Monica Parisa Rabii

Representing Revolution: Politics of Performance and Memory at Iran's Freedom Square

"The fascination with monuments lies in the contrast between the illusion of performance and solidity they create and their actual vulnerability to time and circumstance."[1] Ian Germani wrote this in reference to the use of monumental space at the *Place de la Nation* in Paris by different political groups and movements. The fascination lay in the latent ability of these concrete symbols to be re-interpreted and appropriated – of course not only via the agency of those creating these successive narratives but also the ability of the public to assimilate these layers of meaning in one place. This chapter considers this concept of the multiple narratives and appropriations of a national monument and applies it to the site of the most concentrated protests of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Tehran, Iran. As such, it will bring readers a welcome contextualization of the recent nationwide civil protests in Iran, notably those known as Bloody Aban, beginning in November 2019, and the Women, Life, Freedom Movement following the death of Mahsa Amini in custody in September 2022. Additionally, many dynamics developed in this chapter will find an echo in cases from around the world of political appropriation and reinterpretation of monuments.

Completed in 1971 and originally named Shahyad, or the "Remembrance of the Kings" by the last Shah of Iran – Mohammad Reza Pahlavi – the monument was later renamed Azadi or "Freedom" Tower by the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.[2] As a revolutionary icon, the monument is embedded in the collective memory of the Iranian public, a remembrance that has been further solidified with the performance of annual anniversary rallies and rituals over the past four decades. What is striking about the space is that in 2009 these memories were used again, this time by protests for a new movement countering the contested re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. For the first time since 1979 the monument was extremely "vulnerable to time and circumstance," a vulnerability that reflected the changing political landscape of Iran as well. What, if anything,

1 Ian Germani, "Revolutionary Rites: Political Demonstrations at the Place de la Nation, Paris," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 22, no. 2 (2011): 58.

2 The two names will be used interchangeably in this paper, coinciding with what the site was called in the era under discussion (pre- or post-revolution).

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111675930-002

does the ritual use as well as the attempted contemporary appropriation of the space tell us about the relationship of the site with the public and power?

Part 1. Making a Monument: The Creation of a Pre-Revolutionary National Icon

The last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (ruling 1941–1979), linked a set of values and a first identity narrative during the creation of Shahyad square and monument. The 1960 and 1970s were an era of rapid urbanization and population growth in Tehran. This was a desired consequence of the Shah's "White Revolution": an ambitious program of social, political, and economic reform and industrial expansion that would centralize power in the capital.[3] Often following urban growth is the construction of public spaces and monuments that can serve as icons of these new landscapes. For the Shah, his modern capital needed a modern icon. The identity constructed at Shahyad was that of a monument connecting conceptual places and historical eras: pre- and post-Islamic Persian capitals with the contemporary capital of Iran, Tehran. This narrative worked to legitimize the Shah's nation-state project by reinforcing a direct link between the present monarchy and previous Persian dynasties, with the conceptual identity of the site constructed for the public through its highly symbolic architecture as well as the opening ceremonies coinciding with the two thousand and five hundredth anniversary celebrations of the Persian Empire at Persepolis in 1971. This metaphorical tie would also be reiterated in the use of the space by the state – like the gates of Persepolis, Shahyad would be the site of the Shah's civic rituals.

The Architecture of National Identity

To build this monument, the Shah launched a contest in 1966 to design a monument to commemorate the 2,500 years of the Persian monarchy. Advertised in the national newspaper *Ettela'at*, the contest called for a modernist tribute to the Anniversary of the Persian Empire founded by Cyrus the Great.[4] Not only would it be the first large monument travellers and citizens would see upon enter-

3 Vahid Vahdat, "Spatial Discrimination in Tehran's Modern Urban Planning 1906–1979," *Journal of Planning History* 12, no. 1 (2013): 54.

4 "Announcement for the Competition Design for Shahyad-e Aryamehr Monument," *Ettela'at*, September 1, 1966, 1.

ing Tehran from the airport, it would hold a new regional bus terminal and be placed on the median line that separated the North and South of the city. The winning design was a tower and archway that incorporated both Persian architectural features and modernism. Construction started shortly after in 1966 and was completed in 1971, in time for the two thousand and five hundredth anniversary celebrations.

