocabulary of the Pahlavi's narrative, in protestation against the 'malign' state-sponsored construction of the collective past.

The Islamic Republic thus articulates its alternative master narrative by elevating the nation's Shia heritage as the constituent core of identity and playing down the nation's roots in the ancient pre-Islamic past as historically fabricated, politically irrelevant, alien imposition (Saleh and Worrall 2015). The recovery of the country's religious heritage came at the expense of the previously glorified ethnic heritage, perpetuating the dichotomy between the nation's nonreligious Persian and its religious Shia traditions and heritage. The Islamic Republic thus falls into the same trap, highlighting the perception of a 'great divide' within the Iranian collective past. Its master narrative calls for the reassertion of a suppressed yet genuine Iranian identity, for seizing hold of the disregarded Islamic past as the way out of inauthenticity and historical decline. Seeking to frame the country's collective past to fit its ideological principles, it views the early days of Islam, the times of the Prophet, and the subsequent generations of Shia Imams that followed him as *the* period worthy of remembrance and commemoration.

The new reconstruction of the collective past skips the pre-Islamic time, describing the legacy and heritage of the Achaemenid and Sasanian empires as "morally corrupt" and excessively "obsessed with mundane and worldly values" (Elling 2013). Accordingly, while the Iranian past began with the founding of the Persian Empire, it was a period of political oppression, cultural backwardness, and economic marginalization; thus, it is not worthy of pride and remembrance but should be disregarded unequivocally. The post-Islamic period, when Iranians were 'sanctified' by the purity and integrity of the message of Islam is when the Iranian civilization has thrived, enjoying political, social, and cultural growth (Davari 2014). With the adoption of Islam yielding deep transformations within the society, Persian language, literature, art, and philosophy flourished, and the nation emerged at the forefront of what culminated as the Islamic Golden Age. This is thus seen favorably as the age, with its particular values and principles, to which a 'return' is desired—see for examples the works of Ale-Ahmad (1982) and Shariati (1971)—wherein the authentic culture and identity long buried under the infiltration of secular and Westernizing influences could be found and revitalized.

This period further serves as an inspiration and a model for the post-revolution era ahead. With multiple references to the leadership and government of the Prophet and Shia Imams, the new narrative seeks to mediate the relationship between state and society and to legitimize the new status and relationships of political authority in post-revolutionary Iran (Nasr 2007), replacing the centuries-old traditional monarchy with the 'custodianship' and supervision of Shia clergy over the political establishment. It presents clerical rule as the historical continuation and legitimate successor of the leadership of the Shia Imam, deriving its legitimacy from its call for Islam and a just society.

The new reconstruction of the collective past further forges a new sense of belonging with a collective religious identity by establishing a sense of continuity with the Shia past—a feeling markedly engendered with a distinctive symbolic reservoir of Shia traditions and memories (Dabashi 2011) presented in history books, literature, the media, and everyday culture—which sharpens the nation's social and religious boundaries, differentiating it from the neighboring societies not just in the eyes of outsiders but, more importantly, its own members. It connects historical experiences, concerns, triumphs, and destructive defeats; it lends meaning and significance to monotonous existence and ties everyday life to a collective Shia destiny. It particularly elevates the battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Hussein as the turning point: a perfect historical model of resilience, solidarity, and communal identity to be emulated and identify with. While ethnic heritage, myths, and rites were appropriated by the Pahlavi's narrative to legitimize 'the detested' previous political order and thus lost their social meaning and relevance, the tragedy of Karbala, the third and most emotionally intense part of the origin legend of Mohammad, Ali, and Hussein, is politicized and transformed from a religious practice wherein participants

solely emote with the suffering of Hussein to a politically alternative potent narrative for the struggle against injustice.

