

The Politics of War Commemoration in Iran

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Abstract

Scholarship on collective memory shows that war commemoration shapes political legitimacy, national identity, and moral authority. Yet most research analyzes commemorative narratives while paying limited attention to the events through which memory is enacted. We shift the focus to public war commemoration as an event-based practice that overlaps with contentious politics and social movements: commemorative gatherings are organized, recurrent, symbolically charged, and can function as state-led movements when used to advance government agendas. We ask: Why do autocratic states hold war commemoration events at higher rates in some localities than others? Drawing on scholarship on state-led movements and research on the political consequences of war, we develop two mechanisms. First, similar to other state-mobilized activities, commemorations depend on a regime's social bases and organizational infrastructures and should be more frequent where such networks are stronger. Second, war studies show that war-affected communities—including veterans, martyrs' families, and districts with high fatalities—remain politically consequential long after conflict, creating incentives for concentrated commemorative activity. We analyze Iran's postwar mobilization following the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), a paradigmatic case of prolonged conflict and sustained state-led activism. Using original subnational data on commemoration events, mosque membership, wartime fatalities, and measures of veterans' and martyrs' families, we test these mechanisms. Negative binomial models show that commemoration is significantly more frequent in districts with stronger conservative support, denser mosque networks, larger student populations, and higher concentrations of war-affected constituencies. These findings show how postwar states transform the residues of war into patterned, state-led mobilization across space.

Introduction

On June 28, 2025—just days after a ceasefire ended twelve days of Israeli attacks on Iran—the Islamic Republic staged a massive funeral for senior commanders killed in the strikes. Hundreds of thousands attended, chanting patriotic and pro-regime slogans in a highly emotional display (Reuters 2025). At a moment when many observers predicted the regime’s imminent collapse or severe weakening, the event revealed the enduring reservoir of mobilizable support among loyalist constituencies. Such scenes, however, do not emerge spontaneously. They reflect a decades-long state project: the systematic use of war commemoration—especially remembrance of the Iran–Iraq War (1980-1988)—as a central instrument for consolidating support and responding to political threats.

Existing collective memory scholarship has recognized the political importance of war remembrance, but has primarily focused on narrative and discourse (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2013; Olick 2016; Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020). By foregrounding the contentious and performative dimensions of commemorative gatherings, we bridge this literature with research on contentious politics and social movements (Almeida 2019; Tilly and Tarrow 2015), which emphasizes variation in public events across time and space as a way to identify underlying mechanisms (Acosta and Braun 2022). This theoretical integration motivates our central question: why does the state organize war commemoration at much higher rates in some localities than in others?

Drawing on research on autocracy (Riley and Fernández 2014), state and society relations (Klein and Lee 2019), state-led mobilization (Ekiert, Perry, and Yan 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2019), and the political consequences of war (Wimmer 2014), we propose two sets of mechanisms driving this variation. First, scholarship on state-led mobilization shows that—much like social movements (Lu and Tao 2017)—regimes rely on their social bases and organizational infrastructures to coordinate participation and sustain public visibility (Khani and Kadivar 2023).

Where supportive constituencies and loyal institutions are denser, commemorative events are easier to organize, repeat, and publicly stage. Accordingly, we expect commemorations to be more frequent in localities with stronger regime support and deeper organizational penetration.

Second, war scholarship emphasizes the lasting political importance of communities heavily impacted by conflict—such as veterans, families of martyrs, and districts with high wartime exposure (Juan et al. 2023; Kestnbaum 2009; Kriner and Shen 2020). Because these groups carry moral authority and emotional investment rooted in wartime sacrifice, regimes have stronger incentives to concentrate commemorative activity in such localities.

To test these arguments, we examine subnational patterns of war commemoration in Iran between 2015 and 2019, roughly three decades after the end of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). Iran serves as a paradigmatic case for studying how wartime legacies shape state-led mobilization. Forged through a long and devastating war, facing persistent geopolitical confrontation, and exhibiting one of the world’s highest rates of state-led mobilization (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2019), Iran shows how postwar states use commemorative rituals to extend wartime political projects into peacetime.

We proceed in two steps. First, we provide a qualitative overview of the Iran–Iraq War, postwar commemorations, the discourse surrounding remembrance, the organizational structures supporting these events, and the core constituency behind the war that has enabled the state to develop an extensive welfare and symbolic system.

Second, we share findings from our statistical analysis based on several original subnational datasets: an extended dataset of over 12,500 state-sponsored events from 2015–2019—including over 5,000 war commemorations and funerals—an original compilation of war fatalities from the 43-volume Encyclopedia of Martyrs, and newly gathered district-level data on families of martyrs, veterans, and mosque center membership.

The findings support both mechanisms: districts with higher conservative vote shares, greater mosque-center membership, and larger university-student populations host more commemorations, reflecting the regime's social base and mobilizational infrastructure; and districts with higher wartime fatalities, more martyrs' families, and more veterans display significantly higher rates of commemoration, demonstrating the enduring political relevance of the war core constituency.

Our study makes four contributions across distinct literatures. First, in collective memory research, we shift attention from narrative and discourse (Jansen 2007; Yazdiha 2023) to the spatially patterned enactments of commemoration, treating remembrance as a public performance whose political force depends on where and for whom it is staged (Reed 2013, 2019).

Second, in contentious politics, while prior work shows that wars shape contention primarily from below through grievances and civic activation (Heaney and Rojas 2014; Leitz 2014; Tarrow 2015), we demonstrate how wars also generate symbolic and organizational materials that states mobilize from above, making commemoration a form of top-down contention.

Third, in research on state-led mobilization, where rallies have been the dominant empirical focus (Hellmeier 2021; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2019), we show that war commemorations function in similar ways: they are patterned, strategic, and rooted in mosque networks, conservative constituencies, and university-based organizations. This broadens the concept of state mobilization to include ritualized, memory-based events.

Fourth, in scholarship on war's political consequences, which emphasizes strengthened extraction and institutional capacity (Eibl, Hertog, and Slater 2020; Feinstein and Wimmer 2023; Slater 2018; Tilly 1992), we show that wars also build mobilizational capacities in the form of enduring war-affected constituencies that states continue to activate through commemorative rituals decades after the conflict.

War, Memory, and the Performance of Power

Sociologists have long emphasized the importance of collective memory in shaping political and social life. From Durkheim's (1912) view of commemoration as a moral ritual that binds communities to more recent studies of nationalism and historical narrative, scholars have shown how memory practices construct a shared past and define present identities (Jansen 2007; Olick 2016; Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020). As Hobsbawm (1983) argued, modern states often rely on "invented traditions" to naturalize political authority through selective interpretations of history.

Building on this insight, research demonstrates that states institutionalize and manage collective memory to secure legitimacy and moral authority. Through rituals of remembrance, monuments, and official narratives, memory becomes a political means that structures emotional attachment, moral obligation, and national belonging (Olick and Robbins 1998). Yet commemorations can also expose ambivalence and contestation rather than unity (Yazdiha 2023), as shown in studies of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where competing interpretations of sacrifice and nationhood coexist within a single commemorative form (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). In this scholarship, memory appears as an arena shaped by state projects but also open to interpretation, negotiation, and dispute.

War commemoration occupies a distinctive place within memory practices because war produces mass death, trauma, and moral disruption on a scale few other events do. Through memorials and ceremonies, states reinterpret the human costs of conflict by recasting death as national contribution, translating loss into narratives of honor, endurance, and collective purpose (Anderson 1998; Ashplant et al. 2013). By transforming death into patriotic sacrifice, war memorials and ceremonies provide symbolic resources for cultivating loyalty and national identity (Acosta and Braun 2022; Wedeen 2015). In defeated nations after World War I, commemorations reframed the trauma of loss into myths of honor and renewal, while far-right movements in interwar Europe

glorified the fallen soldiers, erected sacred monuments, and embedded remembrance into nationalist utopias (Mosse 1990). Such examples highlight how war commemoration becomes a vehicle for channeling past violence into present-day narratives with a clear political purpose.

Among its different forms, war commemoration unfolds through public gatherings that blur the boundary between remembrance, social movements, and contentious politics. Whenever commemorations articulate claims about state legitimacy, wartime performance, or political loyalty, they overlap with the domain of contentious politics—public, collective claim-making in which governments are parties to the claims (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). At the same time, commemorative events share important affinities with social movements (Almeida 2019; Snow and Soule 2010): they rely on routinized organizational networks, draw on shared symbols and interpretive frames, and cultivate collective identities rooted in narratives of sacrifice.

Beyond their claim-making and organizational dimensions, commemorative gatherings also function as rituals and performances. Research on ritual demonstrates that public ceremonies generate emotional energy, constitute collective audiences, and materialize authority through shared recognition (Alexander 2011; Collins 2004). Power itself depends on such enactments: political claims become effective not simply because they are articulated, but because they are performed and received in concrete social settings, where visibility, participation, and spatial context shape their resonance (Reed 2013, 2019). This performative, movement-inflected lens makes space central: commemoration is not merely a narrative, but a public act staged in specific districts, squares, streets, and campuses, whose political force depends on where it is enacted and on whom it draws.

Cultural sociology has richly documented how states construct meanings, symbols, and narratives around the past. Building on this foundation, we turn to a complementary dimension: the patterned enactments through which these narratives are publicly staged and circulated. Placing this perspective in dialogue with the event-centered approaches of contentious politics and social

movements (Almeida 2019; Snow and Soule 2010; Tilly and Tarrow 2015) shifts the analytical lens from what states say about wars to how, where, and when they perform commemoration. This reframing opens a methodological path: spatial–temporal variation in commemorative events becomes an observable indicator of the political work of remembrance and the constituencies the state seeks to engage. In this view, memory is not a static discourse but a set of performances whose spatial distribution reveals the dynamics of state-led mobilization.

This performative, event-centered approach shows that war can furnish not only grievances for resistance but also symbolic and organizational foundations for state-led movements and mobilization. Wars leave behind networks of relations, shared memories, and emotionally charged symbols that governments may appropriate to consolidate support and manage threats. Pfaff and Yang (2001) describe such practices as “double-edged rituals,” capable of generating both resistance and compliance depending on their framing. This dual potential is central to understanding war commemoration: it can function both as a space for opposition and as a platform for reaffirming state authority (Morris and Braine 2001). While in democratic contexts, memories of war tend to be contested and commemorative practices fragmented among political actors, autocratic regimes often aim to monopolize these rituals—standardizing narratives and consolidating commemorative authority—to incorporate war memory into their own political agendas (Ashplant et al. 2013; Glaurdić, Lesschaeve, and Mochtak 2021).

As we conceptualize war commemoration as a form of state-led movement in the postwar period, our argument bridges two major strands of scholarship that have developed mainly in isolation. One examines the effect of war on state and regime formation, emphasizing how wartime mobilization expands state capacity and institutional reach (Eibl et al. 2020; Feinstein and Wimmer 2023; Slater 2018; Tilly 1992). The other focuses on war’s bottom-up consequences—how experiences of violence, sacrifice, and social disruption generate grievances and collective identities

that fuel protest and civic activism (Bellows and Miguel 2009; Blattman 2009; Skocpol 1979; Tarrow 2015).

Our framework brings these perspectives together by showing how postwar regimes transform the symbolic and organizational residues of warfare into enduring repertoires of movement and mobilization. Through war commemorations, states convert the collective memory of conflict into a performative resource for sustaining participation and loyalty, showing how war's legacies shape both resistance from below and mobilization from above.

This form of mobilization shows how authoritarian regimes sustain engagement beyond coercion or institutional control. Scholars have long debated the foundations of durability in autocratic systems, identifying the roles of institutions (Gandhi 2008), managed elections (Schedler 2013), repression (Bellin 2004), regime origins (Levitsky and Way 2022; Slater 2010), economic performance (Ross 2012; Slater and Wong 2022), and international linkages (Levitsky and Way 2010; Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2017; Weiss 2013). Recent sociological work, however, emphasizes the state's infrastructural power—its capacity to penetrate and organize society through institutions, organizations, and symbolic practices (Klein and Lee 2019; Lee and Zhang 2013; Mann 1984). War commemoration may operate as one such mechanism: by organizing commemorative events, regimes not only project legitimacy but weave themselves into civic life. Commemorative mobilization and movements thus exemplify how states embed power within the moral fabric of collective memory.

