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Memories of Empire: Imaginaries of Pasts and Futures in Iranian Anti-regime Online Spaces

Abstract: Past experiences with empire, whether positive or negative, play an important role in Iranian oppositional online spaces and collective memory more broadly. The Golden Age of the Achaemenid empire, the mytho-history of the Shahnameh, and the supposed decline following Iran's conquest by Arab-Muslim armies all serve as reference points to glorify the "Iranian nation," condemn the Islamic Republic, and (re)define what it means to be Iranian. Drawing on three case studies about heroization discourses surrounding recent protest "martyrs," this chapter analyses how Iranian memories of empire shape discourses both on diagnoses of Iran's present woes as well as expectations regarding its near future. It argues that references to select episodes of Iran's past are used to imagine a different version of the Iranian nation, separate from government-sanctioned ideology, which exists in a state of tension between genuine revolutionary enthusiasm and the necessity to mobilize for further protests. Heroizing narratives and the historical reference points they draw on thus serve as vehicles for debating the boundaries and possible future(s) of the national collective.

Introduction

"Memory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself."¹

This is one side of the story. Memories are events, people, places, feelings and sensory information that I collect over the course of my life, that my brain sorts through to decide – sometimes in a seemingly random manner – what to scrap and what to keep. The things I end up keeping form the narrative into which I integrate new experiences or, in particularly disruptive moments, the effigy I shatter because it represents a view of myself and my place in the world that no longer seems self-evident. When my individual narrative about who I am in relation to the world lines up with that of others, my narrative interweaves with

¹ Jan Assmann, "Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory," in Assmann and Conrad, *Memory in a Global Age*, 123.

theirs to a certain degree, adding knowledge about who we are in relation to one another.²

But there is another side to this story; memories are not born but made, and not only by body and mind that together form an “I” or a “you,” but by conscious efforts of communicating knowledge about past experiences. These communicative efforts by individuals, the media, schools, or other actors influence the pattern that filters my perception of the world around us as well as my reaction to it, thus granting the shapers of perception the power to shape reactions as well. As an individual, I am not even able to access my own personal past in an unmediated manner,³ even less so for the history that I share with others, which makes me part of a “we” that reaches back past my individual life span.⁴

In this chapter, I will put my focus on the meanings that a particular kind of memory has to a particular group or, to be more precise, the role that memories of empire play in constructing an alternative Iranian nation free from the ideological and political underpinnings of the Islamic Republic. I focus on empires instead of other, non-imperial, historical eras because people often draw on Iran’s past encounters with empires when searching for alternative historical roots for the Iranian nation to emphasise. I call these searches “memories of empire” to draw attention to the fact that they are not – and cannot be – anything but recreations that base their conception of the past (and the future) on present hopes and fears. In attempting to find a new way to understand Iran’s place in the world, and the individual’s place in the nation, people reflect the knowledge they already possess about a past that no one has lived, but many relate to: Iran’s memories of empire.

In particular, I will focus on three memories of empire that have proven influential since the latest cycle of unrest in Iran started in 2017/2018: the memory of Iran’s mytho-historical past as expressed in the *Shahnameh* epos; the memory of Iran’s Golden Age of empire beginning with the Great King Cyrus II (ruled 559–530 BCE); and the memory of Iran’s conquest by the Muslim Arab armies (ca. 632–661 CE) and the following Islamisation of Iran. I am including the *Shahnameh* alongside two more historically verifiable cases on the one hand because, in spite

2 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: C.H. Beck, 2006), 21–25; Adam B. Lerner, *From the ashes of history: Collective trauma and the making of international politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 66.

3 Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, “Memory and Political Change: Introduction,” in *Memory and Political Change*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3–5.

4 Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time maps: Collective memory and the social shape of the past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

of stylization, the text is based on historical writing, and on the other because, as we will see, it is often treated as an essential part of the story about how Iran came to be. In that way it is no different than the Persian imperial era and the Muslim Arab conquest.

I will analyse the views on these memories of empire that people express on Twitter/X⁵ through the lens of three so-called “martyrs” of past protest movements: Navid Afkari, a professional wrestler who was executed in 2020 allegedly for murder, but more likely for participating in protests, after a more-than-dubious trial; Jina Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish Iranian woman who died of her injuries in 2022 after she had been taken into custody and mistreated for a hijab violation; and Pouya Bakhtiari, a participant in the 2019 protests who was shot in the head while marching in the street. Martyrs and other heroized or exceptionalised figures provide a valuable lens on broader discourses including those on the intricate relations between past, present, and future because they serve as platforms to debate common values and group boundaries.⁶ Regarding my method, I thus used their names as well as significant dates in their lives to scrape Twitter/X for tweets and then coded them for references to the three mentioned memories of empire. On this basis I will provide an answer to the question of how memories of empire are made in Iranian oppositional online spaces to form an alternative notion of the “Iranian nation” –and mobilise people to fight for it.

What’s Past is Prologue: Collective Memory and Boundary Work

As a symbol, an institution etc. as well as a metaphor for (non-)belonging, collective memory shapes the way we perceive and think about the world as individuals born into a society. Maurice Halbwachs stated that “social thought is essentially a memory [whose] entire content consists only of collective recollections or remembrances. But it also follows that, among them, only those recollections subsist that

5 In July 2023, Twitter’s new owner Elon Musk renamed the platform to X. I have nonetheless decided to keep the old name for this study for two reasons: first, because I find it nonsensical to ignore the lexical connection (in many languages) between the name Twitter, the verb to tweet, and the noun tweet, and while the name is easily replaced, the verb and the noun are not; and second, because the platform was named Twitter during the time that this study and its source material covers.

6 Johanna Pink, “National Hero,” in Asch et al., *Compendium Heroicum*.

in every period society, working with its present-day frameworks, can reconstruct.”⁷ In other words, the past is woven into our every interaction with the world around us.

