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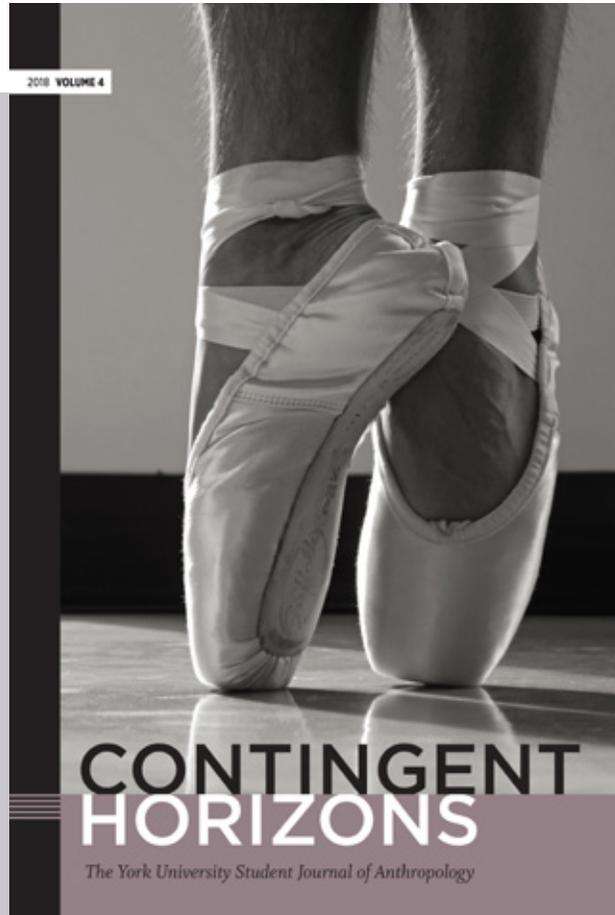
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## The Imagery of Iranian National Identity: A Typology of Slogans During the Aftermath of the 2009 Presidential Election

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# The Imagery of Iranian National Identity

## A Typology of Slogans During the Aftermath of the 2009 Presidential Election

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In this paper, I analyze the nation-building project that the Islamic Republic of Iran has produced and reproduced in the past four decades. I explore the political, social, and economic processes contributing to the (un)doing of identity projects, by investigating the 2009 protests following the Iranian presidential election and analyzing the slogans shouted from both sides of the conflict. I analyze these slogans, their words, metaphors, and meanings embedded in them to extract various aspects of national identity imagery, ideologies, and discourses in Iran. I argue that the narratives that emerged during the political protests of the 2009 Iranian Green movement demonstrate the formation of a plural national identity in Iran, which allows for the inclusion of more and more citizens. I contextualize my questions in the post-Islamic Revolution time period and specifically in the last decade (2009 to the present), because this period has undergone multiple civic movements. I contend that by placing the Iranian Green Movement under scrutiny various dimensions of contemporary national discussions in Iran can be exposed; notably anticolonial nationalism (fear of foreign domination), religious nationalism (Islamic and Shia), and civic nationalism.

**KEY WORDS** Iran, national identity, nationalism, civic movements, protests, slogans

**A**s an active force with the ability to mobilize the masses of the population in different parts of the world, nationalism is a dominant form of cultural and political identity where people with shared characteristics have a mutual feeling of belonging to one nation, state, or homeland. However, I have always wondered what shared characteristics have contributed to the crafting of collective national identity among Iranians? What makes citizens feel belonging to one nation (if that is the case)? There is no consensual agreement regarding Iranian national identity; for instance, Persian Iranians living in the diaspora may choose to introduce themselves by ethnicity as Persian (thus distancing themselves from about forty percent of non-Persian Iranian citizens), or by the highly politicized national identity as Iranian that directly associates them with the recognized politics and ideologies of the state of the Islamic Republic all over the world.

Contemporary Iran has experienced the development of several distinctive discourses on the construction of national identity, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In this paper, following Richard Handler (1988), I argue that the definition of national identity

in Iran is composed of several elements informed by the interplay of politics, culture, and nationalism across contemporary Iranian history. I argue that Iranian identity cannot be reduced to the Persian Empire, which used to be promoted by the prerevolutionary monarchy, or to ethnicity, or religion (that is endorsed by the current religious leadership).