As the architect explained in a 2016 interview, the tower's evolution into a "symbol of Iran" lay in its power as an aesthetic manifestation of the capital: "modern, yet very Persian, with aspects of both pre- and post-Islamic architecture."[5] The monument features two central arches each representing these two narratives: the "sweeping parabola" of ancient Iranian architecture and the traditional arches of Islamic architecture seen in many grand mosques.[6] The parabolic arch was specifically a nod to the Sassanian ruins at Ayvan-e Kasra, the ancient archway to the city of Ctesiphon in modern-day Iraq.[7] The underbelly of the arch also features multiple squinches, the filling of the corners of a square or polygonal shape to support the base of a dome, which are a feature often attributed to the Sassanid Empire. [8] Additionally, the pattern of the roundabout's gardens and fountains was inspired by the pattern found on the dome ceiling of Sheikh Lotfallah Mosque in Esfahan,[9] a nod to the golden age of another of Persia's capitols during the Safavid Empire.

For the architect, this marriage of Persian and Islamic architectural forms is distinctly Iranian, as he states that "if this was erected somewhere else it would have no meaning; you can't put Shahyad in Cairo."[10] In the 2011 biography of the Shah, Abbas Milani states that "Shahyad became the perfect metaphor for the many cultural paradoxes that were rapidly changing Tehran [...] Shahyad

---

5 Rozita Riazati, "The Man Behind Iran's Most Famous Tower," *BBC*, January 14, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35295083.

6 Yeganeh Torbati, "Tehran Azadi Tower, Witness to History, Victim of Neglect," *Reuters*, February 20, 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-azadi/tehrans-azadi-tower-witness-to-history-victim-of-neglect-idUSBRE91J0QU20130220.

7 David Douglass-Jaimes, "Architecture Daily *Classics:* Azadi Tower by Hossein Amanat," *Architecture Daily*, October 26, 2015, https://www.archdaily.com/774683/ad-classics-azadi-tower-hossein-amanat.

8 Britannica, Editors of Encyclopaedia, "squinch," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 19, 2017, https://www.britannica.com/technology/squinch.

9 Hossein Amanat, "Interview with the Architect of Azadi," *Radio Zamaneh*, July 2018, http://radiozamaaneh.com/rohani/2008/07/post_236.html.

10 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "After Azadi: Man Behind Iran's Freedom Tower on How His Life Unraveled," August 15, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/15/azadi-tower-tehran-hossein- amanat-architect-iran.

Fig. 1: Azadi/Shahyad Tower.
Copyright Massoud Mohebbi, 2018 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1008-1-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AC_%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C.jpg)

was a gateway to the future and a celebration of the past."[11] Iranian historian Ali Mozaffari argues that starting with the Shah's father in 1925, the Pahlavi Dynasty's particular brand of nationalism would draw on pre-Islamic identity and a "romanticising of ancient dynasties – the Sassanids (226–651 CE) and the Achaemenids (550–330 BCE) – the founders of the first Persian Empire."[12] But it was not just in monumental architectural form that the Shah wanted to legitimize the lineage of his modern-day capital to the ancient Persian Empire. He sought to emphasize this identity for both domestic and international audiences by situating the opening of Shahyad in the anniversary celebrations of the empire.

11 Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 353.
12 Ali Mozaffari, *Forming National Identity in Iran: The Idea of Homeland Derived from Ancient Persian and Islamic Imaginations of Place* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2014), 26–27.

Heritage as Propaganda: The Celebrations of 1971

The Shah most clearly attempted to establish the link between his modern Iranian nation and ancient Persia by using Tehran and Persepolis as the sites of lavish ceremonies of commemoration in honour of the two thousand and five hundredth anniversary of the Persian Empire. As human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explains, "the identity of a place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life."[13] This dramatization of both sites to emphasize the hegemonic narrative in these public spaces was in full force during "The Celebrations." In October 1971, the Shah would hold a lavish ceremony at Persepolis, creating a full "tent-city" at the archaeological ruins. He would be referencing the historic scene at the site when emissaries from nations subject to the Achaemenid empire would bring tribute to the Persian king. Of the 600 guests, there were 37 heads of state with 69 nations represented.[14]

Millions tuned into the broadcast of the event on national television and heard the Shah's speech at the foot of Cyrus's tomb at Parsgarade. The Shah would also go on to commission a documentary film of the commemorations at Persepolis entitled *Flames of Persia*, narrated by Hollywood star Orson Welles. As Welles would dramatically state in the film, "Persia was on parade."[15] Mozaffari emphasizes the significance of such an ostentatious celebration: "for the first time in the twentieth century, Persepolis was inscribed as the place of modern Iranian identity and the metonym for the Iranian homeland in the global popular imaginations of people through an international celebratory event."[16] The celebrations were meant to present the Shah's nation to the world and also situate that identity at sites that could provide historical continuity to the present.