Collective memory and collective identity are thus interconnected in both directions, with the present influencing views of the past and the past shaping the community’s wants and needs in the present. For when a group flees into the arms of an imagined Golden Age and turns the past into a reference point for a sacralised order, it usually does so in recognition of its wretched present and unstable future.⁸ In Iran, the last half-decade has brought several protest waves that saw thousands killed by government forces, an ongoing economic crisis that pushed a third of the country’s population into poverty,⁹ a badly mismanaged response to the Covid-19 pandemic that cost another 145,000 lives,¹⁰ and the death of the last semblance of political participation with the accession of Ebrahim Ra’isi to the presidency in 2021. I will demonstrate how all of these factors have contributed to an idealization of the past that in turn raises expectations for a better future which, since it is based on a state of affairs that the nation had attained once already, could be within reach if only enough people fight hard enough to establish it. Certain historical events, like the rule of Cyrus II, thereby transform into “*political myths* [. . .] [that] not only reflect the social and political needs of the group that contributed to their formation but also become active agents in molding [sic] the group’s needs.”¹¹

What is more, refusing the interpretations of the present as guided by the past positions an individual outside the boundaries of their community; not sharing certain memories (including the conclusions drawn from them) means, in a very fundamental way, not belonging under the umbrella of a certain collective identity.¹² This is especially true when the memories, and the stories spun from them, concern a community’s heroes, martyrs, and other highly affective figures.

7 Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 189.

8 Bernhard Giesen and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Triumph and Trauma* (Boulder, London: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 9–10.

9 Iran International, “Poverty Doubled in Iran in One Year - Welfare Ministry,” *Iran International*, 2 January, 2023, accessed 28 July 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301025682>.

10 These are just the official numbers that the Iranian government reported to the World Health Organization; the real number is probably much higher. See World Health Organization, accessed 13 April 2023, <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/ir>.

11 Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), 9. Emphasis in original.

12 Assmann, “Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory,” 123.

Telling triumphant and tragic stories about pasts and mythical personalities fulfils several functions. Casting the present as a reincarnation of the past might help give a sense of order to current events, enabling people to mourn their losses and mobilise for collective action.¹³ Recounting stories of past sacrifice can grant some reassurance that the group has already survived hardship in the past and will do so again.¹⁴ In addition, reminding each other of the group's foundational stories helps confirm group boundaries and one's own belonging as it is "easier for us to ignore the fragility of boundaries if we see others who demarcate them in the same way."¹⁵

Like other groups defining themselves through their allegiance to their nation, people claiming to speak for the Iranian nation often project their group's history to reach back to ancient times. This naturally leaves them with a rather overwhelming amount of history to choose from: an entire parade of triumphant battles and painful defeats, ground-breaking scientific discoveries and intricate court intrigues, devastating natural disasters, and the slow rhythms of everyday life, all waiting to be turned from tangles of cause and effect into a clear narrative where A must always lead to B. It is important to note that this does not happen on its own, however. As Susan Sontag reminds us, "[w]hat is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened."¹⁶ Therefore, national(ist) narratives – or rather the powers that shape them – rely on "the exigencies of the present"¹⁷ as well as the needs and expectations of their audience and transmitters to create order where there is none. This means that the stories that gain a certain prominence for explaining how the Iranian nation came to be usually take up a hegemonial position, at least in certain (more or less bounded) groups. The conflict between different national(ist) narratives, and the heroes, martyrs, and villains that populate them, thus mirrors the conflict between different political groupings in Iran who place more weight on either the Islamic or the pre-Islamic part of Iran's heritage.¹⁸ Rejecting one narrative, one stipulation of what is important and how it

13 Samira Rajabi, "Political Memory and Social Media: The Case of Neda," in *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society After 2009*, ed. David M. Faris and Babak Rahimi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 240.

14 Lucia Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 31.

15 Giesen and Eisenstadt, *Triumph and Trauma*, 4.

16 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, NY: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2003), 86.

17 Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

18 Georg Feitscher, "Erinnerung und Gedächtnis," in Asch et al., *Compendium Heroicum*.

happened, and embracing another is thus also a rejection or approval of the collective identity that the narrative undergirds.¹⁹

This is particularly relevant in situations where group boundaries are highly contentious, as is the case in Iran today; with both regime supporters and opponents claiming to represent the true Iranian nation and accusing the other side of treason, drawing some comfort from a community of like-minded people becomes ever more enticing, which in turn reinforces those boundaries. At the same time, as boundaries between groups become more impenetrable, those between past, present, and future turn more porous. Psychoanalytical research suggests that in these contexts “time collapse” sets in:

“Time collapse typically occurs when a chosen trauma is reactivated. This term refers to the fears, expectations, fantasies, and defenses associated with a chosen trauma that reappear when both conscious and unconscious connections are made between the past trauma and a contemporary threat. [. . .] If the large group is in a powerless position, a current event may reactivate a sense of victimization.”²⁰

In such a state, the past is not only a memory that can be unpacked and then repacked at will, but also a filter that colours one’s perception of events. This does not mean that some people do not manage to spin the narrative in a way that affords them greater power, but removing oneself from the impact of the past upon the present is a difficult thing indeed.

Iranian memories of empire are currently among the most important sites where past, present, and future blend together and the battle is being fought over who or what Iran is. Iran’s mytho-historical past as well as its experience of conquest at the hands of Arab Muslim armies currently display a lot of “commemorative density” (and have for some time). Commemorative density, as theorized by Yael Zerubavel, characterizes periods or events that attract a considerable level of attention and discussion in commemorative acts, but also mundane entertainment or political debate.²¹ One can cite historical reasons for this; whereas the Pahlavi Shahs (1925–1979) laid a lot of commemorative emphasis on Iran’s pre-

19 Rosa de Jorio, “Politics of Remembering and Forgetting: The Struggle over Colonial Monuments in Mali,” *Africa Today* 52, no. 4 (2006): 82.