As Ernest Gellner (1983) states in *Nation and Nationalism*: “Nationalism has been defined, in effect, as the striving to make culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof, and not more, than one roof at that” (40). On this account, Iranian national identity has been shaped and reshaped, produced and reproduced, through modern history, not only by changing internal political powers but by external factors such as the long-term British colonization of the region, World Wars I and II, and post-Second World War American influence in Iran. Similarly, in *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, Richard Handler (1988) argues that in Western Europe’s classical nation-states projects, “state-building bred national identity rather than simply following from it” (8).

Thus, in this paper I seek the central components of the national identity and the nation-building project “bred” (Handler 1988, 8) by the state of Islamic Republic. I investigate the political, social, and economic processes contributing to the doing/undoing of identity projects in Iran by discussing the 2009 presidential election, the Green Movement protests provoked afterward, and the slogans chanted during the demonstrations. I employ these slogans as the lenses through which one can analyze the nationalist ideologies and discourses in Iran.

Contextualizing my questions regarding the Iranian national identity project in the post-Islamic Revolution time period, specifically between 2009 and the present, I argue that the multiple civic movements during this period reflect the dominant nationalist discourses in Iran. In particular, I scrutinize the Iranian Green Movement, the political movement in the wake of the 2009 presidential election that criticized the election as fraudulent and called for the removal of President-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from office. I argue that the protests of this movement (lasting for several months in the form of silent demonstrations, social media campaigns, and so forth, despite being brutally suppressed by the state) expose the various obscure dimensions of contemporary nationalism in Iran. The Green Movement’s national identity discourses are revealing, due to its “general lack of defining and limiting parameters” and subsequent broad reach (Siavoshi 2014, 266). This movement also provides the opportunity to study the dichotomies between the definition of national identity presented by the state officials (and its followers), and the common people (mainly the opposition) in Iran.

Nicholas De Genova (2013), in the *Spectacle of migrant illegality*, defines the “border spectacle” as a scene of exclusion where the illegality of unwanted or undesirable migrants is rendered “spectacularly visible” (1180–1). In his view, the visible exclusionary characteristic of border policing reifies the inaccessible and invisible laws, illegalizing the migrant’s existence (2013). Although De Genova’s (2013) argument regarding migrants and immigration laws is broader than the focus of this paper, his approach toward borders is useful here when considering Iranian nationalism.

De Genova’s (2013) discussion of scenes that embody the abstract “exclusionary” attitudes of the states toward their citizens supports my examination of Iranian national identity. The massive participation in the 2009 presidential election, the candidates’

campaigns, the questionable results of the election, and the crisis that manifested in the subsequent Green Movement brought to the fore the enduring and heartily contested questions regarding Iranian national identity and its relation to the “form and function of the state that presides over it” (Siavoshi 2014, 253). Consequently, I suggest this election spectacle enacts a scene of both exclusion and inclusion within the Islamic Republic and makes the notion of national identity recognition among people visible.

Choosing the particular occasion of the 2009 elections and subsequent Green Movement as the scene, or “spectacle,” of this article was threefold. First, it was a national election, and consequently most people living in Iran were included simply by having citizenship. As a democratic country holding elections, every citizen has the right to vote; indicating their existence within the nation-state, and the state therefore must recognize the incorporation of citizens into the state’s formulations. Second, it was a presidential election which highlights that, as a national election and because the state of Iran is a Republic, the issues discussed during debates focused on national concerns. Indeed, the state was holding and monitoring the election; therefore, the state’s nationalist views were expressed before, during, and after the election. And third, the 2009 national elections encouraged unprecedented public participation in post-revolution Iran, with mainstream nationalist discussions emergent during the Green Movement protests in response to the state-imposed ideologies. Despite its aftermath, not only did the national mass media endeavor to represent the election as a “national epic” (or *Hamās-e-Melli*, in its Persian translation) but concurrently the authorities condemned and suppressed the outnumbered opposing groups both verbally and physically, labelling them as enemies of the state who were associated with Britain, Israel, and the United States.