## 6. The Islamic Republic's Official Calendar

From its early days, the leaders of the revolution, particularly Ayatollah Khomeini, were aware of the political significance of the constructed collective past and warned against 'nationalistic' use and changes within the country's calendar as an outrageous assault on Islam:

*the monarchy is alien and against Islam and its history . . . the change of the calendar is a betrayal of Islam, an affront and insult to the Prophet, a more atrocious act than numerous killings [of the protestors] in the past years. (Khomeini 1999b, p.163)*

Understandably, soon after the establishment of the new regime, it implemented changes to the calendar to reclaim the country's long-neglected and obscured religious authenticity, reflecting its religiously orientated master narrative. Article 17 of the Islamic Republic's constitution thus sets the Hegira of Mohammad from Mecca to Medina as the starting point of the calendar, recognizing both lunar and solar calendars as officially valid while stating that "government offices will function according to the solar calendar" (IRI. Const. art. XVII). The adoption of the solar calendar is also justified as a reminder of the country's self-consciousness and expression of its Islamic values and heritage:

*We are proud to set the Hegira of Mohammad as the starting point of our both lunar and solar calendars . . . which is indeed a reflection of our passion and admiration for the teachings of Islam and the practices and guidance of the Prophet. (Khamenei 1998)*

Like its predecessor, the Islamic Republic views public celebrations and national days as political opportunities for presenting its own appraisal of the past and history. The imperial celebrations and days were deemed to be tied to the previous political regime and have thus been replaced by revolutionary commemorations and remembrance more in line and less noxious to the new political order. Religious memories and the rituals associated with them have also been reinvested with new significance to forge a new Shia-orientated collective identity.

Reflecting the sponsored master narrative, the Islamic Republic's official calendar consists of two commemoratively 'dense' clusters, replete with turning points worthy of commemoration, which are separated by a long, commemoratively irrelevant empathy 'lull' (Figure 2). The first period consists of a set of *religiously* significant events associated with the nation's religious origins in the past and with the tumultuous first century of Islam's history. Seventeen of the country's 27 official holidays<sup>2</sup> are marked to commemorate the country's religious roots. These include the events celebrated by all Muslims regardless of their faith, such as the birth of Mohammed in 570 CE (Birthday of the Prophet), his first revelation forty years after (*Eid Mabaas*), and his death in 632 CE, as well as events commemorated mainly by Shias such as the birth of Ali, the first Shia Imam and fourth Caliph (Birthday of Imam Ali), his appointment as the Prophet's successor in the Farewell Pilgrimage (*Eid Ghadir*), and his assassination (Day of *Zarbat*) and death in 661 CE. It furthermore includes the death of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam and founder of the Shia school of jurisprudence, and the birth of Mahdi (*Nime-Sha'ban*), the 12th and last Shia Imam, in 879 CE. Mahdi is viewed by Shias as the eschatological redeemer of Islam, who will emerge from his centuries-long occultation to bring peace and justice to the world. His birthday is celebrated with joy and passion as a restorer of the political power and religious purity of Islam.

As noted by Mosse (1990), religious rituals and commemorations indeed "provided the nation with a new depth of religious feeling, putting at its disposal ever-present saints and martyrs, places of worship, and a heritage to emulate". The pervasive presence of memorable Shia events in the post-revolutionary calendar is thus not surprising, given its deep religious roots. Compared to the pre-1979 calendar, the national calendar has seven more religiously significant national holidays; all are marked according to Shia traditions,

including two more holidays associated with the Battle of Karbala, namely *Tasu'a*, the ninth day of Muharram, and the day before *Ashura*, devoted to the commemoration of Hussein's companions, *Arba'een*, marking the 40th day of mourning of the anniversary of Hussein's martyrdom. It also includes five more Shia holidays, including the death of Ali al-Ridha, the eighth and only Shia Imam who lived and is buried in the country and whose shrine in northeast Iran, a magnet for Shia pilgrims, is a hub of Shia clerical political and economic power, and the last Shia Imam's appointment (*Day of Imamat*) commemorating the day Mahdi assumed imamate at nearly five years of age following the killing of his father, Hasan al-Askari. It further includes the death of Fa'imah al-Zahra, the only child of the Prophet and his first wife who lived to adulthood and the wife of Imam Ali. Fatimah's death shortly after the death of the Prophet due to injuries sustained after the raid of Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Caliph, is a principal subject of dispute and grievance between the Sunnis and Shias and is thus retold and commemorated with passion and anguish. Fatimah is deeply revered in Shia Islam and particularly in Iran; not surprisingly, her birthday is also celebrated as Mother's Day and Women's Day as an alternative to International Women's Day on March 8th, as part of the state policy of de-Westernization and of removing holidays that undermine the development of Shia self-consciousness. Both holidays are indeed an indicator of the state effort to reclaim its lost 'authenticity'.