20 Vamik D. Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity,” *Group Analysis* 34, no. 1 (2001). The term chosen trauma, coined by Volkan, signifies that historical events (or rather the stories based on them) are not created equal; whereas some potentially traumatic events are forgotten after a few decades, others are elevated to form what Assmann and Conrad call a group’s “referential core” (Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, “Introduction,” in Assmann and Conrad, *Memory in a Global Age*, 8).

21 Zerubavel, *Recovered roots*, 8.

Islamic monarchies (and their literary incarnations like the *Shahnameh* epos) to loosen the Shi'a clergy's hold over the population, the Islamic Republic distanced itself from this narrative and instead focused on Iran's Islamic heritage. As will become clear, since one memory of empire was heavily favoured over the other by consecutive regimes with very different ideas about what an ideal society looks like, both narratives have become strongly politicized – the one lamenting Iran's decline from an early advanced civilization to barbarianism under Muslim rule, and the other praising the Arab Muslim conquest as a rescue from hedonistic decadence and inequality. These days, even many regime supporters would agree that something needs to be done about the interconnected crises the country is facing, but the respective Golden Ages that they raise up as models for the future could not be more different.²²

It is in our Blood: Genealogy and the Question of the “We”

Navid Afkari and the *Shahnameh*

The first memory of empire I will discuss might as well be called a dream: the mythical fight of Kaveh the Blacksmith and Fereyduun the Hidden Prince against the evil King Zahhak, which ended Zahhak's centuries-long rule and brought about the empire of the Kayanid kings. This story forms one of the central tales of the *Shahnameh*, an epic poem written in the eleventh and twelfth century by the Persian poet Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi Tusi. In terms of content, the *Shahnameh* is based on historiographical writing available at the time of its composition and recounts the period from Iran's mythical origins until the Arab Muslim conquest. It therefore merges fiction and fact in “a manner of historiography that has successfully fused its own mythic and heroic dimensions into its historical conscious-

²² Compare, for instance, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's claim in his speech for the fortieth anniversary of the revolution that the Islamic Republic “seeks to follow the role model of the government founded by Imam Ali” with opposition figure Reza Pahlavi II's accusation that “this regime's medieval mindset is not compatible with governance in the twenty-first century.” Ali Khamenei, “The ‘Second Phase of the Revolution’ Statement addressed to the Iranian nation,” *Khamenei.ir*, 11 February 2019, accessed 28 July 2023, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/6415/The-Second-Phase-of-the-Revolution-Statement-addressed-to-the>; Reza Pahlavi, “The Power of the People, United,” *Kayhan Life*, 20 October 2022, accessed 28 July 2023, <https://kayhanlife.com/news/kayhan/prince-reza-pahlavi-the-alternative-to-the-islamic-republic-is-the-iranian-nation/>.

ness.”²³ So whereas the *Shahnameh*, or rather its author, dramatized and to a certain extent romanticised the past as a time of great heroes, it would be wrong to say that it is “just” a myth.²⁴ Rather, it is treated today as a poetic expression of who and what Iran is.

The story of Zahhak is located early in the *Shahnameh*.²⁵ Zahhak, the son of an Arab ruler, makes a deal with the devil, who endows him with immortality and great power, but which also results in two voracious snakes growing out of his shoulders whom he feeds the brains of two youths every day to prevent that they eat him instead. Zahhak conquers Iran and rules it brutally for centuries, until one day it falls to the sons of a certain blacksmith named Kaveh to be sacrificed to Zahhak’s snakes. Incensed, Kaveh goes to Zahhak to retrieve his sons and then leads a popular uprising against the King together with Fereydun, a scion of the last true Iranian King whose mother had hidden him away from court. Marching under Kaveh’s apron, which serves them as a banner, and fighting behind Fereydun’s ox-headed mace, the people manage to overthrow Zahhak and install Fereydun on the throne.

This specific memory of empire – wherein a common-born hero saves the ancient Iranian empire from a foreign-born tyrant and lays the foundations for a new Golden Age – features many links to Navid Afkari’s story: his working-class background (Afkari worked as a plasterer besides wrestling), the importance of family as a catalyst (Afkari is said to have been a caring, family-minded person, and withstood his torturers’ attempts to get him to implicate his brothers in his murder case), his physical strength, and the identity of his opponent, that is, an old man who kills his young subjects to stay in power. In a comment on a much-shared article by exile news organization Kayhan London, one person draws the same conclusions and writes:

In Iranian mythology there is the story of a devilish ruler named Zahhak snake-shoulder, who came from a land of demons and fed the snakes growing out of his shoulders with young people’s blood. Feeding his snakes the blood of young Iranians granted him immortality [. . .]. This mythological Iranian story has come true today, and the seed and legacy of this devilish foreign ruler [. . .] has come back to rule over Iran and the old men [executing this rule] have discovered their need for the blood of young Iranians. With the difference

²³ Hamid Dabashi, *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic in World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 85.

²⁴ Saghí Gazerani, *The Sistani Cycle of Epics and Iran’s National History: On the Margins of Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 2.

²⁵ For a good English translation see Abolqasem Ferdowsi and Dick Davis, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, with the assistance of Azar Nafisi (East Rutherford: Penguin Publishing Group, 2016).

that today they spill the blood of young Iranians not for immortality in ‘this world’, but to please their made-up God.²⁶

As this excerpt demonstrates, people do not only compare Afkari to Kaveh in order to make sense of the present, but draw direct lines connecting Iran’s plight under Zahhak to its misery under the Islamic Republic. According to this view, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his inner circle not only behave like Zahhak, but are his successors in spirit. Drawing a parallel between Khamenei and probably the most unequivocally evil figure in the entire *Shahnameh* serves to indict the Islamic Republic’s ruling elite of regarding the country and its population as their personal property to exploit, sucking the Iranian nation dry and being in league with the devil.