Initially, I intended to focus on the candidate’s campaigns, debates, statements, and promises revolving around nationalism. However, while researching and reading the studies conducted on the 2009 election, I discovered a long list of more than forty different slogans shouted from both sides of the crisis against each other during the Green Movement. This engaged my attention in such a way that I changed my approach. I then started to create a typology of slogans by doing a close analysis of the words, metaphors, and the meanings embedded in them, to examine the various aspects of national identity projects operating in Iran, which resonated with the slogans.

To borrow from Eric J. Hobsbawm’s (1990) observation about nations and nationalism, Iran’s revolutionary ideology was “a dual phenomenon, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is regarding the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings, and interests of ordinary people” (150). Therefore, a typology of slogans provides me with opportunities to analyze the Islamic Republic of Iran’s national discourses from “below,” as Hobsbawm (1990) argues is necessary to understand nationalism.

As Robert Denton (1980) argues, a slogan is “a rhetorical device” that can provide scholars, politicians, and even the general public “with topical outlines of the major concerns, frustrations, and hopes of society” (10). However, despite their potential to expose widespread concerns confronting people, there is a lack of scholarship on the nature of slogans, whether used in political campaigns or chanted during movements and demonstrations. The purpose of this paper is to recognize the capacities and attributes of slogans as they are used in the Iranian Green movements and campaigns.

In the following sections of this article, I categorize the slogans shouted during the Green Movement into three different groups: Anticolonial Nationalism (fear of foreign domination), religious nationalism, and civic nationalism. These categories enable a deep and precise understanding of the slogans' contexts, forms, meanings, roots, and so forth. The structure of this paper will be organized via these categories. I argue that by examining the narrative of the 2009 Green Movement we can detect a new and different type of national identity in Iran: a plural identity of civic nationalism that includes all citizens and does not exclude based on ethnicity, gender, and political or religious beliefs.

## Methodology

I collected the slogans analyzed in this paper from newspapers, YouTube videos, online news agencies, and from direct ethnographic observation. I lived in Tehran at the time of the 2009 election and subsequent Green Movement and attended some of the demonstrations held by protesters after the election, in 2009 and 2010. I have translated most of the slogans from Persian to English myself, except for those I refer to by Dabashi (2011) and Michael Fischer (2010). I have also had my translations reviewed by two other Iranians fluent in Persian and English to confirm my interpretations.

In this article, I have scrutinized some of the slogans, such as “*Takbir*” or “*Allah-o-Akbar*,” by contextualizing them historically, socially and politically in contemporary Iran. Furthermore, for the remaining chants, including “Mousavi, BBC, The British Agent,” I have examined the words and metaphors utilized by the protesters and situated them within the cultural context from which they stem. Thus, I have conducted a close survey of the words, metaphors, and the meanings embedded therein to highlight aspects of Iranian national identity imagery echoed by the slogans.

## Contextual Background

Iran's tenth presidential election was held on June 12, 2009, in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the incumbent, was running against three candidates, including two public reformist figures, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.<sup>1</sup> The election intensified when Mousavi, the Iranian reformist politician and the last Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic from 1981 to 1989, during the Iran-Iraq war, declared his candidacy. Mousavi came back to politics after twenty years of an almost total absence which was regarded as a manifestation of his disapproving attitude toward Ahmadinejad's established regime.

During one of the pre-election debates about the National Television Broadcast, Mousavi stated that his reappearance in politics was with the aim of protesting against the prevalent corruption in the Ahmadinejad presidential period: “I am a revolutionary man and speaking here to protest the current situation [...] They [the authority] have brought the country to the point, which is full of lies and hypocrisy!” (IRIB1 2009). He started acrimonious campaigns against Ahmadinejad and ultimately became the leader of the post-election unrest. His leadership was highly supported by Mohammad Khatami, former president of Iran (from 1982–1992) and the leader of reformist campaigns since 1982 (Tait 2009a).

Under the leadership of Mousavi, reformists were united during the post-election unrest. The Iranian reformists (or *Eslahtalaban* in Persian) are a political group that generally supports former President Khatami's ideas to reform the established Iranian political system in order to incorporate more freedom and democracy. Pro-reformists are also regularly called leftist (or *chap*, in Persian), or called the opposition among the elites. After the 2009 election most of the prominent reformists, including Khatami, were condemned as "spies" and "traitors" by the state and consequently were arrested, exiled or prohibited from political activities and appearing in mass media (Moaveni 2011).