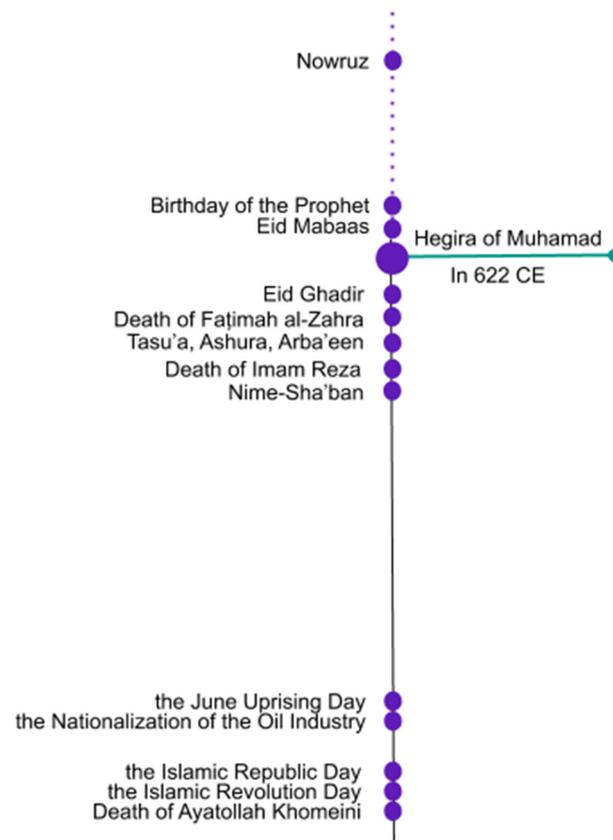


Figure 2. The Islamic Republic's National Commemogram.

This rather 'dense' century-long period is followed by a practically barren 1357-year unmarked history that, with the exception of the day marked for the nationalization of Iran's oil industry in 1951, is associated with virtually no national holiday and ends only with the events preceding the 1979 revolution. The second period consists of another set of significant political revolutionary events in the last forty years. Five out of 27 national holidays are designed to commemorate historical events associated with the 1979 Islamic Revolution, including the inception of the current form of government (Islamic Republic Day), the nation's symbolic birth as a sovereign and independent polity (Islamic Revolution

Day), the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader and founding father of the revolution, and the first outbreak of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic movement (June Uprising Day), revealing the obsessive calendrical preoccupation of the new regime with its revolutionary cause.

Forgetting alternative 'memorable' pasts, alternate possibilities for collective memory and identification are at the heart of national self-understanding. The holidays related to the previous regime and its sponsored master narrative, particularly the 'imperial' holidays, are viewed as a 'disease' or 'pollution' that might undermine the development of the Shia revolutionary collective memory and have thus been removed from the national calendar. In its early years, the Islamic Republic also sought to condemn and dampen public enthusiasm for commemorative holidays with Persian roots; in particular, *Nowruz* is a Zoroastrian practice with a strong association with the cultural memories of the monarchy. However, given their profound roots in the country's history and heritage, it later allowed them to flourish with slight elaborations or modifications, despite the strong objections from the religious orthodoxies. These commemorations were thus either assigned a new meaning like *Sizdah Be-dar*, which was renamed Nature's Day, or legitimized and celebrated as *Islamic Iranian*, such as *Nowruz* being allegedly sanctioned by Prophet Mohammad and Shia Imams. A number of *hadiths* are cited to give *Nowruz* a very strong Islamic significance, to be celebrated as the most blessed day "when God made the Sun rises, the wind blows . . . [when] the Prophet shattered the idols of Mecca and nominated Ali at the *Ghadir-e khomm* as his legate . . . [when] the Mahdi, 'the Lord of Time', will appear" (Shahbazi 2016). Moreover, despite the country's century-long quest for liberty and justice, expressed in the nation-wide Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909, the Jungle Movement of Gilan in 1920, and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1951, only one national day marks the nation's other politically memorable events, historically preceding and unrelated to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This conspicuous absence indeed reveals existential insecurity that calls for a commemorative reaffirmation of the revolutionary identity.