Furthermore, it is also quite telling that (at least in my sample) the most popular reference point for Afkari is Kaveh the Blacksmith, as opposed to, for example, triumphant heroes of royal blood such as Fereydun or innocent and oppressed martyrs like Siyavash.²⁷ With Kaveh/Afkari representing the common people, distinguished not by divine grace but the courage of their hearts, it is the nation itself that defies and ultimately defeats its tyrant instead of waiting around for a saviour to show themselves. This sentiment is expressed very well in a graffito painted onto Afkari’s tombstone, photos of which circulated widely online. The graffito only quotes the first two lines of Kaveh’s speech before Zahhak, but I will cite it in full for context:

I’m Kaveh, and a blacksmith, sire,’ he said,
And as he spoke his clenched fists struck his head.
It’s you whom I accuse, you are the one
Whose fire’s destroyed all that I’ve ever done.
A king then, or a monster? Which are you?
Tell us, your majesty, which of the two?
If you reign over seven kingdoms, why
Must our fate be to suffer and to die?
Acquit yourself then, let me weigh your worth
And let your words astonish all the earth;

²⁶ “Seda-ye azadi va dadkhahi-ye Navid resa-tar va boland-tar az parisal [The voice of freedom and justice for Navid rings louder than last year],” Kayhan London, 13 September 2021, accessed 27 April 2023, <https://kayhan.london/1400/06/22/255933/>. Original in Persian, my own translation.

²⁷ The story of Siyavash, a descendant of Fereydun, is another well-known tale from the *Shahnameh*. It recounts Siyavash’s expulsion from the Iranian court after falling prey to an intrigue by his stepmother the Queen and his subsequent betrayal and murder by the hands of Afrasiab, a rival king with whom Siyavash had sought asylum. Siyavash is thus a paradigmatic martyr figure, too virtuous to survive in a world filled with guile and deceit; in pre-modern times, he was even turned into the object of commemorative rituals to mourn his death.

And when we've heard you out we'll see
 The evils that the world has done to me
 And why it is my son's brains have to feed
 Your snakes' insatiable and monstrous greed.²⁸

It is predominantly the subject positions in this speech that I find instructive: there is an "I," i.e., Kaveh, whose personal suffering represents the entire population's suffering, but who also condemns his sovereign and demands accountability, thereby claiming agency on behalf of the voiceless; there is a "you," i.e., Zahhak, who has to sit wordlessly through Kaveh's accusations and have his humanity taken away; and there is a "we," i.e., the Iranian people with Kaveh as their spokesperson, who are entitled to have their oppressor account for his actions in front of them and then pass judgment on him in an act of collective sovereignty. Referencing this scene on Afkari's grave somewhat turns the tables in that it is not the singular, tortured individual speaking for the voiceless many, but the many giving a voice to an oppressed individual. Nonetheless, this act represents a reclamation of agency through denouncing an unjust ruler in what could be read as a home-grown conception of popular sovereignty.

Lastly, representing Afkari as a modern-day version of Kaveh also raises expectations concerning the future, specifically the fall of the Islamic Republic and the beginning of a new Golden Age. As one person writes on Twitter/X: "The #criminal_clique [meaning the ruling elite] kept everything away from the people's lives and culture and now is the time to return to honouring our great personalities. Navid = Kaveh the Blacksmith."²⁹ The tweet is illustrated with a painting of Kaveh in traditional miniature style which shows Kaveh standing on a ledge, raising his fist and holding his apron-turned-banner while addressing a group of smaller figures. Both Kaveh, whom the caption helpfully informs us is actually Afkari, as well as the group are armed, but Kaveh is much larger than the other men and visibly more muscular. Kaveh/Afkari says: "Until Zahhak is overthrown and the blood of Navid, Mostafa, Sattar, Neda etc. is avenged, we will not back down."³⁰ This statement is thus a promise to the opposition's martyrs that the blood ties between them and the community that remembers and mourns them are as strong as ever.

²⁸ Translation taken from Ferdowsi and Davis, *Shahnameh*, 19. You can see the photo on a website dedicated to Afkari's gravesite: <https://navidafkari.info/%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AE%DA%86%D9%87%E2%80%8C%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1>, accessed 27 April 2023.

²⁹ Twitter @fandoq [pseudonym], 18 September 2020.

³⁰ Mostafa Karimbeigi and Neda Aqa Soltan are among the most prominent casualties of the Green Wave protests of 2009. They were both shot dead by security forces. Sattar Beheshti died in custody in 2012 after having been arrested for criticizing Khamenei and the Iranian judiciary online.

At this point, the metaphor starts breaking down – after all, Afkari is dead and cannot lead a movement – but the prediction of the future is clear. Just as Kaveh and the people that followed him did not back down until they had brought down the tyrant, today's Iranian nation will not stop until they have achieved the same result.

Jina Mahsa Amini and the Achaemenid Empire

While the Achaemenid Empire and its founder, Cyrus II (in Persian Kourosh, ca. 600–530 BCE) stand firmly in the realm of history, Cyrus' actual life and deeds leave much room for projection due to the scarcity of source material.³¹ What we know about him today can be traced back to three kinds of sources, with their own inherent biases: Greek historiography, such as the *Cyropaedia*, a (partly fictionalised) biography by Greek philosopher and general Xenophon; the Bible, especially the books of Ezra and Isaiah, which praise Cyrus for liberating the Jews from captivity in Babylon; and archaeological finds such as the Cyrus cylinder, which was discovered by British archaeologists in the ruins of Babylon and declares Cyrus' kingship over the Babylonians.³² From these sources, one can piece together some core dates of his life. Succeeding his father Cambyses, Cyrus became King of the local kingdom of Anshan (today in central/southern Iran) in 559 BCE and as such led a rebellion against the Median King Astyages. After taking over the Median throne, Cyrus kept expanding his rule until he had conquered Anatolia and the Levant to the West as well as the lands reaching up to the Indus River to the East, including Babylon in 539 BCE.³³ These sources agree that Cyrus displayed great religious tolerance, helping to rebuild the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.³⁴ However, it remains unclear which religion he practiced himself (if any).³⁵ He died on a military campaign in the Aral Sea region in 530 BCE and was buried in Pasargadae near today's Madar-e Soleyman in Iran.³⁶

31 Ali Ansari, "A Royal Romance: The Cult of Cyrus the Great in Modern Iran," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 3 (2021): 411.