In what follows, we theorize two mechanisms explaining geographic variation in state-led war commemorations in authoritarian regimes. First, commemorative mobilization builds on the same social bases and organizational infrastructures that sustain other forms of state-led movements, making such events more feasible and visible where regimes possess dense loyalist networks and institutional capacity. Second, the uneven social legacies of war shape where commemoration is

strategically deployed: communities marked by loss and sacrifice remain politically salient after conflict, creating incentives for regimes to concentrate commemorative activity in localities with larger war-affected constituencies. We develop each mechanism in turn, showing how state capacity and wartime legacies jointly structure the spatial patterning of postwar commemoration.

War Commemoration as State-led Movement

Building on this understanding of how states embed power in social life, we turn to the literature on state-led movements to develop our argument about the drivers of war commemoration as a form of state-led contention. We adopt Ekiert and Perry's (2020:5) definition of state-mobilized movements as "collective social and political activities initiated or promoted by state actors to further state objectives." Although state-sponsored mobilization is a longstanding feature of authoritarian rule, systematic research on it has emerged only recently (Ekiert et al. 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2019; Perry and Wolf 2024).

State-led mobilization is widespread across authoritarian regimes. In Russia, Vladimir Putin's *Nashi Movement* built youth-based mobilization capacity through rallies, ideological training, and summer camps (Atwal and Bacon 2012; Hemment 2015). In Syria, both the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the rebel government of Tahrir al-Sham mobilized massive crowds to display their governments' legitimacy (Balmer and Evans 2012; Dahir and Mourshed 2025). Cambodia's Union of Youth Federations, tied to the ruling Cambodian People's Party, mobilizes students through humanitarian and cultural activities (Vong 2022). Similar strategies are evident in Venezuela (Ulmer and Aponte 2017), Zimbabwe (Lebas and Young 2023), Ethiopia (Rhodes 2020), and Turkey (Yabanci 2021), all of which use public mobilization to consolidate rule and suppress dissent. Cross-national analyses confirm that higher levels of autocratic mobilization in authoritarian regimes

correlate with lower probabilities of democratic transition, underscoring its role in authoritarian durability (Hellmeier and Bernhard 2023).

In authoritarian settings, such mobilization at least serves two main functions: managing threats and sustaining support. Regimes organize loyalist rallies to counter opposition protests, project control, and occupy contested public space (Anderson and Cammett 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2019). They also focus on semi-autonomous spaces like universities, which have traditionally been centers of dissent. In response, governments have promoted loyalist student groups and integrated political monitoring into campus activities (Khani and Kadivar 2025).

Beyond crisis response, authoritarian regimes also mobilize to maintain engagement and display vitality. These activities often occur in areas of regime strength, where organizational infrastructures facilitate participation (Khani and Kadivar 2023). Like grassroots movements, state-led mobilization depends on organizational capacity—institutions that channel resources, coordinate strategy, and recruit participants (Lu and Tao 2017; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Walker and Martin 2018). Over time, such efforts routinize into recurring performances of unity and control. Although civil society is often viewed as a realm of democratic autonomy, autocratic regimes cultivate loyalist associations that extend political control and co-opt local loyalties (Forrat 2024; Riley 2010; Riley and Fernández 2015). These infrastructures institutionalize mobilization, shifting it from a crisis response to a ritualized demonstration of power in everyday life.

We argue that when war commemorations become part of the repertoire of pro-government mobilization, they operate in ways similar to other forms of state-led movements. Like rallies and other organized displays, commemorative events draw on the regime's existing social bases and organizational infrastructure. Dense networks of loyal institutions and associations facilitate coordination, recruitment, and repetition, making public commemoration logistically feasible and highly visible where state capacity is strongest. At the same time, commemorations help sustain

engagement among regime supporters and loyalists. By providing recurring, ritualized occasions for participation, they reinforce cohesion, collective identity, and ongoing political involvement beyond moments of acute crisis. War commemorations also offer particular advantages in contested arenas, such as universities, where the regime faces independent activism. In these settings, invoking martyrs and fallen soldiers as sacred national figures raises the symbolic costs of dissent, allowing authorities to assert presence and counter challengers while framing opposition as a challenge to shared national sacrifice rather than routine political disagreement.

Accordingly, we expect war commemorations—much like other forms of state-led mobilization—to be more frequent in areas where regimes enjoy stronger social bases and denser organizational infrastructure, and to appear in institutionally sensitive or contested sectors where the state seeks to extend its reach and contain opposition.

Constituencies of War

War commemoration extends wartime mobilization into the postwar era by engaging core constituencies—especially veterans—who remain politically consequential long after the conflict ends. Veterans often hold moral authority, dense organizational ties, and mobilizational capacity that can shape politics in multiple directions. Research shows that they may become advocates of conservative or authoritarian projects, as in interwar Germany, where districts with more World War I veterans experienced stronger right-wing voting and democratic erosion (Koenig 2023), or in France, where the memory of wartime heroism contributed to enduring autocratic values during the Vichy regime (Cagé et al. 2023). Yet veterans can also mobilize *against* the state: studies document their emergence as leaders of peace and reform movements, leveraging hybrid identities as insiders with moral credibility to contest official narratives of war, sacrifice, and national duty (Heaney and Rojas 2014, 2015; Leitz 2011, 2014).

The Croatian case further shows this ambivalent potential. Veteran organizations created and institutionalized during the Homeland War became what scholars describe as state-mobilized movements—politically incorporated by the ruling HDZ and repeatedly activated in support of its projects. However, the same organizations later mounted sustained, high-capacity protest campaigns against SDP governments that attempted to reform veterans' benefits and challenge nationalist memory politics (Dolenec and Širinic 2020). Thus, the very organizational infrastructure built through war and remembrance can serve as mechanisms of both loyalist mobilization and forceful opposition, depending on shifting political alignments. This ambivalent potential makes veterans a politically sensitive constituency.

Authoritarian regimes, therefore, seek to retain their loyalty through symbolic recognition, material support, and organizational incorporation. Commemoration provides a public arena through which authorities honor sacrifice, reinforce ideological alignment, and channel veterans' prestige toward displays of continuity and regime loyalty.

The fallen, though no longer living actors, continue to shape political memory through those who remember them, especially their families. Collective loss can generate both grievance and cohesion, depending on how it is framed. Studies of interwar Europe show that communities suffering higher wartime fatalities later exhibited more substantial support for nationalist and far-right movements (Juan et al. 2023; Surdea-Hernea 2025). Similar associations appear in the United States, where local casualty rates correlate with support for leaders emphasizing nationalism and military strength (Kriner and Shen 2020).

Authoritarian regimes attempt to shape these sentiments by institutionalizing remembrance and integrating bereaved families into state networks of recognition and material support. Through rituals that frame death as a patriotic sacrifice, authorities seek to “speak for” the dead, positioning their memory as an endorsement of the regime's moral and political order. Publicly honoring

veterans and martyr families, and linking recognition to allegiance, allows regimes to signal that loyalty will be rewarded while striving to prevent loss from transforming into dissent.

Accordingly, we hypothesize that *war commemorations occur more frequently in areas with higher concentrations of war-related constituencies, where the symbolic and emotional resources of sacrifice are most readily mobilizable.*

Empirical Strategy

To support our argument, we examine war commemoration in Iran through a mixed-method research design that combines qualitative description with quantitative analysis. The qualitative component establishes the empirical foundation for our theoretical claim that commemoration functions as an organized repertoire of state-led movements. It unfolds in four parts: (1) narrating the political history of the Iran–Iraq War and tracing the emergence of its commemorative landscape; (2) analyzing funerals and ceremonies, their dominant discourses, and the political messages they convey, while identifying the state institutions that sponsor them; (3) mapping the broader organizational infrastructure of mobilization—including mosques, universities, mass organizations, and ideological bodies—as well as showing how these platforms produce and disseminate commemorative practices; and (4) examining the cultivation of a core constituency of martyrs’ families and veterans, along with the political organizations through which they are mobilized. Taken together, these components clarify political logic, institutional vehicles, and target audiences of war commemoration, allowing us to conceptualize commemorative events as observable instances of state-led mobilization rather than purely cultural rituals.

Our qualitative analysis relies on both secondary literature and primary historical sources in Farsi. Both authors were raised in Iran—one in the 1980s through the late 2000s, the other in the 1990s through the late 2010s—and have directly observed commemorative practices in schools,

universities, mosques, and public spaces. While we do not cite these observations as data, they inform our interpretation of how commemorative rituals are experienced, performed, and understood in everyday political life.

We then turn to quantitative analysis to account for the spatial distribution of commemorative events across Iran. Treating commemorative mobilization as the dependent variable, we test two sets of predictors. The first captures the broader drivers of state-led mobilization, including the density of mosques, universities, and conservative constituencies. The second reflects constituency-specific factors tied directly to the war, such as the presence and concentration of martyrs' families and veterans. By integrating qualitative grounding with systematic subnational evidence, this approach demonstrates not only that war commemoration functions as a repertoire of state-led mobilization but also reveals *where* and *why* it is deployed with greater intensity.

War and Commemoration in Iran

Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988

The Iran–Iraq War and its subsequent commemoration provide a compelling context for analyzing war commemoration as a form of state-led contention. The Iran–Iraq War was the longest interstate conflict of the twentieth century, mobilizing more than 2 million combatants on the Iranian side and approximately 1 million on the Iraqi side, and resulting in an estimated 190,000 Iranian and 80,000 Iraqi deaths (PSRI 2014; Razoux 2015). Iran is also a global outlier in state-sponsored mobilization: according to the only cross-national dataset on pro-government mobilization in autocracies, it has ranked among the most active states in organizing top-down collective action in the past two decades (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2019). The combination of the war's duration, scale of mobilization, and enduring postwar state-led activism makes Iran a paradigmatic case for examining how major conflicts reshape authoritarian repertoires of mobilization.

The war began on September 22, 1980, when Iraqi forces invaded Iran. Saddam Hussein believed that Iran's armed forces—already strained by postrevolutionary turmoil—had been severely weakened by the new regime's purges of senior officers and thus expected a swift victory. Iranian leaders, meanwhile, had been publicly calling on Iraqi Shi'a to rise and overthrow Saddam as part of the Islamic Republic's early project of exporting the revolution. Although Iraq was the clear legal aggressor, Iran's official narrative downplays how its own strategic choices—especially the purges that debilitated the army and the revolutionary rhetoric aimed at Iraq—also shaped Saddam's calculations and contributed to the conditions under which the invasion became thinkable.

Iraqi forces initially captured several border cities, but Iran managed to halt their advance through an improvised yet massive mobilization effort that combined volunteers in the Revolutionary Guards and Basij militia with a conscription-based regular army (*Arteshb*). Facing an acute disadvantage in equipment and firepower, Iran relied heavily on so-called “human wave” assaults—large infantry attacks in which lightly armed volunteers advanced in dense formations to overwhelm Iraqi defenses. While these tactics occasionally produced tactical breakthroughs, they did so at the cost of extraordinarily high casualties (Axworthy 2016; Shiralinia 2016).

By 1982, Iran had expelled Iraqi forces from its territory and reclaimed the occupied cities. Rather than pursuing a ceasefire, however, the leadership—emboldened by early victories—chose to extend the war into Iraq. From 1982 to 1988, the Revolutionary Guards spearheaded a series of offensives aimed at toppling Saddam's regime and, as some leaders framed it, “opening a path through Iraq to Palestine.” Despite this ambitious rhetoric, the operations yielded no decisive breakthroughs. The United States and several European powers, alarmed by the revolutionary regime's regional ambitions, increased their support for Iraq, further undermining Iran's position (Ayatollahi Tabaar 2018).