Recognizing the iconic significance of the calendar for presenting the ideological appropriation of the past and reviving the zeal of revolution, which had markedly faded with the end of the eight-year war (1980–1988) and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (1988), the office of Supreme Leader turned once again to the national calendar as a political artifact and named each year after historically important figures, celebrating their legacy or cherished principles, values, and goals such as "national unity and Islamic brotherhood", "national authority", and "innovation and development". Of the 22 names chosen since 1999, 4 were marked to celebrate a historical figure; not surprisingly, all of these were religiously significant, including Ayatollah Khomeini, Imam Ali, Imam Hussein, and Prophet Mohammad, with no references to the nation's ethnic heritage. Every year, in his New Year speech which is broadcast live to the nation, the Supreme Leader officially announces the chosen name for the year, and streets are later filled with banners and billboards bearing the name and quotes from the Supreme Leader's speech.

A particular commemoration that perfectly represents and promotes the Islamic Republic's master narrative is the Ashura mourning session and eulogy recitation held at the office of the Supreme Leader, where every year Ayatollah Khamenei invites all senior military and government officials to join him in commemorating Ashura and the martyrdom of Hussein. Ashura is the day when Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, refusing to pledge allegiance to the Umayyad Caliph, was killed in the Battle of Karbala with his followers, who viewed him as the rightful heir of the Prophet's legacy during the tumultuous first century of Islam's history.

Reciting the sacrifices and hardships of the Shia imams, and particularly mourning for the tragic death of Hussein and his companions, has been part of the country's culture and the reference point for almost all preaching for centuries (Rahnema 2011); however, seeking to cement its master narrative with Shia identity at its core, the Islamic Republic ideologically deploys and recasts this historically religious story and its ritual. Ashura, blurring the line between the real and the imagined, reproduces a commemorative narrative, a story

about a particularly memorable past that provides a moral message for the group members. It offers a politically charged narrative of resilience, solidarity, and communal identity. Ashura dramatizes and extols the essential message of Shia Islam and the fulfillment of redemption. It is rich with symbols, rites, and rituals that entail reaffirmation of one's ultimate commitment to the beliefs of political liberty as well as to the perseverance of Shi'ism as a distinct identity.

Hussein's death first represents active heroism, a historically failed yet politically and spiritually liberating resistance to the persecutor. It provides examples and vivid images of heroes' readiness, when oppressed, to stand up against a more powerful oppressor and to sacrifice their lives. This emotionally potent theme of the righteous rising up against the oppressor is ever-present and latent with political potential to frame or clothe contemporary discontents. The Islamic Republic, from its early days, has promoted itself as the defender of the oppressed:

*we are proud to be martyred like Imam Hussein on the Day of Ashur. In return, our names will be remembered till eternity . . . [these days] we have to make another Karbala. It is an honor to be martyred on the path of God and Hussein, to die for independence.* (Khomeini 1999c, p. 240)

In this narrative, the Islamic Republic always plays the role of the righteous, but the oppressor against which it stands varies according to the political circumstances: during the revolutionary years of the 1970s, it was mainly the Pahlavi, the corrupt regime cruelly ruling the country; with the start of the war with Iraq in 1982, Saddam Hussein filled the role of the oppressor who sought to crush the incipient revolution; later, with the removal of the Baathist regime in Iraq, the US took up the role.