32 A translation of the Cyrus cylinder by Irving Finkel of the British Museum, where the artefact is kept, can be found on the museum's website, accessed 27 October 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1880-0617-1941.

33 Muhammad A. Dandamayev, "Cyrus II the Great," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 6, no. 5 (1993).

34 Ezra 1:1–4 (King James Bible).

35 Menahem Merhavy, *National Symbols in Modern Iran: Identity, Ethnicity, and Collective Memory* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 73.

36 Dandamayev, "Cyrus II the Great."

Due to the nature of available sources about him, Cyrus the Great had been much more of a fascination for Western thinkers than for Iranians until the twentieth century CE.³⁷ This, in addition to the fact that there are no Persian-language sources about him, meant that turning Cyrus into an object of national identification required royal patronage, which he received under the Pahlavi Kings (1925–1979), as well as some creative interpretation. It was especially during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979) that the Achaemenids, and Cyrus the Great in particular, were raised to be paragons of Iranian virtue.³⁸ Cyrus' acceptance among the population was helped along by propagating the belief that a Qur'anic figure called Zulqarnayn (literally “he who has two horns”), who is commonly identified as Alexander the Great, was actually a reference to Cyrus, which granted him a veneer of monotheism and thus greater acceptability among the Muslim public.³⁹ Pahlavi enthusiasm for Cyrus at first proved to be detrimental for commemoration after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 because the new political elite rejected anything with an ideological connection to the Pahlavi era (which included most of Iran's pre-Islamic history). However, due to ongoing popular fascination with Cyrus, they soon reversed course and even found ways of appropriating Iran's pre-Islamic heritage for their ideological purposes, as evidenced by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calling Cyrus “the godfather of all *basi*-

37 For an overview of Europe's fascination with Cyrus and his subsequent re-import to Iran see Josef Wiesehöfer, „Ein kühner Beschirmer der Rechte der Menschen, seiner Brüder: Das Bild des Kyros in den Herrscher- und Herrschaftsdiskursen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit,“ in *Politische Kultur im frühneuzeitlichen Europa: Festschrift für Olaf Mörke zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Julia Ellermann, Dennis Hormuth, and Volker Seresse (Kiel: Ludwig, 2017), 179–97.

38 Technically, Cyrus II is not an Achaemenid but a Teispid in the sense that he (by his own testimony) did not descend from a person by the name of Achaemenes whom later Achaemenid Great Kings (starting with Darius I) claimed as a forebear, but a certain Teispes. The question of Teispid-Achaemenid dynastic coherence is murky because of contradictions in extant sources and the kind of ancestry-doctoring that many new rulers engaged in for the sake of legitimacy. However, these are discussions held among experts, while laypeople happily keep referring to Cyrus II as the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. Since I am interested in common perceptions, I will therefore follow the common nomenclature designating Cyrus II an Achaemenid and refer interested readers to Waters' breakdown of Teispid-Achaemenid genealogy: Matt Waters, *King of the World: The Life of Cyrus the Great* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), Appendix C.

39 Most commentators on the Qur'an believe this to be false; for an overview of the discussion see Menahem Merhavy, “Religious Appropriation of National Symbols in Iran: Searching for Cyrus the Great,” *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 6 (2015).

jis.”⁴⁰ In spite of this, and epitomising what Ansari calls the Iranian “romance of monarchy,”⁴¹ Cyrus and the Achaemenids in general are proving ever more popular as a political myth among opposition-minded, nationalist Iranians searching for alternative sources of national identity.

One of the most popular commemoration events is Cyrus Day, held each year on 29 October on what is believed to be either his birthday or the day he entered a freshly conquered Babylon. In 2022, this day coincided with the most intense period of the Woman Life Freedom protests because the traditional fortieth-day mourning ceremonies (*Chehelom* in Persian) for Jina Mahsa Amini as well as for several (mostly young, female) protesters fell into the same time span. Using this fact as an incentive to mobilize their fellow citizens, people framed their calls to protest in nationalist language by drawing on Cyrus’ example of resistance against violent and intolerant rulers.⁴² The exile news agency Unika, for example, posted a video on Twitter/X and YouTube in which they praised people’s courageous participation in Amini’s *Chehelom* and called on them to participate in even higher numbers in the *Chehelom* of “our non-blossomed flower Nika Shakarami” because “as 29 October, the Day of Cyrus the Great, is drawing near, we descendants and heirs of Iran will come out into the streets stronger than ever.”⁴³ This phrasing constructs a direct line between the figure of Cyrus, imagined here as a proud rebel against tyrannical rule, and modern-day Iranians, thereby comparing the Iranian people not with the chosen hero’s followers as in Afkari/Kaveh’s case, but with the hero himself. It thus draws two interconnected boundaries between and around the collective body of opposition-minded Iranians: one based on political persuasion, according to which only those people actively putting their lives on the line in protests are actual Irani-

40 Merhavy, “Religious Appropriation of National Symbols in Iran: Searching for Cyrus the Great,” 944. Italics in original. *Basijis* are members of a volunteer militia affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps.

41 Ansari, “A Royal Romance,” 405.

42 The Median King Astyages and the Babylonian King Nabonidus, both of whom Cyrus deposed, are said to have been tyrants who exploited their subjects and imposed harsh regulations for religious minorities.