Meanwhile, rapid construction had been underway since 1966 in Tehran to complete Shahyad in time for the celebrations. The inauguration of the monument was held on October 16, 1971, only four days after the events at Persepolis. Again, emphasizing ancient Persian heritage, the opening exhibitions inside the monument included archaeological artefacts and reliefs from Persepolis.[17] The Shah was not only conceptualizing the two symbolic centers of his nation-state at Sha-

13 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

14 Kamyar Abdi, "Nationalism, Politics, and the Development of Archaeology in Iran," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1 (2001): 68.

15 Shahrokh Golestan, *Flames of Persia* (Tehran: Iranian State Film, 1971).

16 Mozaffari, *Forming National Identity*, 55.

17 "Shahyad Aryamehr: A Synthesis of Yesterday and Today's Iranian Architecture," *Ruznamehe Jashne Shahanshahi Iran*, October 24, 1971, 1.

hyad through its aesthetic architecture, he was also making a direct connection through these successive celebrations at each site. In his analysis of four Parisian monuments as a reflection of French national identity, Avner Ben Amos reflects that ceremony and ritual practices of a site are "high-intensity times" to charge a place with a "special meaning" possibly "never meant by the builder." They are also characteristic of hegemonic national narratives and power-holders as they are meant to be "one-sided," where there is only space for a singular presentation, without room for opposition.[18] Shahyad was now "charged" with the symbolism of pre-Islamic and Islamic architecture, but also as the seat of the "modern capital" of the empire via its location as the concluding ceremony of The Celebrations. Symbolically "passing the torch" from Persepolis to Tehran after the opening ceremony, Shahyad continued to be the Shah's stage for the state's civic and national rituals. Perhaps the most famous of these ceremonies was when President Nixon visited the site in May 1972. He was escorted to the scene with a presidential motorcade and made a short speech speaking to the alliance between the U.S. and Iran and the "progress" he had seen since his last visit to Tehran 19 years earlier. The ceremony ended with the Shah presenting Nixon with the keys to the city. Ben-Amos explains that the ritualization of civic ceremonies such as these is extremely important to maintain the relevance of national monuments to not only international audiences but domestic ones as well. Otherwise, they are at risk of becoming merely a tourist attraction and losing their relevance for the nation.

There were mixed public reactions to the 1971 Celebrations in which Shahyad was opened. While international media coverage was largely congratulatory, there was also criticism that it was gaudy and excessive. *Life Magazine* and *The New York Times* praised it as the "the party of the century"[19] while *The Guardian* pointed out that the excessiveness was considered by some as "tacky."[20] Domestic reactions were more critical, especially from student groups and Islamic leadership. The opposition pointed to the lack of actual Iranian public at the ceremonies, underlying the feeling that it was a show meant for international over domestic audiences. Student activists considered it an attempt to situate Iranian heritage within a markedly Western framework that they argued contradicted such commemora-

18 Ben-Amos, Avner, "Monuments and Memory in French Nationalism," *History & Memory* 5, no. 2 (1993): 51.

19 William A. McWhirter, "The Shah's Princely Party," *Life Magazine*, October 29, 1971, 22 and John L. Hess, "Made in France – Persia's Splendorous Anniversary Celebration," *The New York Times*, October 15, 1971, 36.

20 Walter Schwarz, "A Kingdom Remembered – 2,500 Years on," *The Guardian*, October 13, 1971, 1.

tions.[21] Popular Islamic clerics like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini referred to it as an "illegitimate festival," noting the disparity between the wealth of the monarchy and their foreign allies and the Iranian rural poor.[22] Tension in perceptions of the monument and the commemorative festivities surrounding it underlined growing conflict between sections of the public and government. The most notable critics, Iranian student groups and Islamic leadership, would go on to be two of the most important agents during the years leading up to the Revolution of 1979. Shahyad was already shaping up to be a site of contestation and a reflection of the relationship between political power and the Iranian public.