Strategic miscalculations, internal disagreements among commanders, and mounting casualties eroded Iran's military capacity. Middle-ranking officers privately criticized senior commanders for their disregard of human losses and the continuation of costly offensives (Bastani 2020)—grievances that later shaped veterans' political orientations in the postwar period. Under growing economic and military pressure, Iran accepted a permanent ceasefire in 1988. The scale of failure was such that, as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani later recounted, the Revolutionary Guards' commander came to him in tears, fearing persecution for front-line failures (Hasemi Rafsanjani 2011).

Throughout the war, the Islamic Republic expanded and institutionalized a martyrdom discourse that had been revived during the 1978–79 revolution. Revolutionary leaders drew on Shi'i narratives of sacrifice—especially the story of Karbala, in which Imam Husayn, the Prophet's grandson, chose death over submission to an unjust ruler. In Shi'ism, Husayn's martyrdom symbolizes righteous resistance to tyranny. The state transformed this symbol into a potent political resource: wartime volunteers were portrayed as spiritual successors to Husayn, and battlefield deaths were framed as sacred offerings rather than evidence of strategic failure. This discourse legitimized enormous human losses and sustained recruitment despite overwhelming risks. Through school rituals, murals, posters, televised funerals, and cultural production, the state embedded martyrdom into everyday life, turning grief into pride and linking wartime sacrifice to political loyalty (Dorraj 1997; Varzi 2006).

The war profoundly reshaped Iran's political and institutional landscape. It solidified the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij as dominant political forces and instruments of coercion (Alemzadeh 2018, 2021; Golkar 2015a; Ostovar 2016). It intensified a siege mentality among political elites, reinforcing perceptions of an existential external threat (Razoux 2015; Samuel 2021).

It also changed domestic politics: the conflict erupted amid fierce competition among revolutionary factions, and Islamists used the war to marginalize rivals and consolidate control.

By 1981, they had sidelined nationalist elements and suppressed leftist movements through repression and by mobilizing their supporters in elections and public demonstrations (Abrahamian 1989). Recruitment rallies, funerals of fallen soldiers, and wartime ceremonies became central tools for projecting Islamist dominance. At these events, regime elites framed opposition groups as collaborators with Iraq and foreign adversaries (Arjomand 1989). This strategy—using war-related public gatherings to mobilize loyalists, discredit opponents, and assert ideological control—became a foundational element of the Islamic Republic’s mobilization repertoire, one that the regime has relied on continuously in the decades since the war’s end.

War Commemoration Events in Iran

After the war ended in 1988, the Islamic Republic reactivated and systematized the Karbala-infused language of martyrdom, transforming wartime sentiment into a repertoire of postwar public ritual. Rather than allowing remembrance to develop informally, the state promoted narratives that framed wartime sacrifice as an ongoing duty to defend the Islamic Revolution. Murals, school ceremonies, televised funerals, and memorial installations recast individual loss as collective loyalty, while welfare institutions that supported martyrs’ families linked everyday life to the moral vocabulary of the war (Kaur 2010; Khosronejad 2013; Saeidi 2010; Varzi 2006). Through these practices, the state extended the war’s meaning into the postwar period and positioned martyrdom at the center of political identity.

War commemoration takes two complementary forms: *martyr funerals* and *recurring public ceremonies*. Martyr funerals are one-time events centered on the return and burial of specific bodies.

Recurring commemorations—especially during Sacred Defense Week¹—are ritualized performances that revisit the war’s meaning long after the original funerals. Together, they embedded the war in both local mourning and the national civic calendar.

Martyr funerals merge mourning, Shi’i ritual, and political messaging. Coffins draped in the national flag move through town centers as crowds chant “Husayn, Husayn,” engage in chest-beating, and shout slogans such as “Death to America.” Military bands, clerics, and banners accompany the procession, while attendees reach toward the coffin to absorb its baraka. Farewell gatherings in mosques, universities, and cultural centers frame participation as a pledge to uphold the martyr’s ideals. Burials often occur in prominent locations—parks, hilltops, overlooks—transforming them into sacred local spaces frequented for prayer and supplication. Through this funerary culture, martyrdom becomes a public, performative experience that binds communities to the Islamic Republic’s moral and political project (Defapress 2025).

The political function of funerals is especially clear in moments of exceptional scale. The June 2015 funeral of 175 combat divers—whose remains were returned decades after the war—drew millions nationwide and tens of thousands in Tehran. Although the divers died in a failed operation, the state transformed the event into a dramatic display of unity and sacrifice. Officials invoked the divers’ purity and steadfastness, mourners touched the coffins for blessing, and pro-regime signs filled the streets. The ceremony provided a platform for denouncing the United States, affirming Iran’s nuclear rights, and emphasizing adherence to Khamene’i’s directives. Even ideologically diverse cultural institutions publicly endorsed the event. By converting a military disaster into a

¹ Sacred Defense Week is an annual commemoration in Iran, held from September 22 to 29, marking the anniversary of Iraq’s 1980 invasion and honoring the eight years of resistance during the Iran–Iraq War. It is observed through military parades, ceremonies, and public events that underscore the war’s significance in shaping national identity and collective memory.

symbol of resilience, the state demonstrated how funerals rework loss into political capital (Reuters 2015).

Rose Wellman's (2015) ethnography of the recovery and reburial of two unknown martyrs in a provincial town in Fars-Abad shows how such funerals operate at the local level. She shows how the arrival of the martyrs' remains activated dense organizational networks—Basij units, municipal authorities, and veteran families—while also drawing large numbers of ordinary residents into the procession. The affective intensity of the rituals—crying, praying, and treating the martyrs' return as spiritually transformative—transformed the ceremonies to extend beyond committed loyalists. After burial, the graves rapidly became sites of ongoing devotion, where residents sought blessings and made vows. Together, these cases demonstrate how funerary rituals convert wartime loss into a recurring, locally grounded form of political attachment, renewing the regime's moral vocabulary through embodied participation rather than formal persuasion.

Recurring commemoration ceremonies extend these dynamics into an ongoing civic practice. Held throughout the year and peaking during Sacred Defense Week, these events begin with Qur'anic recitation and prayers for the martyrs, followed by speeches from clerics, officials, and veterans emphasizing the duty to preserve the values of the Sacred Defense. Organizers display wartime photographs and soldiers' personal effects, stage artistic renderings of heroism, and incorporate military anthems, flag processions, and theatrical reenactments. Religious elements and honors for martyrs' families highlight the moral weight of sacrifice, while exhibitions and performances turn remembrance into a civic celebration that keeps the war's political meaning active in everyday life (Farsnews 2020; Tasnimnews 2014).

To identify the core themes of the state's commemorative message, we analyze war-related speeches delivered by Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i. These speeches articulate the authoritative narrative reproduced across institutions. In this discourse, the war becomes a "Sacred Defense": a

divinely guided struggle revealing the moral strength of the Islamic Republic. Losses and tactical failures are reframed as spiritual triumphs; even controversial battlefield tactics are recast as acts of devotion. Iran is cast as a faithful nation besieged by foreign enemies led by the United States, with its survival presented as evidence of divine favor. Martyrdom emerges as a moral template for citizenship, and cultural institutions are instructed to disseminate this narrative through literature, film, museums, and ceremonies. Depictions that emphasize tragedy or leadership failures are condemned. Through this framing, the leadership seeks to convert memories of loss into moral capital and extend wartime mobilization into peacetime, even if these aims exceed practical outcomes. For further details, see section A1 of the appendix.

This commemorative project is sustained by a dense institutional apparatus anchored by the Foundation for the Preservation of Works and Publication of Sacred Defense Values (*Bonyād-e Hefẓ-e Āsār va Nashr-e Arzeshbā-ye Defā‘-e Moqaddas*) and its nationwide Rahian-e Noor program. Established in 1990 under the General Staff of the Armed Forces, the Foundation sets commemorative policy, oversees cultural programming, manages museums and heritage sites, and enforces adherence to the official narrative of resistance. Rahian-e Noor organizes annual battlefield pilgrimages—bringing thousands, especially students, to former frontlines—where trained narrators frame the war as a moral and ideological template for citizenship (Rahianenoor 2018). Together, these institutions turn war memory into a year-round program of political education, ensuring that themes of sacrifice, loyalty, and anti-imperialism remain embedded in Iran’s political culture.

Although the Islamic Republic has developed a dominant official discourse of the war, this narrative is not the only way Iranians remember the conflict. Alternative interpretations—ranging from critical memoirs and literary accounts to films, plays, and documentaries—have long circulated in the public sphere. Scholars show that these counter-memories challenge the state’s heroic framing, highlight the human costs of the war, and articulate resentments that have persisted across

generations (Behrouzan 2016; Ehsani 2016; Farhi 2004). These cultural productions show a diverse and contested landscape of remembrance. Yet when it comes to public commemoration, the state has maintained tight control over the terms, symbols, and spatial forms through which the war is collectively remembered.

State-led Contention and Its General Organizations in Iran

Beyond war-related mobilization, the Islamic Republic has relied on a wide array of state-sponsored public events to reinforce ideological conformity and counter opposition. In the postwar period, authorities organized mass gatherings to promote conservative social codes—mandating the hijab, encouraging modest dress among youth, and policing gendered behavior (Shahrokni 2019; Teimouri 2024a). As the student movement revived and reformist factions gained influence in the late 1990s, conservatives drew on top-down mobilization to challenge reformist initiatives. In subsequent decades, hardliners continued this strategy to curb moderate factions and repress widespread protests, including the mass uprisings of 2009, 2017, 2019, and 2022, during which loyalist mobilization played a direct role in suppressing dissent (Golkar 2012; Razavi 2009; Teimouri 2024b). To organize state-led events—war-related or otherwise—the regime has embedded its mobilizational infrastructure across key social and institutional arenas.

Mosques were the first institutions incorporated into this apparatus. Prior to 1979, Islamists had relied on mosque networks to coordinate revolutionary activities (Kurzman 2004); after the revolution, these networks were institutionalized to sustain pro-regime mobilization. In 1990, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (*Shoraye-e Aili-e Enghelabe-e Farhangi*) established mosque centers (*Kanun-e masjid*) under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, formalizing mosque–state linkages. A coordinating council—composed of representatives from thirteen state bodies, including the Organization of Islamic Propaganda and the Basij—oversaw their activities. By 2025,

more than 28,000 mosque centers operated nationwide, serving as hubs for religious instruction, youth programming, and the organization of rallies such as Revolution Day. Members also participated in war-related commemorative practices, including weekly visits to the families of martyrs and veterans (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance 2021). Through this network, the state transformed mosques from potential sites of communal autonomy into thoroughly co-opted infrastructures of mobilization.

Universities, long central to revolutionary activism and political dissent, were among the earliest targets of ideological restructuring. During the 1981–83 Cultural Revolution, the regime shut down campuses to purge leftist and nationalist faculty and students and rebuild universities on Islamic foundations. Islamist student activists created the Office for Strengthening Unity (*Daftar-e Tabkīm-e Vahdat*), which later fragmented under state pressure. As student dissent re-emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, conservatives expanded control through loyalist organizations such as the Islamic Society of Students and the University Student Basij. Under Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), repression intensified: independent student associations were dissolved, faculty purged, and pro-regime groups mobilized to hold commemorations and rallies that fused religious symbolism with fidelity to the state (Rivetti 2020).

A particularly significant post-2009 development was the state's decision to bury Iran–Iraq War soldiers on university campuses (Elling 2009). This practice was unprecedented and deeply political. Universities were central to the 2009 Green Movement, with reformist leaders aiming to restore the war's moral language by highlighting commanders like Hemmat and Bakeri as true national heroes, separate from the Basij forces responsible for repression. In this context, burying martyrs on campuses was a strategic effort to redefine the moral landscape of student life. By introducing potent symbols of the Sacred Defense into spaces associated with opposition, the state aimed to reassert ideological authority, deter protest, and reclaim martyrdom as a state-defined

category. Student objections were met with crackdowns, and officials urged faculty and students to embrace the martyrs' example as a defense against "foreign cultural influences." These burials thus functioned not only as commemorative acts but also as mechanisms of discipline and political reassertion in one of the regime's most contested institutional arenas (BBC Persian 2022).