43 Twitter @unikador, 26 October 2022. Nika Shakarami died at 16 years of age sometime between 19 and 29 September 2022 after participating in a street protest in Tehran. The exact date is unclear because after her disappearance on 19 September, the Iranian authorities did not inform her family about her whereabouts or hand over her body for ten days even though her family was looking for her desperately. Officially, she died of a suicide attempt by jumping off a building, but most likely she was beaten to death by the security services after being arrested. After originally handing over Shakarami’s body to her family, the authorities again abducted and secretly buried her in the village of Veysiyan in order to prevent the family from holding a public funeral.

ans, whereas those remaining on the side lines and those supporting the regime are equally excluded from the nation; and one based on ethnicity, since the Achaemenids were (most likely) among the forebears of ethnic Persians. This phrasing thus excludes all non-ethnically Persian Iranians, about half of the population.⁴⁴ Whereas the Woman Life Freedom protests were generally much more attentive towards the difficulties faced by ethnic and linguistic minorities, implicitly excluding language thus remains prevalent, especially in circles that like to trace back their lineage to the political myth of Cyrus the Great.

This attempt of defining “true Iranian-ness,” that is, opposition to everything the Islamic Republic stands for, also has a religious component. Commenting on one of the countless videos showing protest scenes in the streets of Iran, one person applauds the depicted protesters by saying: “Peace be upon each and every one of these true descendants of Cyrus the Great. Iran really is the abode of lions. May Ahura Mazda [God] shield you.”⁴⁵ Besides another claim to genealogical continuity between modern Iranians and Cyrus, the choice of word for God is interesting in this tweet. In Persian there are several options for invoking God, which carry different connotations. The most common term, “Khoda,” derives from the Middle Persian word for “lord” and is used not only in Iran, but in the wider non-Arabic-speaking Muslim world. It does not carry a specific religious connotation since it is used by followers of different religions (and atheists) – as opposed to another term, “Allah,” which is derived from Arabic and denotes (outside the Arabic-speaking world) specifically the Muslim version of God. In Iran, it carries the additional connotation of the speaker being somewhat Arabophile, potentially conservative, and a supporter of the Islamic Republic. The term used in the quoted tweet, Ahura Mazda, is specifically associated with Zoroastrianism, a pre-Islamic Iranian religion that several pre-Islamic empires are said to have followed, among them some Achaemenid Great Kings. Calling God “Ahura Mazda” thus makes a claim to authenticity in one’s Iranian-ness that goes back to a time before the Muslim Arab conquest (in this worldview) deformed Iranians’ religious sensibilities – when it was Kings and not Mullahs that ruled Iran, and its people were not sheep but lions. Consequently, now that Iranians have woken up to their heritage and rediscovered their courage, the future will bring a revival of the Achaemenid memory of empire and turn Iran into an abode of Kings once again.

44 Oubai Shahbandar, “No Country for Minorities: The Agony of Iran’s Ethnic Arabs, Kurds, Balochis and Azeris,” *Arab News*, 9 March 2021, accessed 27 April 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1822151/middle-east>.

45 Twitter @sarv [pseudonym], 26 October 2022.

The Islamic Republic, of course, will do anything to prevent that – including (again, in this worldview) murdering its own God-fearing citizens to distract the nation from its uprising. On 26 October 2022, three terrorists committed a mass shooting at Shiraz' Shah Cheragh mosque, killing at least 15 people. The attack was later claimed by ISIS, but on the internet, doubts soon appeared on whether it was just a ploy by the ruling elite to galvanize the population against an external enemy.⁴⁶ What made people especially suspicious was the timing of the attack, since it took place on the day of Amini's *Chehelom*, the day before Shakarami's *Chehelom*, and three days before Cyrus Day, in a city very close to Pasargadae.

It is to be understood in this vein when one person writes on Twitter/X: "This criminal gang [the Mullahs] started with the Rex cinema when ISIS wasn't fashionable yet, but our revolution won't be side-tracked under any circumstances and we will keep going until the fall of this devilish [*ahrimani*] regime and come out into the streets on Cyrus Day in Pasargadae and all over the country."⁴⁷ This person hereby ascribes the Achaemenid memory of empire transtemporal importance that is tied to both a time and a place. Cyrus Day, i.e., his birthday or the day of his greatest conquest, is understood to be a key date bringing with it the triumph of the Iranian nation's revolution against "this devilish regime," just as it did in the Achaemenid era. As such, it is strong enough to mobilise a critical mass of people to sweep away the "criminal gang" that started its rule by murdering its own citizens.

Furthermore, Pasargadae, the place where Cyrus is buried, serves as a physical space for the people to rally just as they did on the preceding days around Amini and Shakarami's graves – a place where they can feel their physical close-

46 See for example this video essay (in Persian), published by oppositional news channel AVA-TODAY on YouTube: Ali Javanmardi, "Barnāmeḥ-ye zendeh-ye vizheh-ye bamdad panjshanbeh 5 Aban-mah 1401," *AVATODAY (YouTube Channel)*, 26 October 2022, accessed 19 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QG1JvHQHeDs>.

47 Twitter @siahleiz [pseudonym] 27th October 2022. "Ahriman" is another Zoroastrian term denoting the principle of Evil (≈ Satan). The burning of the Rex cinema in Abadan in 1978 is generally understood to be one of the catalysts of the Iranian Revolution. It claimed the lives of around 400 people (the exact numbers differ) who were locked into the cinema when terrorists doused the entrance area in flammables and set it aflame. Forty years later, theories as to the culprits abound; while some claim that the former king's secret police did it to scare people away from protesting, others lay the blame on the Islamist opposition and its hatred of Western culture (including cinemas). Neither theory has ever been conclusively proven, much like who really was behind the Shah Cheragh attack. See Sebastien Roblin, "A Brutal 1978 Terrorist Attack Changed Iran (And the World) Forever," *The National Interest*, 23 April 2020, accessed 27 April 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/brutal-1978-terrorist-attack-changed-iran-and-world-for-ever-147381>.

ness to Cyrus and the empire he created. Under the pressure of severe violence against protestors, this person thus actively collapses the millennia between Cyrus' time and today according to the present's needs. According to them, Shah Cheragh, which hosts the grave of an important Shia religious figure, is but a distraction without definitory power and will – with its reference point being the Arab conquerors instead of the Achaemenid emperors – play no role in the revolution that is sure to come.