The 2009 presidential election spectacle, in Hamid Dabashi's (2011) words, was certainly an "unrivaled mobilization of the public throughout Iran" (13). It was anticipated by weeks of passionate campaigns, public gatherings, and debates; nationwide pre-election euphoria manifested in a dynamic life in the streets, spirited and vivacious, with a glimmer of hope for change through a peaceful democratic election. It was a historic moment for Iran, during which there was unity among all Iranian groups—various social, cultural, political and economic dichotomies and gaps among people were not at the fore. According to Dabashi (2011): "Voting turned into a national struggle for Iran, for its future, for our country, and not necessarily for an election held by the Islamic Republic" (10). The day following the election, the Islamic Republic News Agency announced that Ahmadinejad had won the election with 63% of the votes cast (*Al Jazeera* 2009).

However, there were substantial inconsistencies in the results, which surprised people and led to protests with millions of Iranians in opposition to the declared victory of Ahmadinejad—a response that is now called the Iranian Green Movement (Tait, Black, and Tran 2009). Eventually, the post-election disappointment and suppression of the Green Movement followers, whose hopes were shattered in a night, not only exacerbated the pre-election political gaps within Iranian nationhood but alienated the majority of people from the state. It divided the nation into relative or insider (*Khodi*) and irrelative or outsider (*Na-khodi*) individuals, into 'us' and 'them.' Thus, people turned against each other, especially after Ahmadinejad called the anti-Ahmadinejad rallies a gathering of "*khas-o-khashak*" which translates to "dirt and dust" (Islamic Republic of Iran Presidency 2009).

Subsequently, an impromptu slogan, later turned into a song, responded to the Ahmadinejad insult with the words: "*Khas-o-khashak to'ie, Doshman-e in Khak to'ie*" (meaning, "YOU are the dirt and the dust, YOU are the Enemy of this land!"), or by another frequently heard slogan: "*Ma Khas-o-Khashak Nistim, Ma Mellat Iranim*" ("We are not dirt and dust, we are Iran's nation") (Tait 2009c). The pre-election unity was bifurcated; the rhythm was broken (Fischer 2010, 497). The offending words "*khas-o-khashak*" (dirt and dust) soon became a badge of pride for protesters. One of Iran's most famous musicians, Mohammad Reza Shajarian, asked the state broadcaster (IRIB) to refrain from broadcasting his songs: "because this is the voice of dirt and dust and will always remain so" (Schott 2009).

Demonstrators gathered to mourn the protesters murdered by Iran's Basijis (pro-government militia) in several silent marches. One of the silent march protesters, interviewed with *Telegraph* (2009), described the scene as "the overwhelming sea of people in black standing there in silence." Further, he said: "No matter how many of these

one goes to, you just can't get used to the sight of tens or hundreds of thousands of people walking or just standing there in silence" (quoted in McDowall and Freeman 2009). The silent marches were effective as a way of expressing a long-term silenced and suppressed citizenship, and a method of displaying the long-standing ignorance by the state toward opposition existence and belonging to the nation.

### **Anticolonial Nationalism (Fear of Foreign Domination)**

Gellner (1983) defines Nationalism as "a theory of political legitimacy," requiring that "the political, and the national unit should be congruent" (1). He analyzed nationalism from a historical viewpoint in which "cultural similarity as a basis for political legitimacy" was one of the central features of his theory (1983, 1). Gellner also argues that ethnic boundaries should not go beyond the political ones, particularly "ethnic boundaries within a given state should not separate the power-holders from the rest" (1983, 3).

In Iran, the protests of diversified groups of people after the presidential election in 2009 indeed cut across the political boundaries of the Islamic Republic. Mousavi, the main leader of the Green Movement, who has been placed under house arrest since February 2011, continuously began to question the election results and urged his supporters not to lose hope from the moment the results were released (see his statements in Mousavi 2012). He openly described Ahmadinejad's government as illegitimate and promised that the protests would continue until the state repeals the election results, stating that: "A majority of the people, including me, do not accept (the government's) political legitimacy" (Mousavi 2012, 32). He continued, in his first statement published the day after the election, June 2009, that: "it is our historical responsibility to continue our protests and not to abandon our efforts to preserve the nation's rights. A ruling system that relied on people's trust for 30 years cannot replace this with security forces overnight" (Mousavi 2012, 32). The Green Movement, therefore, located nationalism and national political legitimacy amongst the people rather than the state.