Part 2. Revolutionary Re-Inscription: Place, Protests, and New Rituals

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 completely changed the Shah's Iran and most notably the capital city. Shahyad, which after the revolution was called Azadi or "Freedom" Tower, was the epicenter of these events. This monument by the last King of Iran was appropriated by the revolution and then by the new government, the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the remarkable protests that culminated with over half the population of the capital taking to the streets in the fall and winter of 1978–79, Shahyad was reshaped for the public as the site of the democratization of space and power, a turning point and place in the process of self- determination of the revolution. It was the site of battle and celebration: first the protests and violent clashes with the Shah's forces and then the celebratory return of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. After the fall of the monarchy, these collective memories were used and ritualized through annual commemorations at Azadi by the regime as an attempt to further re-inscribe the monument as not just one of the revolution, but also one of the Islamic Republic.

21 Press Release by the Confederation of Iranian Students, "Whose Celebrations?" October 1971, MS-1- Ref, Box 15. University of Tehran Reference Collection, National Archives and Library of Iran, Tehran, Iran.

22 Ruhollah Khomeini, "The Incompatibility of Monarchy with Islam," Speech at Najaf, October 13, 1971, in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 200.

A People's Monument

The irony of seeing the Shah's icon of his modern capital and nation become the site where Ayatollah Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini, the would-be first supreme ruler of the Islamic Republic of Iran, returned from exile was not lost on spectators of the events of 1978–79. Unlike other monuments and symbols of the Shah that the new regime demolished after the revolution, Shahyad, rebranded as "Azadi," was the only Pahlavi-made monument dedicated to the monarchy that was left standing. This was for two reasons: the collective memory of the images of the revolution imprinted on the site as the place of change, which was aided by continual commemoration and veneration of those events annually, as well as the aesthetic capability of the monument to be incorporated into the values of the new regime. Unlike other statues and emblems of the monarch, the monument had no overt royal imagery. The Shah's brand of nationalism at Shahyad, one that tied itself to pre- and post-Islamic traditions, was not a direct threat to the Islamic Republic. In terms of society's collective consciousness of the site, the square would become what Karen Till has coined a place of "symbolic democratization," where "groups and individuals often struggle with one another for authority to represent their version of the past in the built environment." These struggles in turn bind those sites with "a right to the city intricately tied to the processes of democratisation."[23] By flipping its ownership on its head but purposefully keeping the place unchanged, it is a constant reminder of the power of the public to subvert that space and therefore subvert the ruling power. Because what could be more of a triumph than to reclaim the spaces of your opponents as your own? However, it is not just the importance of Shahyad as the symbolic center of the Shah's nation before the revolution that made it an obvious choice. Shahyad, its surrounding thoroughfares, and the location of the "hubs" of the countermovement network made for a natural and powerful protest space.

The East-West thoroughfare of Tehran, Reza-Shah Road, that leads to Shahyad was of crucial importance to the protest movements in advance of the revolution. The eight-mile road connected these three crucial spaces for the counter-movement: The University of Tehran, the Tehran Bazaar, and the transportation hub at Shahyad. The University of Tehran housed the socialist and anti-US imperialist student groups of the countermovement, who often demanded a return to the social-democratic rule of President Mohammad Mossadegh prior to the 1953 CIA coup. The Tehran Bazaar housed the traditionally conservative Muslim merchant

23 Karen E. Till, "Wounded Cities: Memory-work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care," *Political Geography* 31 (2012): 7–8.

class who grew to strongly oppose the Shah's creation of "western-style" supermarkets and tax breaks given to these chain-stores that were a part of the modernizing reform of the Shah's "White Revolution."[24] Lastly, Shahyad Square itself was an important transportation hub for Tehran. Not only was the proximity to the airport important, it was also the roundabout housing the regional buses that connected Tehran and the provinces–populations which entered Tehran *en masse* to support the protests when called upon by Ayatollah Khomeini. Proximity to Mehrabad International Airport also made it easy for foreign journalists to cover the protests at the square.

Protests against the Shah increased in both frequency and number of people in the fall of 1978. In early September, the number of protesters going through Shahyad was around 100,000, and by January 1979 it was estimated at two million, about half the population of Tehran at the time.[25] Escalation was largely a response to increased police violence, when September saw the Shah enact martial law and orders to shoot protesters as well as permit the use of tear gas.[26] This is where the memorialization of the site as a battlefield takes root, as the place of violence at the hands of the Shah's state. Some of the largest demonstrations until that point took place on December 10–11, staged by Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters on the Shia holy days of Ashua Tasu'a at Shahyad – the commemorative rituals remembering the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his family. By referencing the battle of Karbala protestors were aligning themselves with Shia revolutionary imagery, which paralleled the oppressive forces of the historic Umayyad army with that of the Shah's army.[27] At the feet of the monument made from the imagery of the Shah's nationalism, this new brand of Shia influenced identity would formally take root at Shahyad. It was also in these two days that the first draft of a "16-point proclamation of the formation of an Islamic Republic" was read out

24 H.E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 95. The scope of this chapter does not include an analysis of the creation of these networks, of which there is already substantial research. For further reading see Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

25 "Iran's shah said to have agreed to give up power," *United Press International*, December 20, 1978, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1978/12/30/Irans-shah-said-to-have-agreed-to-give-up- power/5250430138417/.