Pouya Bakhtiari and the Arab Muslim Conquest

When the newly founded Muslim community, still under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdallah (ca. 570–632 CE), started expanding its sphere of influence beyond the areas surrounding Mecca and Medina in 629 CE, Iran was ruled by the Sasanian Kings. Priding themselves on continuing the Achaemenid legacy, the Sasanians had conquered lands reaching from Egypt to Pakistan and from the Caucasus to the Eastern shores of the Arabian Peninsula.⁴⁸ The Sasanian empire only reached its greatest territorial extent in the first decades of the seventh century, shortly before it fell to the Arab Muslim conquerors. However, the wars that its ruler Khosrow II fought against the Byzantine empire to achieve this also severely weakened the Sasanian treasury, population, and leadership, leading to crippling defeats in al-Qadisiyah (today's Iraq, 636/637 CE) and Nahavand (today's Iran, 642 CE). The last Sasanian emperor, Yazdagerd III, died in exile in 651 CE, but many elements of court life, administrative structures, as well as the Persian language and the main religion (Zoroastrianism) were carried over into Arab Muslim rule.⁴⁹

On the Arab Muslim side, the expansion of their empire did not follow a central master plan, or even aim at converting large parts of the conquered populations to Islam. Rather, it consisted of separate raids organised and executed in a more or less autonomous fashion by individual tribes, mostly for economic gains and reputation, with the occasional larger battle for which the ruling Caliph would send trusted commanders.⁵⁰ In terms of religion, conversion to Islam seems to have taken place over the course of several centuries, with nobles converting earlier than peasants in order to secure their privileges and economic

⁴⁸ Eberhard W. Sauer, "Introduction," in *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia*, ed. Eberhard W. Sauer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 10.

⁴⁹ A. S. Shahbazi, "Sasanian Dynasty," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition.

⁵⁰ Abd A.-H. Zarrinkub, "The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. R.N. Frye (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

weight. Those who did not wish to convert were usually left in peace (as long as they paid a special tax) and given protected status as followers of a monotheistic religion.⁵¹

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Islamist opposition-turned-elite propagated a very negative view of the Sasanian era (and pre-Islamic Iran in general). Ali Shari'ati, one of the Islamist opposition's most influential ideologues, argued that pre-Islamic Iran's civilisational glories had long fallen to ruin by the time the Arab Muslim armies faced a decaying Sasanian empire.⁵² At the time, it was generally accepted that towards the end, the Sasanian court had been too occupied with internecine warfare to recognize the direness of the situation while its people were so overtaxed and exploited that they welcomed the Arab Muslim conquerors as liberators. While there is probably some kernel of truth to this, newer research suggests that this view of the conquest of Iran is overly simplistic.⁵³ This reductive view, however, does not stop either side – the Islamist regime or oppositional circles – from exploiting this memory of being integrated into a foreign empire for their own ideological objectives.

Therefore, while the Sasanian era still does not receive much (positive) attention from the side of the regime, in oppositional circles the end of the Sasanian empire and Iran's conquest by Muslim Arab armies is seen as a historical catastrophe that Iran has never really recovered from. In this view, the Islamic Republic, and the suffering it inflicts upon the Iranian nation, is a direct continuation of a conquest that took place 1,400 years ago, with the intervening centuries rhetorically collapsed into nothing. Explaining the woes of the present, the conquerors of old and their modern-day descendants are both constructed as essentially alien to Iran, external elements who subdued and continue to subdue true Iranians through violence. It is to be understood in this sense when Manouchehr Bakhtiari, Pouya Bakhtiari's father, states in a video message: "A government that shoots its own people is an enemy. They're people who came from outside and don't have Iranian blood in their veins. They're the enemy. They're transgressors/rapists [*motajavez*] who entered Iran."⁵⁴

The idea that a ruler who uses lethal force against their own population cannot possibly be part of the Iranian nation appears time and again in my material, usually while using the vocabulary of ethnicity to express this outsider status. Explaining why they will participate in Pouya Bakhtiari's *Chehelom* rite despite the

51 Hamid Algar, "Islam in Iran: The Advent of Islam," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 13.

52 Menahem Merhavy, *National Symbols in Modern Iran: Identity, Ethnicity, and Collective Memory* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 44.

53 Ansari, "A Royal Romance," 409.

54 Twitter @iranfarashgard, 6 December 2019. The term "*motajavez*" is used both for people who break a law or accord, as well as to signify rape.

danger of further violence, somebody writes on Twitter/X that the aim is “to bring about the immortal ideals of Pouya Bakhtiari and all the others who lost their lives protesting in 2019; to bring peace to the hearts of the grieving families; and to bring freedom from the claws of the tribe [*qowm*] of oppressors to beloved Iran.”⁵⁵ The term *qowm*, which I have translated here as tribe, can also be used for the English words ethnicity and race. In combination with the previous quote from Manouchehr Bakhtiari talking about Iranian blood, it takes on a less-than-subtle racist quality. In essence, this view professes that true Iranians do not kill their compatriots. However, people of other ethnicities do engage in that habit and must thus be tainted on a fundamental level in comparison to Iranians’ intrinsic purity.