As a result, soon after the election the state began to denounce the Green Movement, Mousavi, Karroubi, and all their supporters by several means including false accusations. The Green movement was positioned by the state as threatening to the Islamic Republic's thirty years of nation-building. The slogans: "*Mousavi, BBC, Amel-e-Engilisi*" (which translates to "Mousavi, BBC, The British Agent,"), and "*Karoubi-e-Bisavad, Amel-e-Dast-e-Mossad*" (or "The illiterate Karoubi, The Mossad Agent" in English) (Borna news n.d.), as well as other more traditional slogans, such as "Death to America," "Death to Israel," and "Death to Britain," were among many that arose in the rallies held by the pro-government demonstrators. They mostly started to emerge when Hossein Shariatmadari, editor-in-chief of the influential conservative and pro-state newspaper *Kayhan*, blatantly accused Mousavi of being an "American Agent," by writing that "We have to ask whether the actions of Mousavi and his supporters are in response to instructions of American authorities" (Tait 2009b). Shariatmadari wrote: "Documents and undeniable evidence show that this mission was directed from the outside" (Tait 2009b). He then went further and asked for a "public trial" for Mousavi and other pro-reform public figures such as the former president, Khatami (Tait 2009b).

The accusation appeared to be part of the regime's strategy of depicting the demonstrations as arranged by foreign governments. It was part of an old political practice of illegalizing the unwanted and oppositional citizens in the Islamic Republic after the 1979 Revolution. To reinforce the practice, the state also charged one of the Iranian employees of the British embassy with "acting against national security," a catch-all accusation leveled against not only political activists, but also lay people who participated in the Green Movement marches. This banal performance in the Islamic Republic, through which the state convicts the opposition of treason, first reflected the post-revolution construction of the homogeneous and essentialist evil of the "other," that is, the United States/Britain/the West. Moreover, this was echoed with the continuous Iranian struggle for independence in contemporary history. Unexpectedly, this approach was not limited to the government. Studying the Green Movement slogans demonstrates how the anticolonial/anti-foreigner attitudes of the Islamic Republic state were extended in their application to the oppositional groups and the nation as well.

On July 17, 2009, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1934–2017), former president of Iran who supported the opposition, led the Friday Prayer, called *Jumu'ah*, in Tehran. *Jumu'ah* in Iran is a state-supported event, in which The Imam, who leads *Jumu'ah* and preaches (politically) during the event, would be assigned by the Supreme Leader. Additionally, organizers of *Jumu'ah* usually ask participants to shout ideological chants (i.e., "death to America," or "death to Hypocrite") after the prayer. Therefore, normally people attending *Jumu'ah* are pro-government, and most of the opposition (even those who are religious) are reluctant to participate. However, as Hashemi was chosen to lead this particular *Jumu'ah*, lots of protesters attended the event and turned it into a scene of legal demonstration.

They replied to the calls for "Death to America!" by chanting "Death to Russia!" (Balatarin 2009). This new chant seemed to be a reaction to the fact that the Russian government quickly accepted the results of the June 12, 2009 presidential election and welcomed Mr. Ahmadinejad in Moscow days later, even though Iran's streets were filled with protesters (Mackey 2009). Demonstrators also believed that the militants, who were suppressing the protesters brutally in the streets, were either Russian or at least trained in Russia. In this respect, Karoubi, in his statement declared in September 2009, alluded to the role of the militants trained by the "Northern neighbor [Russia]" (BBC Persian 2009a), who learned how to control the protesters by terrorizing them.