26 Ervand Abrahamian, "Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution," *Middle East Report* 87 (1980): 24.

27 Ervand Abrahamian, "The Crowd in the Iranian Revolution," *Radical History Review* 105 (2009): 27.

loud in the center of Shahyad square, again demanding the return of Ayatollah Khomeini from exile.[28]

Protests and police violence continued for the next month, with the Shah eventually leaving Iran on January 16, 1979, fully expecting to return. In the hopes of appeasing protestors, he established the provisional government of Shapour Bakhtiar, the leader of the National Front, one of Iran's leftist parties.[29] Three days later, a 10-point declaration of the Islamic Republic was read at Shahyad, demanding Bakhtiar to step down from his provisional government and also calling on soldiers to join the revolutionary movement.[30] The following day one million protesters filled Reza Shah and Shahyad. From Paris, the Ayatollah announced that the Shah had been dethroned by the demonstrations and that "we will take power through the legitimate referendum of the streets."[31] Finally, the tide turned at Shahyad from the place of revolutionary battle to the site of celebration with the return of Ayatollah Khomeini from exile on February 1, 1979. From Mehrabad Airport to Shahyad, and down Reza Shah to Behest Zahra Cemetery, an estimated three million people lined the streets. As *The New York Times* would write, "for this one day, whatever the weeks ahead may bring, the nation went mad with joy."[32] After this day, foreign reports began to mention that people referred to Shahyad as Azadi or even Khomeini Square.[33] On February 11, Bakhtiar's provisional government officially stepped down, making this the date the Islamic Republic of Iran took power of the state.[34] These collective memories of battle and celebration at Azadi would be used annually from then on in commemorations of the revolution. While the protests and return of Khomeini at Azadi allowed "the people" to re-inscribe the space that was the last Shah's national icon, it was up to these commemorative rituals by the new government to legitimize their appropriation of the space for the next four decades.

---

28 Jonathan C. Randal, "1.5 Million Holy Day Protesters," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 1978.
29 Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: New Press, 2007), 171.
30 Andrew Whitley, "Record Rally in Tehran In Support of Khomeini," *The Financial Times*, January 20, 1979, 2.
31 R.W. Apple, "A Million Marchers Rally for Khomeini in Tehran's Streets," *New York Times*, January 20, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/20/archives/a-million-marchers-rally-for-khomeini-in- teheran-streets.html.
32 R.W. Apple, "Khomeini threatens to arrest Bakhtiar if he stays in post," *New York Times*, February 2, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/02/02/archives/khomeini-threatens-to-arrest-bakhtiar-if-he-stays-in-post-iranians.html.
33 Nicholas Gage, "Over a Million March in Teheran, Demanding That Bakhtiar Quit," *New York Times*, February 9, 1979, A1.
34 Dabashi, *A People Interrupted*, 190.

New Rituals: Remembering the Revolution and Forming New Identities

Little was done to change Azadi: the Islamic Republic emblem was not placed on the monument and graffiti left from the revolution depicting anti-Shah imagery and slogans were left untouched for a decade. Some historians point out that this was due as much to the symbolism of the site as it was for economic reasons, with the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) draining most of the state's resources.[35] However, even during wartime, Azadi and Engelaab Road became the site of annual commemorative demonstrations that continue to this day. But because it was not a specifically Islamic or Shia symbol, there was also a need to imbed an Islamic identity at the site without altering the architecture of the "people's monument" that became such an icon of the revolution. This was done through the annual commemorative demonstrations and celebrations of the revolution, Shia holy days, and annual al-Quds[36] solidarity marches with Palestine. Azadi during the revolution became a "sacred center" of the new republic, a concept that Avner Ben Amos constructed from the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz and which "emphasised the need for polities to establish sacred centres to serve as a focus for the rituals affirming the essential values of the community."[37] With the commemorations post-revolution, these values were implemented to remember the Islamic leadership that led the revolution, and also tie the site to the pan-Islamism central to a republic that opposed the "Westernization" of Iran under the monarchy.