Two nationwide organizations anchor the state's capacity for top-down mobilization. The Islamic Propaganda Organization (*Sāz mān-e Tablighāt-e Eslāmī*, IPO)—established by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1982 and overseen directly by the Supreme Leader—functions as a central ideological arm of the regime. Through its extensive national network, the IPO coordinates pro-government events, produces propaganda materials, and embeds the legacy of the war into broader cultural campaigns.

The Basij Resistance Force (*Niroye-e Moghavemat-e Basij*), a volunteer paramilitary under the Revolutionary Guards, was pivotal in mass mobilization during the war and remains central to postwar strategies. With branches across the country, the Basij enforces social norms, contributes to internal security, and organizes commemorations and funerals, reinforcing narratives of sacrifice, loyalty, and resilience that underpin the regime's legitimacy (Golkar 2015b; Razoux 2015).

Core War Constituencies

The Islamic Republic maintains a comprehensive institutional system to provide for veterans, the families of martyrs, and former prisoners of war. At its center is the Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation (*Bonyad-e Shabid va Omur-e Isargaran*), a public body with dual leadership—one appointed by the president with the approval of the Supreme Leader, and the other appointed directly by the Supreme Leader. Established by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1980 and expanded during and after the Iran–Iraq War, the foundation was later consolidated in 2004 to unify dispersed responsibilities for different war-affected groups. It administers an extensive welfare infrastructure that includes

monthly stipends for disabled veterans and the families of martyrs, a large economic network that provides housing assistance, loans, and employment opportunities, and preferential hiring across the public sector.

The “Shahed Plan” offers educational privileges through dedicated Shahed schools, university quotas, and Shahed University. Healthcare needs are met through the foundation’s Shafa Medical Organization, which operates hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies and covers all medical expenses, including treatment abroad when necessary. The institution also provides transportation benefits, subsidized goods, and legal assistance for issues such as guardianship and inheritance. Alongside these services, a broader cultural apparatus—including museums, memorial construction, the naming of public spaces, and organized trips to wartime sites—supports the preservation and public recognition of veterans’ and martyrs’ experiences (Harris 2017; Research Center of the Parliament 2013).

Alongside the state’s extensive welfare and commemorative infrastructure, veterans themselves have built political organizations that reflect divergent trajectories of engagement with the Islamic Republic. The most influential of these is the Society of Devotees of the Islamic Revolution (*Jam‘iyat-e Isārgarān-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmī*), a conservative party established by war veterans in the late 1990s in response to Reformist electoral gains. The Society quickly became a pillar of the conservative camp—contributing to the formation of the United Front of Principlists (*Jebbe-ye Mottahide-ye Osulgarāyān*), gaining parliamentary influence, and helping elevate veteran politicians such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (president, 2005–2013) and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (speaker of parliament since 2020).

Veterans have also formed smaller organizations outside the conservative mainstream. Reform-aligned veterans created the Assembly of Devotees (*Majma’-e Isargaran*) in 2017 to challenge the conservative monopoly over the Sacred Defense narrative, though their influence has mainly

remained symbolic (IRNA 2017). A minority of veterans have aligned with opposition and reformist causes—most notably during the 2009 Green Movement, when some publicly endorsed Mir-Hossein Mousavi and later faced repression (Alimagham 2020; BBC Persian 2025). These efforts, however, did not develop into durable organizations comparable to the conservative veteran formations. Taken together, these patterns show that veterans’ politics are not homogeneous; rather, the most institutionalized and influential veteran organizations have been anchored in the conservative, pro-regime camp. Table 1 summarizes the major organizations that sponsor war commemoration events in Iran.

Table 1. State Organizations Involved in War Commemoration and Mobilization in Iran

Category	Organizations
Organizations dedicated to war commemoration	Foundation for the Preservation of Works and Publication of Sacred Defense Values (<i>Bonyād-e ef-e Āsār va Nashr-e Arzesh-hā-ye Defā-e Moqaddas</i>); Nationwide <i>Rahiyān-e Nūr</i> program
Organizations representing war core constituencies	Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation (<i>Bonyād-e Shahīd va Omūr-e Isārgarān</i>)
Organizations engaged in state-led mobilization more broadly	Mosques and Mosque Cultural Centers (<i>Kānūn-hā-ye Masājed</i>) Universities: Student Basij (<i>Basīj-e Dāneshjūī</i>), Islamic Societies (<i>Jāmeeh-ye Eslāmī</i>) Islamic Propaganda Organization (<i>Sāzmān-e Tablīghāt-e Eslāmī</i>); Basij Resistance Force (<i>Nīrū-ye Moqāwemat-e Basīj</i>)

Quantitative Data

Outcomes: War Commemoration

Our main dependent variable is the count of public war commemoration events in each district from 2015 to 2019. This measure builds on Khani and Kadivar’s (2023) original dataset on state-led mobilization in Iran, which was constructed through a two-stage coding of reports published by three government news agencies—Fars News, Tasnim, and Basij News—that together provide extensive coverage of regime-sponsored events. In this study, we expand the dataset by adding an

official source, DefaPress, which focuses on reporting Sacred Defense and commemorative activities and serves as the official news agency of the Foundation for the Preservation of Sacred Defense. This addition improves coverage of war-related events and strengthens the empirical foundation of our measure. To our knowledge, this remains the only subnational, event-level dataset of pro-government mobilization available for Iran. Appendix A2 provides details on the two-stage coding procedure and the integration of the new source.

The full dataset includes 12,518 unique events, categorized into several types, including war commemoration events, rallies, and funerals of state officials or Iranian soldiers killed abroad (e.g., in Syria). War commemoration and war funeral events account for 5,248 unique events, a substantial share of all state-led mobilization (See Figure 1 for the geographic spread of war-related mobilization). For comparison, our dataset records 3,902 rallies, highlighting the scale of war-related mobilization relative to other common forms of state-sponsored street activity.

To highlight both frequency and contrast, we juxtapose these war-related events and rallies with district-level data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a global dataset that systematically collects and codes protest and political violence (Raleigh et al. 2010). ACLED's coverage of peaceful demonstrations provides a comparative baseline, allowing us to situate war commemorations within broader patterns of protest activity across districts (see Figure 2 for the temporal distribution of these events).

We also consider the number of non-war state-sponsored events in each district. This includes rallies, funerals, and memorials for state-affiliated figures such as clerics or security forces killed in clashes by political armed insurgents or smugglers, as well as short-term, state-affiliated volunteer service missions (*ordū-ye jahādi*) organized by students, clerics, physicians, and other groups in disadvantaged regions.

Through computational text analysis, we also identify both the themes emphasized and the actors present at war-related commemorative events. Although many reports are brief and omit thematic details, when themes are mentioned, they consistently reflect the Islamic Republic's official repertoire. The most frequent topics include martyrdom (74%), loyalty to the Supreme Leader (30%), the Sacred Defense (25%), support for the revolution (20%), and anti-imperialism (18%). Additional checks show that thematic content is reported more frequently in larger cities, suggesting that missing details arise primarily from reporting bias rather than substantive differences across events.

Actor information shows a similarly patterned structure. Among events with identifiable participants, the most frequently mentioned actors are martyrs' families (30%), state officials (40%), and clergy (36%). Other groups—such as the IRGC, Basij, Army units, and university students—also appear regularly. Taken together, these patterns underscore the dual foundations of commemorative mobilization: the presence of state officials and security institutions reveals direct state coordination; clergy participation reflects the regime's social base; and martyrs' families signal the activation of core war-affected constituencies.

Because our theoretical focus concerns *where* commemorations are held rather than variation in thematic content or speaker composition, missing information in some news reports does not undermine the analysis. Instead, the consistent themes and actor profiles, when reported, reinforce existing scholarly accounts and our own field observations, suggesting that events without explicit details likely followed the same official script.

Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of War-Related Mobilization Across Iranian Districts

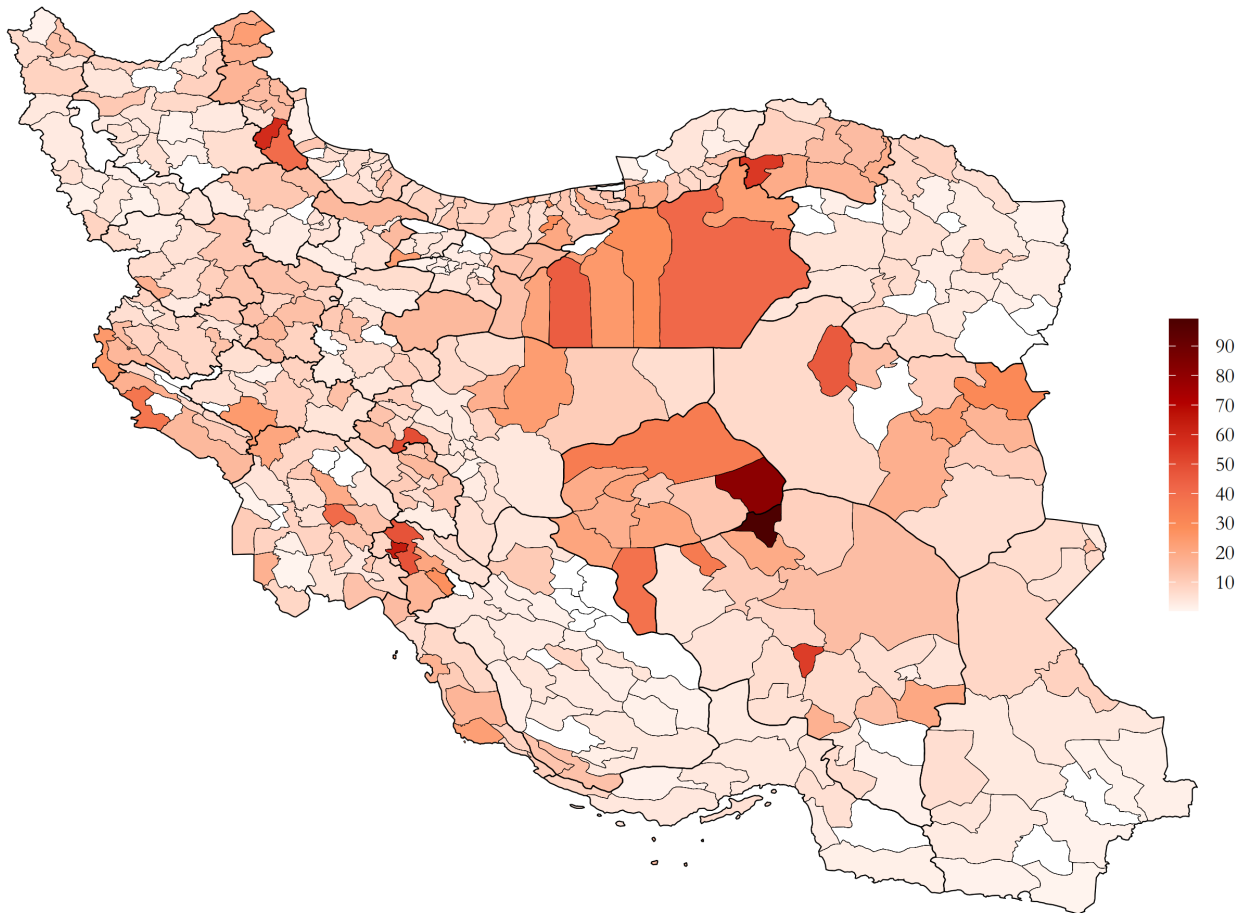


Figure 1. War-related mobilization events per 100,000 population (2015-2019). The measure includes war commemoration ceremonies and war martyr funeral events, normalized by district population to control for size differences. Higher values (darker red) indicate greater mobilization intensity relative to the population. Districts in white had no recorded instances of war mobilization during the study period.