Whether or not Russia, Britain, or United States really interfered in the 2009 election aftermath, the fact that both sides of the conflict blamed foreigners for domestic issues was remarkable. Poopak Ta'ati (1988), in her comprehensive article *Concern for Autonomy in Twentieth-Century Iran*, argues that in the last century one of the major concerns within the Iranian society has been for political and social autonomy (22). Ta'ati (1988) argues that this concern has become central to the imagery of Iranian National Identity. Most of the significant political and social events of twentieth-century Iran, such as the Tobacco Movement against British Colonization (1890–1892), the Constitutional movement which was finally suppressed by Russia (1905–1906), the Oil nationalization movement (1950–1953), and the Islamic Revolution (1978–1979), were fueled by anti-American aspirations (26–46).

Ta'ati's (1988) reading of history elucidates the depth of this Iranian National concern for autonomy and provides supporting evidence that shouting anti-colonial slogans on

both sides of the Green Movement was not an accident, and nor was it a mere imposition of people such as Shariatmadari or Karoubi. The nation was already inclined to relate domestic issues to the foreigners. The “fear of domination,” as Dabashi (2016, 152) articulates, has contributed to the Iranian national identity project. Secular nationalism did, and of course is, of paramount importance to the Middle East in the middle of the twentieth century, but all the forms of nationalism eventually failed to produce liberation from foreign domination. Nationalistic resentment of foreign domination also fueled the major Islamist movements of the last century, including the 1979 revolution in Iran. In this case, revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini’s anti-imperialist ideology combined with a socialist one and effectively evoked people’s national sentiments through religious discourses.

### Religious Nationalism

“*Takbir*” or “*Allah-o-Akbar*” (meaning, God is the greatest), is an Islamic religious chant, and was one of the most prominent slogans shouted from the rooftops every night during 1979 revolution, which provoked severe reactions by the state at that time. According to Roxanne Varzi (2011), Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolution leader, “led a disparate group of Marxists, feminists, socialists, radical Islamists, secular students, and everyday citizens into one cry: ‘*Allah-o-Akbar*’” (59), to fight against social injustice and “overcome foreign domination concurrently” (Ta’ati 1988, 47). The slogan “*Allah-o-Akbar*” was not necessarily intended for returning to Islam, or establishing an Islamic state; on the contrary, it was more related to the nationalistic goals (Aghaie 2014; Ta’ati 1988, 61).

Kamran Scot Aghaie (2014) emphasizes the significance of the approach of religious movements which are also considered “National Movements” and in some cases like Iran are even “Nationalistic Movements” (182). By comparing different theoretical approaches, he proposes “Religious Nationalism” as the best approach for studying the relationship between religion and nationalism, in which religion is neither external to nationalism nor an ethnic signifier (Aghaie 2014, 184). Thus, during the Islamic Revolution, religious nationalism can be understood as having offered a “viable alternative” to achieving social and political autonomy and demanding “civil justice” (Ta’ati 1988, 21). It was the incorporation of post-colonial theories with a strong sense of “national belonging” (Varzi 2011, 61).

In June 2009, these night-time outcries of “*Allah-o-Akbar*” returned in the aftermath of the election and lasted for several months. In line with the arguments above, the rooftop chanting of “*Allah-o-Akbar*” can be understood as more profound than merely recalling the 1979 revolution or even asking for God’s help. It was retrieving the Islamic (and Shia) words and gestures as an acceptable tactic of protest. Using this tactic, on the one hand, questioned the legitimacy of the state and, on the other hand, pushed the government to recognize the protestors as legitimate citizens rather than unauthorized and ever silent people, merely living in Iran. Also, by combining anti-government sentiments with Islamic slogans, as Elisabeth Jane Yarbakhsh (2014) explains: “some limits were placed on the ability of the sovereign to exercise its right to violence against the protesters” (22). Moreover, this slogan played an integral role as a medium of encouragement, heartening people to maintain their protests by connecting citizens in the most distanced corners of the nation.

The imagined solidarity among protesters was converted into an obvious manifestation in the form of chanting. However, “*Takbir*” was not the only religious chants heard in the protests.

On December 27, 2009, the day of *Ashura* that marks the climax of the Remembrance of Muharram, Mousavi led the most massive demonstration since June 2009 in Tehran. Over the centuries, every year on the day of *Ashura*, Shia Muslims commemorate the death of Hossein ibn Ali (Imam Hossein), the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Imam Hossein refused to make alliance with Yazid, the tyrant of time, and concede him as the new caliph of Islam, so he was brutally killed by the order of Yazid, at the Battle of Karbala on 10th of Muharram in the year 61 AH.