One “symptom” of this tainted nature is duplicity, i.e., deceiving the nation about one’s true origins and intentions. One person makes an interesting comparison with the Soviet Union:

The leaders of the Islamic Republic, like the Russian communists, all came from abroad. #Pouya_Bakhtiari’s father said correctly that they’re not Iranians. A knife-wielding criminal called Djugashbari [Djugashvili] gave himself the name Stalin just like the Islamic Republic’s President named himself Hassan Fereydun [*sic*].⁵⁶

The tweet is accompanied by a video from a Persian-language exile radio station in which host Artin Partovian and his guest Dr. Zartosht Sotoudeh talk about how before the 1917 revolutions there were no communists in Russia because they all came from abroad, gave themselves made-up names, and killed anyone who disagreed with them, just like the Islamists in Iran.⁵⁷ Again, one key takeaway from this is the absolute conviction that a person so morally reprehensible that they would lie about their identity, enter another country, and kill its people must be a foreigner. It is debatable, but ultimately irrelevant, for the aim of this study whether Sotoudeh (or Manouchehr Bakhtiari) believe the clerical elite to truly originate from outside Iran in terms of genetics.⁵⁸ What matters is that to make sense of the present they construct the Islamic Republic’s elites as (morally inferior) for-

55 Twitter @bumadaran [pseudonym], 26 December 2019.

56 Twitter @bakelan [pseudonym], 21 December 2019. Actually, this person has it backward; Hassan Fereydun is ex-Iranian president Hassan Rouhani’s birth name, which he changed some time after the 1979 revolution, likely for ideological reasons since “Rouhani” means “cleric.”

57 The full video can be watched (in Persian) on Radio Shemroon’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzT3LFRZwPQ>, accessed 27 April 2023.

58 Generally speaking, there has been a lot of movement of prominent Iranian clerical families between what is now Iran, Iraq and Lebanon (as well as Pakistan and India) in the past centuries for political as well as academic reasons, but it is certainly not true that every high-ranking cleric has roots outside Iran.

eigners who subjugated true Iranians for the sake of personal gain and the spread of their violent ideology, just like the Arab Muslims did 1,400 years ago.

The connection with the Arab ethnicity becomes even more obvious elsewhere, for example in edited photos that equate Khamenei with the second Umayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, whose military campaign against the Prophet's grandson Husayn ibn Ali ultimately resulted in the schism between the Sunni and Shi'i branches of Islam.⁵⁹ Other examples include dubbing the Ayatollahs "Zahhakis" after the Arab tyrant who brutalised Iran in the *Shahnameh*⁶⁰ or calling the Islamic Republic's security forces "*Da'eshis*" (the Arabic and Persian term for ISIS members).⁶¹ It is clear that people using this vocabulary implicitly blame Arabs for exporting their supposedly intrinsic violent nature to Iran, which is rather problematic since Iran is home to about four million Arab Iranians, many of whom live in poverty due to the southwestern provinces' systematic neglect by the central government, and thus harbour deep discontent with the state.⁶² Mobilisation efforts across ethnic lines with an eye for intersectional oppression, as can be seen in the Woman Life Freedom protests, thus provide a valuable chance to broaden the resistance's base and raise its chances of success. Whether this will be enough to overcome this particular memory of empire remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This is one side of the story; collective memory, especially those parts of it characterized by high affective potential such as memories of empire, can be used to exclude and even physically harm those that are remembered – and thus constructed – as hostile outsiders. When the remembering group feels under pressure, as large parts of the Iranian population (and diaspora) do these days, it is possible to rhetorically collapse the boundaries between the past and the present, to weave past events into present occurrences as an explanation for the group's troubles. In this way, online actors layer their representations of the demon Zahhak or the Caliph Yazid onto Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, just as they enrich their vision of the nation with claims of descent from Cyrus the Great. Thus employed, memories of empire can be reassuring in that they bring some order to

⁵⁹ You can find one such edit, which proved quite popular on the internet, here: <https://www.balatarin.com/permlink/2021/7/21/5624474>, accessed 27 April 2023.

⁶⁰ Twitter @SaghiLaghaie, 30 November 2019.

⁶¹ Twitter @ghou [pseudonym], 1 December 2019.

⁶² Shahbandar, "No country for minorities."

the everyday struggle that is life in Iran; by painting their oppressors in the bloodiest colours and at the same time insisting that the enemy is ontologically different (and inferior) to them, it becomes easier to sort the world into black-and-white categories. Turned into political myths, these memories also facilitate mobilisation efforts by promising people a spot on the right side of history, but at the same time, their divisive and often racist undertones undermine true solidarity between all disaffected groups in- and outside Iran.

However, there is another side to this story; collective grief for Amini, for Afkari, for Bakhtiari, and for the countless others who lost their lives to the struggle against the Islamic Republic in recent years can be used as a unifying source beyond ethnic, linguistic, religious, or gender boundaries. Collective commemoration of the nation's dead can be an act of protest, a revolutionary symbol; it "introduces fellowship, consideration for vulnerability, and recognition of life as political values."⁶³ There is space here for political myths, such as the one epitomized by Kaveh the Blacksmith's speech before Zahhak, which counters the tyrant's disregard for human life with a powerful display of popular sovereignty. Employed in an inclusive way which elevates decency and solidarity over ethnic belonging, these memories can still provide hope that a better future is within reach – but only by divesting itself of the expectation that this better future brings a renaissance of Iran's supposedly golden imperial past. As a worldview, empire, with its primary mode of expansion being conquest and its main organizing principle being foreign rule by a superior people, is incompatible with the broad coalition that is needed to mount a successful resistance to the Islamic Republic's forces. Much as the past can instruct us on the paths the future might take, only time will tell whether this particular path can lead anywhere.

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⁶³ Dorna Safaian, "Trauer Als Widerstand: Über Ein Symbol Der Revolutionären Bewegung "Frau Leben Freiheit", " *geschichte der gegenwart*, 22 January 2023, accessed 27 April 2023, <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/trauer-als-widerstand-ueber-ein-symbol-der-revolutionaeren-bewegung-frau-leben-freiheit/>.

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