Independent Variables

Infrastructures of State-Sponsored Mobilization

We include three sets of independent variables—mosque-center membership, university students, and conservative vote shares—that capture the main drivers of state-led mobilization in Iran.

Mosque-Center Membership

Mosque centers are state-sponsored organizations embedded in mosques across the country that conduct religious programming and mobilize participants for regime-organized events. Using

computational web scraping, we collected membership data for more than 28,000 mosque centers from the database², aggregated them to the district level, and constructed a variable measuring the share of mosque-center members in each district's population.

University Students

We include a measure capturing the percentage of college students in each district, drawn from the 2016 national census.

Conservative Vote Share

We use the percentage of conservative votes in the 2017 presidential election—measured as Ebrahim Raisi's share of all votes—as a contemporary indicator of regime support in the postwar period. Election results are sourced from the Ministry of Interior.

Core War Constituency (CWC)

To capture the core constituency most directly shaped by the human costs of the Iran–Iraq War, we construct three variables at the district level: (1) the percentage of war fatalities, (2) the percentage of martyr-family households, and (3) the percentage of registered veterans. Because these measures overlap conceptually and empirically, we also use factor analysis to construct a single index of war core constituencies. In our regression models, we include all four measures (the three components plus the index) to show robustness. Details of the factor analysis are provided in appendix section A3.

Islamic Republic Martyrs Dataset (IRMD)

Although narrative histories of the Iran–Iraq War are extensive, systematic quantitative research on war mobilization in the global South remains scarce—largely due to limited access to detailed microdata. Existing quantitative studies of war overwhelmingly focus on countries in the global North (Juan et al. 2024; Koenig 2023; Kriner and Shen 2020). Even in well-studied cases like World

² <https://bachehayemasjed.ir/>

War I, fatality data disproportionately reflect European soldiers, leaving colonial conscripts underdocumented.

To fill this gap in existing data, we introduce an original dataset of Iranian war fatalities drawn from a comprehensive 43-volume encyclopedia published by the Martyrs and Veterans Foundation of the Islamic Republic. In total, the encyclopedia provides biographical records for 215,025 individuals, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Iranian Fatalities by Conflict Period and Type

Conflict Period/Type	Fatalities
Islamists killed in protests or executed under Pahlavi regime	117
1978–79 Revolutionary protests	2,461
Post-revolutionary clashes with armed opposition	3,498
Iran–Iraq War (1980–88)	194,647
Postwar clashes, accidents, or border incidents	15,302

This dataset fills a major empirical gap by providing detailed individual-level fatality data for a large-scale war in the global South. Using PDFs of all 43 volumes, we applied computational text-processing and coding procedures to extract and standardize biographical information, including birth and death dates, birthplace, cause of death, education, and occupation. See Appendix section A4 for further details.

War Fatalities

Our primary measure captures district-level fatality rates. We aggregate the number of Iran–Iraq War deaths by birthplace, which provides the most consistent and complete indicator of a district’s demographic contribution to the war effort. Because many bodies were never recovered, birthplace is preferable to burial location, though we use burial-based measures as a robustness check. Fatality rates are standardized to the 2016 district population.

Martyrs' Families

We also include the percentage of martyr-family households—families officially designated as “martyrs’ families” and eligible for stipends and benefits from the Foundation of Martyrs. Although this dataset includes prewar, wartime, and postwar martyrs, approximately 84% of all cases in the encyclopedia are from the Iran–Iraq War, making this the closest available proxy for households most affected by wartime fatalities. We digitized the data because they were published in PDF format and collected from Iran’s provincial statistical yearbooks, which report district-level counts of families of martyrs (Statistical Centre of Iran 2016).

Veterans

We include a measure capturing the percentage of registered veterans in each district. District-level veteran counts are also taken from the provincial statistical yearbooks. Using a combination of computational extraction and manual coding, we digitized and standardized these figures (see Appendix Section A.5 for the coding procedure).

Figure 2. Monthly Mobilization Events in Iran by Type (2015-2019)

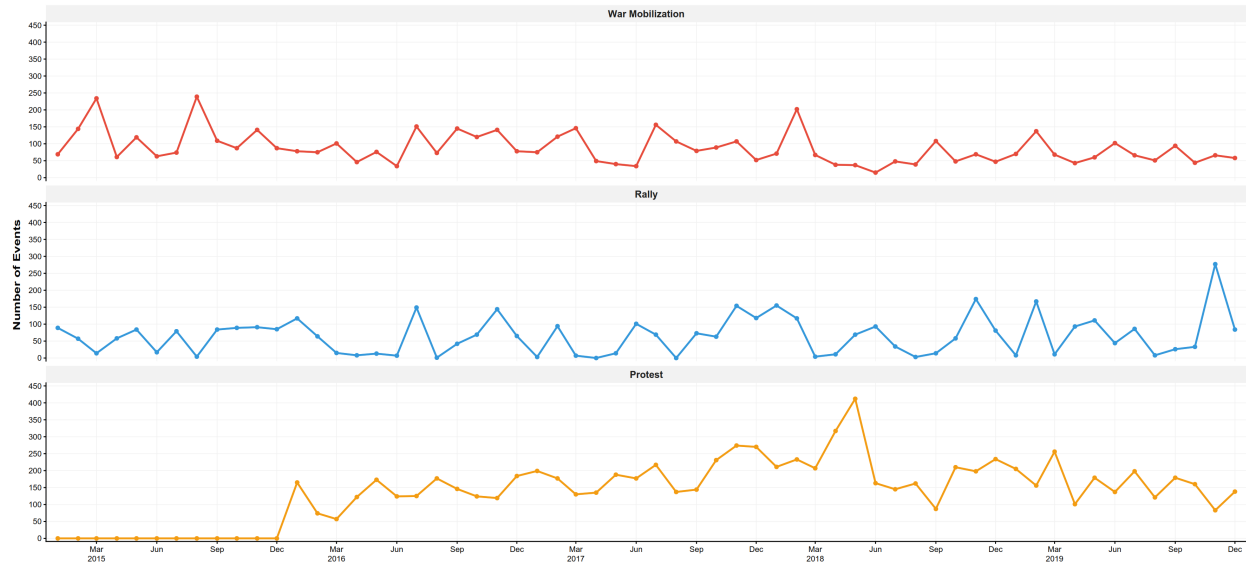


Figure 2. Monthly counts of state-sponsored events (war mobilization and rallies) versus opposition protests (2015-2019).

Controls

We include several control variables to ensure that the relationship between war core constituencies and postwar state-led mobilization is not confounded by preexisting political or demographic factors. First, we draw on our original Islamic Republic Martyrs Dataset (IRMD) to measure prewar pro-regime support. The IRMD records three categories of fatalities prior to the war:

- (1) Islamists killed under the monarchy; (2) individuals killed during the 1978–79 Revolution; and
- (3) individuals killed in clashes between the Islamic Republic and armed opposition groups before the war.

Combined, these categories capture variation in Islamist support across districts during three distinct prewar periods. In our main models, we aggregate fatalities from all three categories to construct a district-level measure of overall Islamist prewar support, allowing us to distinguish the effect of wartime mobilization from preexisting backing of Islamist forces.

Second, we include the share of public employees in each district. Because the Islamic Republic has long used the public sector as a channel for pro-government mobilization, this sector constitutes an important form of sectoral control. We rely on the 2011 census to report this information and to construct this measure.

Third, we include a variable identifying Sunni-majority districts. Sunnis constitute Iran's largest religious minority, and because the Islamic Republic's mobilization repertoire—both during the war and in the postwar period—relies heavily on Shi'i symbolism, it is plausible that recruitment and mobilization were lower in Sunni regions. Including this variable ensures that religious-demographic differences do not confound the estimated effect of war fatalities on state-led mobilization.

Finally, we control for district population size, urbanization, and distance from both the national capital and the provincial capital. To reduce skewness, we take the natural logarithm of population size and distance measures. For ease of comparison, all independent variables are standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation, resulting in a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables appear in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	P5	P95	N
War-related Pro-government Mobilization	13.555	25.934	0.000	284.000	0.000	58.000	429
Non-war-related Pro-government Mobilization	18.028	38.403	0.000	463.000	1.000	84.000	429
Core War Constituencies	0.000	0.875	-1.185	5.559	-1.171	1.215	429
Conservative Votes %	41.962	15.666	4.427	86.123	14.089	70.611	429
Mosque Members %	4.627	5.525	0.080	40.278	0.634	15.462	429
College Students %	3.599	1.646	0.850	19.730	1.558	6.356	429
State Employees %	18.509	7.869	3.726	73.376	8.415	33.589	429
Sunni Presence	0.590	1.018	0.000	3.000	0.000	3.000	429
District Population	186,000	505,000	7,402	8,740,000	23,929	536,000	429
Urban Population %	55.928	22.039	5.765	99.505	16.560	90.248	429
Distance to Province Center (km)	131.014	104.738	0.000	657.000	0.000	328.000	429
Distance to Capital (km)	686.301	392.479	0.000	1,807	103.000	1,451	429
Pre-War Fatalities	0.006	0.010	0.000	0.106	0.000	0.024	429
Veterans %	1.459	1.098	0.000	9.278	0.000	2.957	429
Martyrs' Families %	1.670	1.554	0.000	12.886	0.000	4.569	429
War Fatalities %	0.272	0.255	0.000	1.910	0.000	0.752	429

Notes: All values reported on their original metrics (eg, before log-transformation). SD = Standard Deviation; Min = Minimum value; Max = Maximum value; P5 = 5th percentile; P95 = 95th percentile; N = Number of observations.

Statistical Analysis

Our unit of analysis is the district. The outcome variable is the number of war commemorations and other state-sponsored events recorded at the district level between 2015 and 2019. Because this outcome is a count variable, we use negative binomial regression to estimate the effects of war fatalities and other confounders on event frequency (Allison and Waterman 2002; Hilbe 2014). Negative binomial models are preferred over Poisson models, given the problem of overdispersion common to protest event data in general and to our data on pro-government events in particular (Hendrix and Haggard 2015).

Table 4. Negative Binomial Regression Models

	Dependent Variable					
	(1) War-related Mobilization	(2) Non-war Mobilization	(3) War-related Mobilization	(4) War-related Mobilization	(5) War-related Mobilization	(6) War-related Mobilization
Core War Constituencies (Standardized)	1.202*** (0.0606)	1.002 (0.0484)				
Veterans % (Standardized)			1.210*** (0.0614)			1.181* (0.0877)
Martyrs' Families % (Standardized)				1.122* (0.0510)		0.968 (0.0633)
War Fatalities % (Standardized)					1.220*** (0.0708)	1.133+ (0.0726)
Conservative Votes % (Standardized)	1.166** (0.0572)	1.116* (0.0523)	1.173** (0.0572)	1.167** (0.0580)	1.176*** (0.0579)	1.175*** (0.0574)
Mosque Members % (Standardized)	1.082+ (0.0463)	1.095* (0.0479)	1.076+ (0.0458)	1.088+ (0.0472)	1.077+ (0.0470)	1.070 (0.0459)
College Students % (Standardized)	1.362*** (0.0897)	1.225*** (0.0707)	1.331*** (0.0883)	1.414*** (0.0936)	1.390*** (0.0907)	1.322*** (0.0877)
Pre-War Fatalities (Standardized)	0.974 (0.0441)	0.998 (0.0425)	1.007 (0.0427)	1.006 (0.0450)	0.926 (0.0498)	0.948 (0.0521)
Sunni Presence	1.018 (0.0529)	1.091+ (0.0546)	1.030 (0.0540)	0.990 (0.0516)	1.048 (0.0567)	1.061 (0.0582)
State Employees % (Standardized)	1.053 (0.0509)	1.118* (0.0517)	1.062 (0.0512)	1.052 (0.0517)	1.061 (0.0517)	1.063 (0.0514)
District Population(Log, Standardized)	1.740*** (0.0939)	1.580*** (0.0797)	1.732*** (0.0925)	1.718*** (0.0940)	1.683*** (0.0889)	1.723*** (0.0925)
Urban Population % (Standardized)	1.112+ (0.0668)	1.118+ (0.0641)	1.129* (0.0674)	1.115+ (0.0679)	1.121+ (0.0672)	1.124+ (0.0678)
Distance to Province Capital (Log, Standardized)	0.885* (0.0432)	0.804*** (0.0372)	0.885* (0.0431)	0.894* (0.0442)	0.869** (0.0431)	0.871** (0.0427)
Distance to Capital (Log, Standardized)	1.067 (0.0458)	0.936 (0.0400)	1.075+ (0.0459)	1.065 (0.0464)	1.064 (0.0457)	1.071 (0.0456)
ln(α)	0.462*** (0.0435)	0.463*** (0.0402)	0.461*** (0.0434)	0.474*** (0.0443)	0.465*** (0.0437)	0.454*** (0.0430)
Observations	429	429	429	429	429	429
AIC	2670.0	2879.5	2668.8	2677.7	2672.3	2668.9
BIC	2722.8	2932.3	2721.6	2730.5	2725.1	2729.8

Notes: Incidence Rate Ratios (IRR) from negative binomial regression models. All continuous independent variables are standardized (mean = 0, SD = 1), allowing effect sizes to be interpreted as the proportional change in the expected count for a one standard deviation increase in the predictor. Standard errors in parentheses. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Results

Table 4 presents the results of our regression models. Results are expressed as incidence rate ratios.