Azadi became the site of significant commemorative rituals for the Islamic Republic. The memorial demonstrations and anniversary celebrations of the revolution have taken place at Azadi annually from 1980 onwards, marking the days Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile. Estimates of anywhere from one to three million people annually pour into Engelaab and gather at Azadi. The commemorations include a special ceremony at Mehrabad Airport on February 1 to remember the return of the Ayatollah, and on February 11 those gathered at Azadi hear from the current head of state. Watching footage of the celebrations on Iranian State Television from various years, the images of the rallies are remarkably similar

35 The Iran-Iraq War destroyed large parts of Tehran so any government funding towards infrastructure would be spent on restoration works instead. Pamela Karimi, "Old Sites, New Frontiers," in *A Critical History of Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Ellie G. Haddad and David Rifkind, 339–58 (New York: Ashgate, 2014), 347.

36 Al-Quds is the Arabic name for Jerusalem and commonly used by Muslim majority countries.

37 Ben-Amos, "Monuments and Memory," 59.

to those in 1979, even 39 years later.[38] Clips of rallies from other cities as well as those in Tehran dominate most public channels from 7 a.m. until the late afternoon, when crowds start to disperse and regular programming returns. The same posters, the same slogans, and largely the same speeches are all used to emphasize the continuity of the present with the revolution.

Posters of Khomeini and the subsequent Ayatollah, Ali Khamenei, as well as Iranian flags dominate the street. Signs place specific emphasis on the "martyrdom" of the protesters who died at the hands of the Shah's forces. Those gathered at Azadi square see a stage casting the monument as the backdrop and featuring the orator placed between images of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei. The program starts with a reading from the Quran, with a well-known theology professor or mullah providing opening and closing remarks, and ends with a speech by the president. The speech lasts about an hour, with the bulk of it resembling a sort of "State of the Union" address remarking on everything from education, healthcare, technological advancements, and diplomatic relations. In 2006, President Ahmadinejad remarked that "we have gathered in this place in the heart of our dear nation to underline once again the aspirations and divine goals of the Revolution… and your magnificent presence in the millions and showing of your strength and resolution. I thank you for this show of strength."[39] Here the sacred center is clear: the old symbol of the Shah is now the "heart of the nation" of the Islamic Republic.

Outside of these anniversary rallies there is one other extremely important annual demonstration that takes place at Azadi: al-Quds Day. These are demonstrations in Tehran, along Engelaab and gathering at Azadi, expressing solidarity with Palestinians and underlining Israeli rule as an illegitimate occupation of Palestine. Khomeini staged the first of what would become annual protests in 1979 on the last Friday of Ramadan, an extremely important Muslim holiday. Though the protests take a different tone than the commemorative rallies of the anniversary, they also have crowds of one to three million people demonstrating along Engelaab and reaching Azadi for a series of speeches. These protests re-inscribe Azadi with an Islamic, and specifically pan-Islamic, polity through the ritualization of these

38 "The Anniversary of the Victorious Islamic Republic" from 1987, 1996, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2016, and 2017, Republic of Iran State TV (IRIB) Digital Collection, National Library and Archive of Iran, Tehran, Iran, accessed June 6, 2018. Unfortunately, as of yet not all years of IRIB footage of these anniversaries have been digitized for the collection.

39 CSPAN, "Iranian Presidential Speech," filmed February 11, 2006, at Azadi Square, Tehran, Iran, https://www.c-span.org/video/?191197-1/iranian-presidential-speech.

marches.[40] In addition to the re-inscription of Azadi as the sacred center and a site of democratization, there is a re-inscription of the space as one of pan-Islamic concern and struggle. All this within a Muslim temporality, the holy month of Ramadan, makes for a distinct re-inscription without the need to physically alter the site.

During the remarkable protests that culminated with over half the population of the capital taking to the streets in the fall and winter of 1978–79, Shahyad became re- conceptualized to the public as the site of the democratization of space and power. It was the site of battle and celebration: the protests and violent clashes with the Shah's forces and then the celebratory return of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. These collective memories were used and ritualized through annual commemorations at Azadi to further re-inscribe the monument as not just that of the revolution but also of the Islamic Republic. However, the new government worked hard to similarly appropriate the space of the "people's monument" through anniversary rallies of the revolution and additionally tie the sacred center to their government's Islamic polity through annual al-Quds Day demonstrations. The ritualization of demonstrations at Azadi in the past 40 years are not about a call to action, but rather an expression of the regime's identity, as well as a continued defense of its legitimacy, at Azadi.