Consequently, the demonstration’s importance was twofold. First, the state suppressed the demonstration with considerable violence. According to the official government reports, four people died that day, including the nephew of Mousavi who was killed in a drive-by shooting outside his home in Tehran (Fischer 2010, 508). Furthermore, the protesters combined the anti-government slogans with the Muharram’s chants and created newer ones: “*Mah, mah-e khun ast, Seyyid Ali sar negun ast*” (It’s the month, the month of blood, Seyyed Ali—Khamenei—will be toppled) (BBC Persian 2009b). In this newer version Yazid, the symbol of tyranny, was replaced by Ali, meaning Seyyed Ali Khamenei resembles Yazid.

Likewise, in other examples of these distorted slogans, people continuously made us of older chants by replacing Imam Hossein with Mir-Hossein (the Green Movement Leader) and Yazid with Ali (Khamenei), otherwise they simply made impromptu slogans. These slogans mostly related to the concept of the battle of Karbala, as the protesters that I heard shouted: “We are not from the city of Kufa,” “We are not followers of Yazid” or “O Hossein, Mir-Hossein.” In all these chants, the government (Ahmadinejad, Khamenei, as well as the gangs of young men who policed the streets from the back of motorbikes with batons and chains) was “conceptualized as Yazid the arch-tyrant of Karbala,” and pro-government demonstrators were likened to the people of Kufa who betrayed Imam Hossein (Fischer 2010, 508).

Kufa is the city in which Imam Hossein grew up, and before the battle of Karbala, its citizens wrote a letter to Imam Hossein and invited him to their city so that they would make an alliance with him to fight in the battle of Karbala against Yazid’s army. However, they refused to help him in the very last minute and led him to go confront Yazid with an army of about a hundred soldiers. These politicized slogans, chanted during *Ashura* 2009, as well as the religious concept of martyrdom (*Shahadat*, in Persian), situated the protests within the paradigm of Karbala, including *Ashura*; the concept of martyrdom, and the resistance of Imam Hossein against the oppression, comprises another pivotal component of Shia identity which has been an integral part of the Iranian National identity.

Elizabeth Yarbakhsh (2014) believes that the Iranian historical experience resonates with the Marxian claim; she claims that during revolutionary periods, people invoke “the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language” (77). Accordingly, before the Islamic Revolution, the reconstructed and revolutionary version of the “*Ashura* narrative” alongside “*Allah-o-Akbar*” mobilized

disparate groups into a mass movement against “entrenched tyranny” (Ram 1996, 82). Indeed, recalling the “Karbala paradigm” was of paramount importance to the Iranian National Identity project, as it empowered people to reject imposed “Persianized” citizenship of Shah for an alternative (Ram 1996, 70). This other citizenship was mainly based on newly (re)imagined Shia identity, a “vaguely defined but highly emotive alternative configuration of citizenship and nationality” (Yarbakhsh 2014, 79).

Moreover, Fischer (2010) illuminates how the “Karbala Paradigm” was a vehicle to incorporate “morality and social justice as the goals of politics” during the revolution (504). He maintains that the usage of this paradigm has gradually shifted toward the “secular” opposition in Iran to re-claim both “politics” and “morality” against the Islamic Republic state’s “monopoly” over the “interpretation of Islam” and “martyrdom” (2010, 502). The figure of the “Martyr,” who has an unquestionable significance within Iranian national myth-making, and the concept of the “Martyr Culture” which has been produced and reproduced in the Islamic Republic, has created and preserved a strong “Islamic public sphere” and nation-state in recent decades (Varzi 2011, 61; Yarbakhsh 2014, 78).

Politicians like Ahmadinejad, for instance, emphasize the conception of martyrdom and associate themselves with the history of “martyrolog[y]” (Yarbakhsh 2014, 78) and justice in Islam and Iran, thereby cleansing and legitimizing their states. The origins of this history can be traced back to the Iran–Iraq war, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and to the very earliest periods of Islam. This religious paradigm notably played a vital role in the 2009 Green Movement when a young woman, Neda, died during a protest. She then became a symbol of strong national identity among protesters that were both democratic and Islamic: “*Koshteh Nadadim ke Sazesh konim, Sandogh-e-Dast khordeh Shomaresh Konim*” (We did not make martyr to compromise, to count the rigged ballot box).