In Model 1, the War Core Constituency index is positive and statistically significant: a one-standard-deviation increase in the concentration of war-related constituencies is associated with a 20 percent increase in the rate of war commemoration events, nearly three decades after the Iran–Iraq War.

The three infrastructural variables—conservative vote share, mosque membership, and university student share—are also positive and distinct. A one-standard-deviation increase in university student share raises the expected count of events by roughly 36%, about double the

impact of conservative vote share (17%) and more than four times that of mosque membership (8%). This shows that commemoration events are frequent in districts with stronger conservative bases and denser mosque-centered networks, but even more so in areas with large student populations. While conservative votes and mosque membership capture areas of strong regime backing, the strong positive association with university students notes the continued weight of campuses as contested but politically central spaces where both dissent and pro-regime mobilization occur.

Model 2 repeats the analysis using non-war state-led events as the outcome. Conservative votes, mosque membership, and university students remain clear predictors, confirming that war commemoration shares the same mobilizational infrastructure as other state-sponsored events. However, the War Core Constituency index becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero. This difference points to its specificity: war commemoration is uniquely tied to the war's core social groups, whereas other state-led events mobilize the general conservative base rather than war-affected communities.

Models 3–5 break down the War Core Constituency index into its components—veterans, martyrs' families, and war fatalities. Each independently predicts higher rates of commemoration, though the magnitude varies: war fatalities show the strongest association (22% increase), followed by veterans (21%) and martyrs' families (12%). Model 6 includes all three components simultaneously; as expected, because of their conceptual and empirical overlap, multicollinearity attenuates their coefficients and statistical significance. This model shows why a factor index offers a more coherent and stable analysis of the war core constituency than including the three components separately.

Robustness Checks

We also conducted a series of robustness checks to ensure the reliability of our findings. First, we examined whether the ethnolinguistic composition of districts influences both war mobilization rates and the regime's postwar mobilization efforts. To account for this, we included measures for speakers of six different languages spoken across the country. Furthermore, we introduced measures of district socioeconomic profiles, including literacy rates, the percentage of households in the lowest income deciles, the percentage of households without insurance, and the percentage of households receiving cash transfers. We also used a five-year average of nighttime light data from satellite imagery as a proxy for district-level GDP, given the unavailability of direct district-level GDP data (Bickenbach et al. 2016). These measures ensure that the district's socioeconomic conditions do not drive the observed association between wartime fatalities and postwar state mobilization.

To further validate our findings, we excluded the 10 largest districts from one of our models to verify that they did not disproportionately influence the results. Moreover, we applied a spatial regression model to account for potential spillover effects, incorporating a spatial lag that represents the weighted sum of mobilization events in neighboring districts (Ward and Gleditsch 2018).

Importantly, our main results remained consistent and robust across all these models. See Appendix Table A1 for the full table of these models.

We also tested whether war commemorations operate as short-term responses to unrest. Using a district-month panel with district and month fixed effects and ACLED protest data, we find no systematic relationship between protest and commemoration: protest does not predict war-related events, whereas it is a positive predictor of pro-government rallies (see Appendix Table A.2). This shows that the state relies on rallies—not commemorations—for immediate mobilizational reactions to dissent. Combined with the cross-sectional patterns observed for universities, these

results suggest that war commemoration functions less as a temporal response to acute protest and more as a spatial strategy deployed in sectors where the regime has historically faced threat and seeks deeper, longer-term organizational penetration.

Conclusion

Why does an autocratic state hold war commemoration events at higher rates in some areas of the country than others? This question bridges the literature on collective memory (Jansen 2007; Olick 2016; Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020) and war commemoration (Ashplant et al. 2013; Wedeen 2015)—which emphasizes the political implications of remembrance—with scholarship on authoritarianism (Forrat 2024; Riley 2005), contentious politics and movements (McAdam et al. 2001). While previous research has richly documented how states engage in political memory work and how commemoration shapes legitimacy and collective identity, we know much less about the uneven spatial distribution of these efforts—and what their geography reveals about the social, political, and institutional dynamics of authoritarian rule.

To address this gap, we drew on studies of state-led movements (Ekiert et al. 2020) and the political consequences of war (Kestnbaum 2009; Wimmer 2014) to propose two related mechanisms. First, like other forms of state-led contention, regimes rely on their existing organizational infrastructure to consolidate support and respond to perceived threats. Second, because war commemoration derives its symbolic and emotional power from those directly affected by conflict—veterans, the families of the fallen, and communities most touched by war—states have strong incentives to hold events more frequently in these constituencies.

We demonstrated this argument through a mixed-methods analysis of war commemoration in postwar Iran. Our qualitative narrative traced how the Islamic Republic developed a discourse of martyrdom and sacrifice to reframe the losses and failures of the Iran–Iraq War and established a dense network of organizations dedicated to remembrance and veteran support. The government

also promotes commemoration through its other organizations and networks in its conservative base, mosques, and universities (Khani and Kadivar 2023).

Our quantitative analysis, drawing on original data on war commemorations, mosque membership, veterans, war fatalities, and martyr families, shows that commemoration rates are significantly higher in districts with stronger conservative voting, higher mosque membership, larger student populations, and greater concentrations of war-affected constituencies. Conservative vote share and mosque membership capture areas that function as core bases of regime support, where the state already enjoys social alignment and dense organizational networks. Universities, by contrast, constitute a contested sector—historically a source of dissent but also a space in which the regime has invested heavily in extending its organizational reach. Finally, concentrations of war-affected populations reflect a distinct social foundation for war commemoration itself, marking communities for whom the symbolic and emotional resources of sacrifice are most readily mobilized.

Beyond Iran, the implications of our findings extend to a broader set of postwar autocracies that have similarly institutionalized war commemoration as a tool of governance. Many regimes emerging from violent conflict—especially revolutionary or post-liberation autocracies—have treated wartime sacrifice as a reservoir of symbolic and mobilizational capital. The Soviet Union under Brezhnev expanded youth organizations and built thousands of World War II monuments to anchor political loyalty in the memory of the “Great Patriotic War” (Tumarkin 1995). Maoist China cultivated a “cult of the red martyr,” institutionalizing martyrs’ cemeteries, memorial days, and mass commemorations to legitimize Party authority and embed socialist ideals in everyday civic life (Hung 2008). In Algeria, the post-independence state transformed the memory of the liberation struggle into an official grammar of citizenship, deploying monuments and commemorations to elevate martyrs as pillars of national identity—especially during periods of unrest or regime crisis (Branche

2011). These cases suggest that the patterns we identify in Iran—mobilizing war-affected constituencies, deploying commemorative rituals in strategic locales, and embedding power through ritualized remembrance—represent a broader repertoire available to postwar autocracies. They show how the symbolic and organizational residues of conflict can be leveraged long after the fighting ends, shaping the geography of state mobilization across diverse authoritarian contexts.

Our work contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, by analyzing the spatial and institutional variation of commemorative events, we highlight aspects of state power that discourse-focused approaches to collective memory overlook capture. Official narratives may emanate from the center, but commemorations are enacted unevenly across territory and social sectors. Mapping where events occur at higher rates reveals the constituencies the state seeks to cultivate, the arenas it perceives as vulnerable, and the infrastructures on which it relies. Whereas discourse indicates what the state aims to project, variation in events shows how, where, and toward whom it deploys its mobilizational capacities. Attending to patterned enactments, therefore, allows us to observe political memory in practice, not merely in narrative.

Second, within contentious politics, we show that war shapes mobilization not only from below through grievances and civic activation—as emphasized in existing work (Berman, Clarke, and Majed 2023; Heaney and Rojas 2014, 2015; Leitz 2011, 2014; Tarrow 2015) —but also from above. By tracing how states draw on the symbolic and organizational residues of warfare, we demonstrate that wars furnish materials for state-led movements and collective engagements. War commemoration thus becomes a mechanism through which regimes carry forward wartime mobilizational logics into the postwar period.

Third, in the literature on state-led mobilization—where pro-government rallies have been the primary empirical focus (Anderson and Cammett 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2019; Ketchley 2017) —we broaden the scope of what counts as state mobilization. Our analysis shows

that war commemorations operate through similar mechanisms of organizational capacity, threat management, and support consolidation, but do so through ritualized, memory-based forms rather than explicitly ideological rallies. This widens the concept of state-led contention to include commemorative performances embedded in mosque networks, conservative constituencies, and university-based organizations.

Fourth, in scholarship on war's political consequences, which has largely emphasized extraction, coercion, and institutional capacity (Eibl et al. 2020; Feinstein and Wimmer 2023; Slater 2018; Tilly 1992), we highlight an additional legacy: mobilizational capacity rooted in enduring war-affected constituencies. Veterans, martyr families, and communities with high wartime loss constitute long-term reservoirs of symbolic and emotional capital that states continue to activate through commemoration. This demonstrates that wars not only strengthen states organizationally but also generate constituencies that become integral to postwar political mobilization.

Fifth, our study addresses a major empirical gap in research on war and its legacies by providing systematic, subnational data on war fatalities, martyr families, and veterans in a Global South context. Existing quantitative studies of war commemoration and wartime loss have relied overwhelmingly on data from the Global North, where archival and administrative records are more readily available. By constructing original datasets derived from the Islamic Republic Martyrs Foundation, provincial yearbooks, and computational coding of biographical volumes, we offer one of the most comprehensive district-level accounts of war-affected populations in a non-Western setting. This contribution expands the empirical foundations for studying how war shapes politics beyond the Global North, enabling comparative research that has thus far been constrained by data scarcity.

Beyond the case of Iran, our framework opens several avenues for future research on the political life of wartime memory. By conceptualizing commemoration as a spatially patterned form

of state-led mobilization, the analysis invites comparative investigations into how other postwar autocracies—such as Russia, China, Algeria, and Vietnam—use commemorative rituals across territory and social sectors to manage threats and cultivate support. More broadly, the event-centered approach we develop can be extended to hybrid and democratic regimes to examine whether commemorative practices serve analogous mobilizational functions or operate through distinct political logics. Our focus on the organizational infrastructures that sustain commemorative activity also points toward a wider research agenda on the formation, evolution, and repurposing of “memory infrastructures,” including veteran networks, religious institutions, and student organizations. Finally, by demonstrating the value of high-resolution data on war-affected populations and state-sponsored events, this study underscores the potential to build comparable datasets in other contexts in the Global South, enabling systematic cross-national analysis of how states transform the residues of war into durable repertoires of political action.