Part 3. Breaking the Ritual: An Attempted Appropriation of Azadi

Contemporary public interactions and perceptions of Azadi outside of ritual commemorations reveal growing tensions between the public and the state. Azadi as a visitor attraction has been largely forgotten by the state, the museum inside remarkably underwhelming and apolitical, and instead attention was turned to the new Milad Tower – a telecommunications tower for state broadcasting that had started construction in 1997 and opened for use in 2007.[41] While Milad Tower became the outward facing monument meant for international guests,

40 Annual al-Quds protests have popped up across the Muslim world from East Asia to Africa, even making their way to North America and Europe in smaller protests. For further discussion of Khomeini's rhetoric and ideology around Islamic unity and Pan-Islamism, see Mozaffari, *Forming National Identity in Iran*, 171–73.

41 The scope of this chapter does not include an analysis of these, in many ways, competing monuments. For further ethnographic research on public perceptions of these monuments see Susan Ghaffaryan and Hamidreza Dastejardi, "Modernization Alignment of Tehran Urban Symbols with Tehran Citizens Ways of Conceptualizing," *Planum The Journal of Urbanism* 27, no. 2 (2013): 1–7.

events, and entertainment, similar to Shahyad's function for the last Shah, Azadi became an inward facing symbol, one that reflected the relationship of the public with the memory of the revolution. The protests after the elections of 2009 clearly re-focused the attention on Azadi as the stage of this conflict between people and power.

In what is commonly called the Green Movement of 2009, protesters challenging the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wielded the memory of the revolution at Azadi to legitimize their own political ends. On June 13, 2009, the people of Iran awoke to the surprising news of the "landslide victory" and re-election of President Ahmadinejad. Leading up to this day, polls and public sentiment were expecting the win of, or at least a close run-off with, the opposing progressive candidate, Mir-Hussein Mousavi. Historian Hamid Dabashi noted that it ultimately did not matter if the elections were proven fraudulent or not, but that it became a "social fact."[42] Spontaneous crowds started walking down Engelaab Road and gathered at Azadi. By June 15, the Mayor of Tehran estimated at least three million people had gathered at Azadi with 12 dead.[43] June 15 marked the start of a civil disobedience movement that, with the aid of violent suppression from the state, transitioned from merely challenging the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's presidency to that of the whole government.

The first of their organized protests on June 15 was completely silent. This was a gesture that attempted to hold the government accountable for those same proposed values of the revolution, in the same spaces they demanded them. Although the goal of the protesters was to hold a revote, the visibility of the opposition became just as important. A university student who had marched that day explained that the silence was supposed to be highly symbolic and ironic: "we were saying, hey remember those places you protested for your freedom? Well, we are back here, doing it again. But this time, we have no voice!"[44] Protesters knew that the Iranian public would understand this subliminal message, seeing past just a rally that could have taken place anywhere in Tehran. Even the website for *Jaras*, the reformist news website close to Mousavi, depicted a green-stained Azadi as its logo. [45] The movement also capitalized on Islamic imagery, again referencing the Islamic identity of the revolutionary protests. In the following month

42 Hamid Dabashi, "Diary of Defiance," *Payvand News*, June 15, 2009, http://www.payvand.com/news/09/jun/1157.html.

43 "Qalibaf: At least three million people gathered in support of Mir Huseyn at Azadi Square," *Balatarin*, June 18, 2009, http://www.balatarin.com/permlink/2009/6/18/1624753.

44 Interview with University of Tehran student and participant of the 2009 protests, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran, June 20, 2018. Translation by the author.