Secondly, the establishment of mourning ceremonies on a national scale as an integral part of political culture fosters a bonding process. The retelling, reviving, and revisiting of the tragic circumstances and destiny of Hussein and his companions, perpetuating the twin notions of loving Shia imams and detesting their enemies, furthers the dichotomy of Shia 'us' and non-Shia 'other'. It sharpens the nation's sense of communal identity and belonging, distinct from other neighboring Muslim countries. Thirdly, it helps them to identify and vilify their 'other' enemies. The anti-Sunni sentiment played out in mourning ceremonies and the portrayal of Sunnis as historical 'oppressors' of the Shia community further strengthens the claim of the Islamic Republic as the only protector and upholder of the community. Ashura, thus, is as much about politics as it is about faith. It is a story with deep historical and religious roots and power at the hand of the state to impose certain political beliefs and to generate political support and legitimacy. It provides the Islamic Republic with a turning point in its master narrative where the Shia community fight for their dignity and independence.

## 7. Conclusions

The practice of national commemorations and holidays, whether in official state-sponsored ceremonies or in demotic commemoration, are subject to contestation and modification according to the political, economic, and cultural context. National days associated with religious patronages, commemorating their sacrifices and hardship, those celebrating ancient soil-tilling and agricultural rites, and more recent ones reaffirming state-society relationships, marking independence days, constitution-founding, and military or political victories are all claimed, reinvested, and even contested by the state and society alike.

A country's national calendar is perhaps the most revealing site of collective memory, wherein a cycle of holidays and its associated rituals, designed to commemorate selectively marked events, displays political maneuvering aimed at the articulation of a master narrative about the country's past and its national identity. Comparing changes in the national calendars, the inclusion of new holidays or the removal of the old ones unveils the state's tacit yet potent attempts to selectively elevate some periods as positive and essential for the development of the nation's memory and identity, typically periods of conquest,

pioneering, or political struggle for independence, and to defame some periods as times of recession, decline, and collapse. It shows how particular moments are added and presented as symbolic markers of changes in a nation's historical development and as turning points worthy of celebration in great emphasis and elaboration. The remembrance of certain moments as turning points reveals the political and ideological doctrines underlying their appropriation of the past.

Recognizing the link between national identity and collective memory, the Iranian states before and after the 1979 revolution made a special effort to articulate their master narrative of the past through commemoration of a particular set of holidays and rituals. With six national holidays directly related to the Persian heritage or marking imperial events, as well as celebrations like the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire, the Pahlavi sought to mark the Cyrus coronation as the turning point in the nation's history and to highlight the nation's historical distinct ethnic identity, demonstrating ethnic roots that date back to the ancient time. The Islamic Republic, however, sought to replace the exclusively ethnic narrative of the collective past and to replace it with a religious one, elevating the Shia heritage with 17 religious holidays and nationwide rites and rituals like Ashura, commemorating the martyrdom and hardships of Shia Imams. Iran's national calendars thus encompass a blend of religious and ethnic holidays, reflecting the complexity and hybridity of the nation's collective past and identity. However, the weight of each set of holidays and rituals, ethnic or religious, changes depending on the narrative the state seeks to articulate.

This study aimed to shed light on how the Iranian states have created new and recast old rituals and deployed national ceremonies and holidays for ideological and political purposes in order to forge a desired collective identity. However, the picture is undoubtedly incomplete if reactions, responses, and possible resistance of the society to the state-imposed narratives are not explored. The narratives of identity are negotiated, erased, misplaced, and redrawn on a daily basis. As Eric Hobsbawm holds, while the narrative of national identity is "constructed essentially from above, [it] . . . cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings, and interests of ordinary people" (Hobsbawm 1991, p. 10). In other words, the meanings that ordinary people attribute to national ceremonies, rituals, and holidays as political projects do not simply and unequivocally follow that of their architects, and thus need a separate elaborate analysis. Questions such as how the society in general, and marginalized groups such as women and ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities in particular, receive, respond to, and even negate the state-imposed narratives deserve much more attention and can be a topic of future research.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This research focuses specifically on national commemorative holidays, marked officially on the calendars issued by the state, and thus takes no notice of unofficial holidays of regional provinces, or religious communities. The data are gathered from the official imperial calendar of year 2537 (1978–1979).
- <sup>2</sup> The data are gathered from the official solar calendar of year 1398 (2019–2020).

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