Over the past two centuries, Iran—like many states in the Global South—has been repeatedly exposed to foreign invasion, occupation, and military intervention, from nineteenth-century conflicts with Russia and the Ottoman Empire to Allied occupation during the World Wars, the Iran–Iraq War, and, more recently, direct military attacks by Israel and the United States. Rather than treating this history of vulnerability as a liability, the Islamic Republic has sought to recast it as a source of political strength. By turning war commemoration into a platform for state-led movements, the regime works to translate moments of external threat into organized public presence—linking past sacrifice to contemporary loyalty and mobilization, and transforming episodic violence into an enduring political resource.

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Appendix

A.1 Details of Official Discourse on War Commemoration

While an objective narrative of the war would acknowledge its high death toll, severe destruction, widespread displacement, and numerous military failures and blunders, the official discourse of war commemoration promoted by the Islamic Republic presents a markedly different articulation. In state-sponsored commemorative events, war memory is reconfigured from a history of suffering and mismanagement into a heroic saga of sacrifice and martyrdom. This reframing shifts attention away from the costs and failures of war, transforming potential sources of grievance into moral lessons about obedience, faith, and devotion to the state. In this section, we show how this official discourse turns loss and destruction into symbolic resources for legitimizing authority and mobilizing loyalty.

To examine the state's official framing of war commemoration, we analyze speeches and messages by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamene'i. Assuming leadership in 1989, one year after the end of the Iran–Iraq War, Khamene'i holds the highest formal and informal authority within the Islamic Republic. As defined by Iran's constitution, the leader sets general state policies and provides directives to other institutions. His influence extends over the armed forces—including the Revolutionary Guards—and numerous foundations and cultural organizations that oversee war-related commemorations and state-led mobilization. While his discourse does not capture the full diversity of elite perspectives, it constitutes the most authoritative articulation of how the regime frames the war to sustain legitimacy and mobilize support.

Many of Khamene'i's public addresses coincide with major national holidays and anniversaries of the Iran–Iraq War, making them public war commemorations. In this sense, the speeches analyzed here represent a subset of the broader universe of state-led commemorative and mobilization activities—capturing these rituals at their highest level of political authority. Moreover, Khamene'i's discourse serves as a template for the content and framing of other state-organized

commemorations and rallies. Institutions under his supervision, such as the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, the Islamic Propagation Organization, and the Revolutionary Guards' cultural units, reproduce and disseminate his framing across the state's commemorative apparatus. As the following section shows, these organizations operationalize his message of faith, sacrifice, and obedience through thousands of local events across the country.

This official interpretation stands in stark contrast to more critical historical accounts that acknowledge both Saddam Hussein's aggression and the Iranian leadership's own strategic missteps in the lead-up to war. In the state's commemorative narrative—articulated most clearly in Khamene'i's speeches—the same sequence of events is reimagined as a divinely ordained “Sacred Defense.” Through this reframing, responsibility and loss are converted into moral capital: the war becomes a site of virtue rather than failure, and remembrance becomes a medium through which loyalty and obedience are renewed.

Khamene'i consistently portrays the Iran–Iraq War as a divinely inspired struggle between a faithful, self-reliant nation and a coalition of powerful foreign enemies led by the United States. In his telling, Iran faced overwhelming odds without meaningful external support, yet prevailed through faith, unity, and sacrifice under revolutionary leadership. The war, in this narrative, becomes not merely a historical episode but a moral template—proof of the Islamic Republic's righteousness and resilience. The theme of *sacred defense* runs through his speeches: the war is depicted as a test of spiritual strength and obedience, and its endurance as evidence of the regime's moral superiority (Khamenei 1989a, 1996, 2009, 2011, 2016).

Khamene'i's discourse also engages with the war's more controversial aspects, particularly the enormous human losses that had provoked quiet criticism among some commanders and veterans. Rather than acknowledging strategic mistakes or misjudgments, his rhetoric reframes such losses as evidence of faith and divine purpose. Responding to external and domestic critiques of

Iran's wartime tactics, he declared, "They were saying that we used human waves. Yes, we used human waves, but a wave of faithful, conscious humans... the force of love and faith" (Khamenei 1999). By presenting even the most costly wartime decisions as acts of spiritual strength, Khamene'i deflects responsibility for the human toll and redirects attention toward moral virtue and unity. This framing allows the leadership to address potential challenges to its legitimacy by turning the memory of suffering into an assertion of moral steadfastness and collective loyalty.

Over time, Khamene'i has sought to institutionalize this moral framing through state-sanctioned narratives of martyrdom and sacrifice. His speeches repeatedly emphasize the need to preserve and disseminate the "message of the war"—defined as faith, obedience, and endurance—against what he calls Western propaganda and "cultural invasion" (Khamenei 2008, 2010). He instructs state institutions to safeguard this memory through literature, film, museums, and annual ceremonies, warning against depictions that highlight the war's tragedies or question its leadership. Works that frame the conflict as futile or excessively costly are dismissed as tools of enemy propaganda, and their creators are denounced for dishonoring the martyrs (Khamenei 1989, 2000). Through this strategy, the regime turns commemoration into a domain of moral discipline and ideological reinforcement.

In Khamene'i's vision, the commemoration of martyrs ensures the endurance of the revolutionary spirit. Remembering the dead becomes a civic and religious obligation that sustains collective readiness for future sacrifice. "This sacred defense," he proclaimed, "emanates a unified spirit, a singular language, and an unwavering message... woven of faith, sacrifice, and unyielding struggle" (Khamenei 2018). His discourse also invokes the responsibility of the living to care for the families of martyrs and veterans—both as a moral duty and as a means to reaffirm loyalty to the regime. By linking commemoration to welfare and recognition, the state seeks to bind those most affected by the war to its political project.

Taken together, these speeches illustrate how official discourse about war commemoration functions as part of the regime's broader strategy of political legitimation. Through repeated appeals to sacrifice, unity, and moral perseverance, the leadership seeks to address the potential threat posed by wartime grievances and to sustain loyalty across generations. In this way, the official discourse extends the logic of wartime mobilization into peacetime, transforming remembrance into a recurring instrument of regime stability.

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A.2 Details of the Two-stage Coding Procedure for Pro-government Mobilization Events

To build a systematic record of state-led mobilization in Iran, we expanded the original Khani and Kadivar (2023) dataset of regime-sponsored district-level events. Their dataset covered reports from three government news agencies, Fars News, Tasnim, and Basij News, and served as the foundation for our work. We extended the dataset to cover 2015-2019 and added a fourth official outlet, DefaPress, which specializes in reporting on the Sacred Defense and commemorative activities. Adding DefaPress improves coverage of war-related events and strengthens the basis of our main dependent variable.

The full dataset was assembled through a two-stage process. In the first stage, we employed web scraping to search for, retrieve, and store articles containing frequent keywords associated with state-led mobilization. This search targeted the three original agencies as well as DefaPress. Because drawing on multiple outlets increases the likelihood of duplicate reporting, we implemented a second stage of manual coding.

In this stage, human coders reviewed all retrieved articles to verify accuracy, relevance, and uniqueness. The manual review addressed both the selection problem, ensuring that only articles containing relevant information were retained, and the information extraction problem, identifying the specific portions of each report that contained details about the variables of interest (Weidmann and Rød 2019). To avoid double-counting, we sorted entries by date, location, service, and source, which allowed us to detect repeated reports across outlets and assess variation in reporting intensity (Hellmeier et al. 2018).

We also collectively cross-checked ambiguous cases to maintain consistency in coding decisions, documented all coding rules in a shared protocol, and conducted random reliability checks among coders. This process reduced duplication and enabled us to classify events by type of activity, which allowed us to distinguish war commemorations from other forms of state-led mobilization.

A.3 Details of the Factor Analysis on Cor War Constituencies

Panel A: Correlation Matrix (N = 429)			
	Devotees %	War Fatalities %	Bonyad Members %
Devotees %	1.000		
War Fatalities %	0.494***	1.000	
Bonyad Members %	0.716***	0.501***	1.000

Panel B: Factor Analysis Results				
	Eigenvalue	Difference	Proportion	Cumulative
Factor 1	1.625	1.707	1.189	1.189
Factor 2	-0.082	0.095	-0.060	1.130
Factor 3	-0.177	—	-0.130	1.000

Method: Principal factors; Rotation: Unrotated
 Retained factors: 1; Number of parameters: 3
 LR test (independent vs. saturated): $\chi^2(3) = 452.25, p < 0.001$

Panel C: Factor Loadings and Uniqueness		
Variable	Factor 1 Loading	Uniqueness
Devotees %	0.796	0.367
War Fatalities %	0.594	0.648
Bonyad Members %	0.800	0.361

Panel D: Factor Scoring Coefficients (Regression Method)	
Variable	Coefficient
Devotees %	0.407
War Fatalities %	0.184
Bonyad Members %	0.416

The tables above present the factor analysis used to construct the Core War Constituencies index. Panel A shows pairwise correlations among the three component variables. Panel B presents eigenvalues from principal factor analysis, with Factor 1 accounting for 118.9% of the common variance (eigenvalue = 1.625). The likelihood ratio test strongly rejects the hypothesis that the variables are independent. Panel C displays factor loadings (pattern matrix) and uniqueness values, indicating that all three variables load strongly on the first factor (loadings > 0.59). Panel D presents the regression coefficients used to construct the Core War Constituencies index. The index combines information from all three variables, with Bonyad Members % and Devotees % receiving the highest weights (0.416 and 0.407, respectively).

A.4 Details of the Coding Procedure for Iran-Iraq War Casualties

We started our data construction and collection process by downloading encyclopedias of Iran-Iraq War casualties from the repository³ designed and created by the Iran Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs. This foundation compiled and gathered encyclopedias based on Iranian provinces. This comprehensive collection, available in PDF format, records the biographies of individuals who died before, during, and after the war. Each entry, approximately 100 words long, provides semi-structured biographical information, including the individual's date and place of birth, education, occupation, military service details, cause of death, and burial place.

Each of the 31 provinces has an encyclopedia in the repository. Provinces with a higher number of martyrs, such as Tehran and Isfahan, have more than one book. Consequently, the total number of encyclopedias is 43 for the 31 provinces. However, two of the 43 encyclopedias were not available in the repository. To obtain these two, we relied on personal contacts and located the paper versions of the remaining encyclopedias. We employed a specialized Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technique tailored to Farsi to convert these two paper encyclopedias into readable, searchable PDFs.

After securing all 43 volumes in a searchable, readable PDF format, we employed a combination of computational and manual methods to extract the information contained in them.

First, we applied text analysis tools to convert the PDFs into plain text format (*.txt*). To streamline our data collection, we merged the multiple volumes for provinces with multiple encyclopedias into a single *.txt* file per province, yielding 31 *.txt* files, each corresponding to a province.

³ <https://mag.navideshahed.com/home/category/mostanad-negari>

Second, as the biographical entries were semi-structured, we designed a text parser to process the approximately 100-word entries. The parser separated each entry by periods and newlines and sorted them by their leading numbers. This transformation rendered the previously untidy encyclopedias into a more structured format, with each line containing only one sentence from each entry.

Third, drawing on the semi-structured format of the entries, we used stop words and repeated keywords to guide data extraction. Accordingly, we developed specific functions to extract key information from each entry, including the individual's date and place of birth, education, occupation, military service details, cause of death, and burial place. These functions process each entry, extract the relevant information, and store it in a data frame. To enhance accuracy, we customized the functions for each province, addressing any province-specific errors or modifications introduced by the Iran Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs.

Fourth, with the data extraction functions in place for each province, we applied them to each province's *.txt* file and stored the output in the corresponding *.csv* file. We ran the data extraction process three times for each province to optimize the functions and minimize potential errors or missing data. After each run, we refined and updated the functions to address any errors or warnings encountered.

Finally, after obtaining the *.csv* files for each province, we combined them into a single master *.csv* file. This master file served as the foundation for our subsequent variable creation and data analysis.