45 "Homepage," *Jaras*, www.rahesabz.net.

of protests, the popular slogan "where is my vote?" would emerge. Protesters were playing off the memory of a famous quote by Khomeini shortly after his emergence to power: "the criterion [of our republic] is the vote of the people." Similarly, protesters would shout "ya Hussein" – a reference to Mousavi's first name and, more symbolically, a reference to the Islamic call to Imam Hussein that was often used in the revolution, recalling the Shia paradigm of the battle of Karbala where Hussein battles oppressive forces.[46] Lastly, the color green became the color of the movement as not only one of the colors of the Iranian flag but also the color of Islam and associated with Imam Hussein.[47]

After initial election protests at Azadi, the Green Movement also capitalized on the memory of ritual protests in the space by resurging at extremely significant dates: at the September 18, 2009 al-Quds day and during Islamic holidays like Ashura 'Tasura on December 27, 2009. Most notably, however, was the movement's attempt to overtake the anniversary rallies of the revolution at Azadi on February 11. The state managed to suppress counter protests at Azadi with three tactics. First, they bussed in regime loyalists and Ahmadinejad supporters from provincial populations. As in 1979, the bus terminal at Azadi was extremely busy on February 11, again bringing in the more conservative followers of the Islamic clergy. This allowed the state to maintain a majority early in the day at Azadi, before counter-protesters could even make it down Engelaab. Secondly, they used extra police force and Basij militia to disperse protesters farther down Engelaab, where it was easier to use violence away from the coverage at Azadi. Lastly, the state managed a full-scale media blackout with reporters restricted to a specific section at Azadi, even airing footage segments from the previous year's rally with no audio.[48] The state had quite literally banned any ability for the counter-movement to appropriate the space, physically and in their coverage. February 11 did prove to be a decisive day, one which led to the "hibernation" of the Green Movement and a clear defeat as the regime placed Mousavi on house arrest.[49] However, what was most significant on that year's anniversary was not an outbreak of violence or a clear majority turn-out; it was the state's unnerving ability and desire to maintain control of the space and demonstrations.

---

46 Elizabeth Rauh, "Thirty Years Later: Iranian Visual Culture from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Presidential Protests," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1323.

47 Hamid Dabashi, *The Green Movement in Iran* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 67.

48 "The Nightly Wrap: 22 Bahman," *The Atlantic*, February 11, 2010, https://www.theatlantic.com/daily- dish/archive/2010/02/the-nightly-wrap-22-bahman/190507/.

49 Reza Masoudi-Nejad, "From built to performed space: post-election protests in Tehran," *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 17, no. 3 (2016): 323.

The Green Movement's multiple attempts to occupy Azadi not only underlined Azadi's continued relevance as a national symbol but also its history as a space for public visibility when the values of the revolution are called into question. It was a highly self-aware and historicized protest movement that purposefully used the collective memory of the revolution in its symbols, slogans, and imagery to accentuate these beliefs that were considered under threat, in the same location they were originally formed. The protests were a clear reminder that Azadi is still extremely relevant to voices from the people, even after ritual commemorations became static as the regime consolidated and stabilized their power. As in 1979, perceived ownership over the space – both metaphorically and literally – has become a measurement of political strength and stability of state power. Additionally, the attempted appropriation of the space by the Green Movement showed a new face to the nation than that seen in the space during annual rallies and ritual commemorations. A younger generation of Iranians looked to lay claims over Azadi and, although ultimately suppressed by the government, changed the political landscape of Iran.

Conclusion

The extremely focused attempts of the state to craft their chosen "public" at Azadi reveals the importance of the site in maintaining political control and legitimacy. Because what would happen if they allowed another, as Khomeini had put it in 1979, "legitimate referendum of the streets?" Could the regime survive such a rejection at the same place and through the same means by which they had come to power 30 years earlier? Years of the ritualization of the revolution at Azadi have formed a collective memory of the site as a "sacred center" and place of democratization. These memories have ironically undermined the regime in recent years. The tensions were manifested in 2009 when the public returned to Azadi, outside of commemorations, to bring revolutionary memories literally "back to life" in political opposition protests. Although the Green Movement was ultimately suppressed, the crowds on June 15, 2009 changed Iranian politics as a younger generation came to realize images and experiences they had only ever seen commemorated, and in doing so created their own layer of meaning of the site. The state crackdown on this counter-movement only underlined the understanding by both the people and the state that should the Green Movement, or any subsequent counter-movement, wish to gain political power it would still need to successfully appropriate Azadi as its own. Saved from erasure in the aftermath of the revolution, the importance of Azadi to both the people and subsequent leadership of the Islamic Republic was confirmed. It was the icon of the Shah no longer,

but instead of the "referendum of the streets." Years of ritualization of the revolution at Azadi have formed a collective vision of the monument as a nexus of democratization. Perceived ownership over the space – both metaphorically and physically – has become a measurement of political strength and stability of state power, as it was in 1979. Not only would a successful new polity have to secure Azadi as a place of demonstration, it would also have to successfully appropriate this narrative of unity in public will.