A.5 Details of the Coding Procedure for War Veterans

We began our data collection process by downloading the provincial statistical yearbooks for each of the 31 provinces in Iran⁴. Beginning in 2015, we systematically downloaded yearbooks for each province through 2019, resulting in a total of 155 yearbooks. We extracted the chapters containing information on veterans from these yearbooks and consolidated all the veteran-related tables into a single master PDF file. We used a combination of computational and manual methods to convert data from PDF to a usable digital format while ensuring data accuracy.

In the first step, we developed a custom “PDF Parser.” This parser was designed to read PDF documents, identify relevant tables, and extract data in a structured format, such as a data frame. Since PDFs are often designed for human reading rather than for machine parsing, our parser needed to address several complexities, including irregular table structures, multi-column layouts, and potential formatting inconsistencies.

One significant challenge the parser overcame was handling the use of Arabic and Farsi characters and numerals in the yearbooks, which varied by province. The similarity between the two languages necessitated that the parser correctly distinguish between them and convert them into a uniform format. This multilingual approach ensured data consistency, regardless of the yearbooks' regional linguistic preferences.

After parsing, we manually reviewed each entry, cross-referencing the parsed data against the original tables to ensure the highest level of accuracy. Once we confirmed the accuracy of all data, we compiled a master *.csv* file, with each row representing the veteran numbers for individual districts within each province from 2015 to 2019.

⁴ <https://amar.org.ir/salnameh-amari>

Table A.1 Robustness Tests for Drivers of War-related Mobilization in Iran (2015-2019)

	Dependent variable: War-related Mobilization								
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Baseline	Ethnicity	Nightlights	Literacy	Income Deciles	Insurance	Cash Transfer	10 Largest Excluded	Spatial Regression Model
Core War Constituencies	1.230*** (0.0712)	1.230*** (0.0711)	1.230*** (0.0711)	1.203** (0.0730)	1.231*** (0.0714)	1.227*** (0.0710)	1.217*** (0.0699)	1.240*** (0.0729)	1.194*** (0.0616)
Conservative Votes %	1.010** (0.00319)	1.010** (0.00319)	1.010** (0.00319)	1.012*** (0.00347)	1.010** (0.00319)	1.009** (0.00327)	1.011*** (0.00316)	1.009** (0.00327)	1.008* (0.00308)
Mosque Members %	1.014+ (0.00786)	1.014+ (0.00785)	1.014+ (0.00785)	1.016+ (0.00810)	1.014+ (0.00787)	1.014+ (0.00786)	1.012 (0.00787)	1.014+ (0.00798)	1.013+ (0.00725)
College Students %	1.198*** (0.0499)	1.207*** (0.0487)	1.207*** (0.0487)	1.181*** (0.0510)	1.210*** (0.0506)	1.219*** (0.0513)	1.183*** (0.0476)	1.199*** (0.0493)	1.142*** (0.0367)
Arabic %		0.996 (0.00503)							
Baluchi %		0.997 (0.00463)							
Kurdish %		1.001 (0.00271)							
Lori %		1.003 (0.00339)							
Caspian %		1.003 (0.00284)							
Persian %		1.000 (0.00219)							
Turkish %		1.002 (0.00226)							
Night Light 5 years average (logged)			0.972 (0.0415)						
Literacy %				0.997 (0.0110)					
Households from Bottom Two Income Deciles %					0.996 (0.00716)				
Households without Insurance %						0.986* (0.00604)			
Households Receiving Cash Transfer %							1.007 (0.00868)		
Pre-War Fatalities	0.0884 (0.383)	0.0740 (0.318)	0.0740 (0.318)	0.0382 (0.178)	0.0732 (0.318)	0.0639 (0.276)	0.225 (0.978)	0.0762 (0.335)	0.163 (0.667)
Sunni District	1.026 (0.0551)	1.014 (0.0529)	1.014 (0.0529)	1.048 (0.0610)	1.018 (0.0529)	1.017 (0.0528)	1.051 (0.0565)	1.011 (0.0547)	1.045 (0.0539)
State Employees %	1.007 (0.00618)	1.008 (0.00633)	1.008 (0.00633)	1.013+ (0.00701)	1.007 (0.00622)	1.007 (0.00618)	1.007 (0.00616)	1.006 (0.00639)	1.007 (0.00571)
District Population (logged)	1.790*** (0.105)	1.778*** (0.0991)	1.778*** (0.0991)	1.795*** (0.104)	1.770*** (0.0988)	1.772*** (0.0986)	1.875*** (0.114)	1.772*** (0.105)	1.756*** (0.0929)
Urban Population %	1.004 (0.00306)	1.005+ (0.00279)	1.005+ (0.00279)	1.006* (0.00291)	1.005+ (0.00310)	1.006+ (0.00294)	1.001 (0.00312)	1.005+ (0.00279)	1.007** (0.00249)
Distance to Province Capital (logged)	0.918* (0.0316)	0.913** (0.0315)	0.913** (0.0315)	0.925* (0.0326)	0.918* (0.0315)	0.920* (0.0317)	0.926* (0.0318)	0.913* (0.0334)	0.903** (0.0318)
Distance to Capital (logged)	1.092 (0.0588)	1.074 (0.0558)	1.074 (0.0558)	1.110+ (0.0621)	1.078 (0.0555)	1.069 (0.0555)	1.103+ (0.0563)	1.107+ (0.0659)	1.081 (0.0692)
Inalpha	0.462*** (0.0435)	0.458*** (0.0434)	0.458*** (0.0434)	0.453*** (0.0429)	0.462*** (0.0435)	0.462*** (0.0435)	0.455*** (0.0430)	0.478*** (0.0453)	
Observations	429	428	428	429	429	429	429	419	429
AIC	2671.7	2662.0	2662.0	2677.9	2672.0	2671.4	2667.1	2562.7	965.5
BIC	2728.5	2718.8	2718.8	2759.2	2728.8	2728.2	2724.0	2615.2	1022.3

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients (incidence rate ratios) from negative binomial regressions (Models 1-8) and spatial error model (Model 9); Standard errors in parentheses. The dataset includes Defapress mobilization event data integrated with the Iranian Mobilization Dataset (IRMD). All models include base controls: Core War Constituencies (factor index of veterans, martyrs' families, and war fatalities), Conservative Votes %, Mosque Members %, College Students %, Pre-War Fatalities, Sunni District, State Employees %, District Population (logged), Urban Population %, Distance to Province Capital (logged), and Distance to Capital (logged). Model 1: Baseline specification. Model 2: Adds seven ethnolinguistic controls (Arabic, Baluchi, Kurdish, Lori, Caspian, Persian, Turkish population %). Model 3: Adds five-year average nighttime light intensity (logged) as a GDP proxy. Model 4: Adds literacy rate. Model 5: Adds the percentage of households in the bottom two income deciles. Model 6: Adds the percentage of households without social insurance. Model 7: Adds percentage of households receiving cash transfers. Model 8: Excludes the 10 largest districts. Model 9: Spatial error model accounting for geographic spillover effects. Note: Models 2 and 3 use coefficients from a combined ethnicity and nightlights specification in the source data. + p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table A1 presents several robustness checks that test the stability of our results. Model 1 shows the baseline specification with core controls. We then test whether our results hold when accounting for ethnolinguistic diversity in Model 2, which adds controls for speakers of the country's seven main ethnolinguistic groups (Arabic, Baluchi, Kurdish, Lori, Caspian, Persian, and Turkish). Model 3

includes average nighttime light intensity over five years (logged) as a proxy for district-level GDP. Model 4 tests the effect of adding literacy rates as another socioeconomic indicator.

The next three models examine different dimensions of economic welfare. Model 5 adds the percentage of households in the bottom two income deciles to capture poverty and deprivation. Model 6 includes the percentage of households without insurance, while Model 7 adds the percentage receiving cash transfers to measure the reach of national welfare programs. Model 8 addresses potential urban bias through a more direct approach: it excludes the ten most populous districts, which account for roughly one-quarter of Iran's population, to prevent major urban centers from driving the results. Finally, Model 9 uses a spatial error regression model instead of negative binomial regression. This specification takes the logged number of war-related state-led mobilization events (plus one) as the outcome and accounts for geographic spillover effects.

Our results remain stable across these different specifications. Core War Constituencies remain positive and statistically significant in all models. Variables capturing regime organizational infrastructure and social base, specifically conservative vote share and student populations, also stay positive and statistically significant throughout. Mosque membership shows marginally significant positive effects in eight of the nine specifications. The only exception occurs in Model 7, where the coefficient loses statistical significance after controlling for cash transfer receipt. These patterns confirm that the main results hold up under various alternative specifications, whether we account for ethnolinguistic composition, socioeconomic factors (literacy, income, insurance, welfare program reach), urban concentration, or spatial dependencies.

Table A.2. The Effect of Anti-Government Protests on War Commemorations and Pro-Government Rallies: District-Month Panel Analysis

	Dependent Variable	
	(1) War Commemorations	(2) Rally
Protests (logged)	0.994 (0.0280)	1.039 ⁺ (0.0218)
Constant	1.711 ^{***} (0.126)	2.562 ^{***} (0.140)
Observations	5143	5143
AIC	11987.3	8977.3
BIC	12308.0	9298.0

Notes: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses.

⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A.2 presents results from our district-month panel analysis testing whether war commemorations function as a short-term response to protest. The analysis draws on protest data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). This globally recognized system tracks real-time political violence and demonstrations across all countries and territories. ACLED's fundamental unit is an event, defined as a specific interaction among actors at a particular time and place, with no fatality threshold. The system compiles data weekly from traditional media, local partners, and digital sources in over 75 languages. All entries undergo rigorous multi-stage review and verification.

We identified all ACLED-coded protest events in Iran from January 1, 2016, to December 31, 2019, then applied two filters to focus on protest events. The first filter removed entries from sources with a history of misinformation, including the Mojahedin-e Khalq. The second filter addressed a more technical challenge. ACLED codes all demonstrations regardless of political alignment; therefore, we needed to distinguish protests from pro-government mobilization events. To solve this problem, we used BERTopic, a topic modeling algorithm that clusters text data based on semantic similarity (Grootendorst 2022). The algorithm analyzes event descriptions and identifies

distinct topics by grouping similar events. This approach let us systematically identify and exclude pro-government demonstrations such as state-organized rallies, commemorations, and other regime-sponsored gatherings, while retaining protests that challenge or make demands on the government. After applying both filters, we aggregated the remaining protest events to monthly counts at the district level. This aggregation gives us time-series measures of protest activity across Iran's administrative units.

The final dataset captures a wide spectrum of protest events, ranging from labor and workplace mobilization to professional, student, and financial grievances. Labor and work-related protests are especially prominent, involving factory workers, teachers, municipal employees, petroleum workers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, university professors, and journalists. Current employees, retirees, and job-seeking youth frequently demand better working conditions, higher wages, protective contracts, payment of overdue salaries, pension disbursements, and expanded employment opportunities. Many of these actions are organized by labor unions and worker syndicates, reflecting a structured, collective approach to labor mobilization. Higher education students also appear regularly in the dataset. University students protest for improved campus facilities and academic conditions, while others mobilize against bar examinations and professional qualification requirements. Another major category comprises depositors who protest against credit unions, banks, and other financial institutions, often in response to lost savings, frozen accounts, or perceived financial misconduct.

In addition to these issue-specific events, the dataset includes nationwide anti-regime protests in which diverse groups participate regardless of their occupational or social backgrounds. These episodes reflect broader political grievances that cut across the more sectoral forms of mobilization described above.

Initial negative binomial models did not converge across specifications, so we modeled the log of protest events plus 1 using fixed-effects OLS. The estimates show a positive association between protest and pro-government rallies that approaches conventional thresholds for statistical significance ($p < .10$). In contrast, there is no detectable relationship between protest and war commemorations. Models with a one-month lag produce similar results. Taken together, the patterns indicate that, in the short term, the state reacts to protest mainly through rallies rather than through war commemorative events.