Yarbakhsh (2014) contends that if you want to promote the culture of martyrdom successfully, there must necessarily be a “martyrological confrontation,” meaning that there must be an “absolute” evil fighting the martyr (78). The audience of the martyrdom narrative would then resent this evil and appreciate the oppressed opposition. As in the aftermath of the 2009 election, the Green Movement developed the paradigm of Karbala to position itself as “*Mazloun*” (meaning oppressed) against the (evil) state.

Thus, the Iranian government lost its “monopoly control” over martyrdom (Dabashi 2011, 15). The absolute evil in the state’s narrative of *Ashura* used to be “the West,” but the protesters who were forcing the state to acknowledge them as legitimate Shia citizens changed this association, using religious slogans and insisting the Green Movement martyrs against the absolute evil of the state (Yarbakhsh 2014, 85). As a result, the state’s use of violence in the face of peaceful religious-like protests ultimately delegitimized the state of Islamic Republic. The state was stripped of its postcolonial, feminist, antiracist, and spiritual qualities the moment Neda Soltani became the “martyr” of a new call for change (Varzi 2011, 62).

## Civic Nationalism

The difference between the word for poem and the word for slogan in Persian is just one letter—in Persian, poem is “She’r” (شعر) and slogan is “Sho’ar” (شعار). Both have similar rhythmical structure and the same Arabic root. Both are usually metaphorical, and typically

arouse emotions; however, not all poems become slogans. Select poems, transformed into slogans, become capable of mobilizing groups of people by expressing their ideas and purposes. One of the few poems that transcended its limits, as a song, and became a slogan is “*Yar-e-Dabestani-e-Man*” (translating to “My Schoolmate”), and this slogan first gained enormous popularity among students during the Presidential election campaigns of 1997.

This election was the commencement of the Reformist movements in Iran, led by the former president Khatami who was the most famous public figure of reformists then, and one of the opposition leaders of the 2009 Green Movement. The song was first published in the sociopolitical movie *From screaming to assassination* (1981), and has been continuously sung by Green Movement protesters as not only a kind of chanting (Kaviani 2008), but also a way of manifesting their identity, intentions, and approaches:

My schoolmate  
 You're with me and going along with me  
 The alphabet stick is above our heads  
 You're my spite and my woe  
 Our names have been carved  
 On the body of this blackboard  
 The stick of injustice and tyranny  
 Still remains on our body

This uncivilized plain of ours  
 Is covered with weeds  
 Good, if good  
 Bad, if bad  
 Dead is the hearts of its people  
 My hand and yours  
 Should tear up these curtains  
 Who can, except you and I  
 Cure our pain?

First, the song is not patriotic in traditional ways of describing the beauties of the country, encouraging defense, or mentioning the honor of being Iranian. It is ostensibly referring to the flaws of the nation as “uncivilized” and “covered with weeds,” rather than praising the land for its magnificence and imaginary virtues and suggesting that we have to save it from the evil enemy, which is a typical theme expressed in most (un)official national anthems. Instead, this song is more realistic and futuristic. The futuristic aspect of the song is the second theme embedded in the song, which inspires people to be active and steer their uncivilized homeland, instead of being passive. As it states: “My hand and yours / Should tear up these curtains / Who can, except you and I / Cure our pain?”

It raises hope for change in the future among people by expressing social solidarity to cure national pains. Moreover, there is not any good/evil binary or identifiable enemy, with hostile intentions toward the nation, in this song. It does not represent exclusionary attitudes toward the audience; rather it invites all citizens (or the “schoolmates”) to participate in a civil movement. It therefore accounts for a plural identity.

Furthermore, the song “My Schoolmate” depicts Iranian nation not merely as a socially constructed community, just imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of a group and accustomed to “banal nationalism” (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995). On the contrary, national identity is understood as practical, in the real world, so that Iranian Nationalism would not be, as Daniel Segal and Richard Handler (1992) argue, “a fixed thing, but something invented and reinvented by social actors and something social actors might invent differently now or in the future” (3).

In this case, by examining the Green Movement’s songs and slogans, the new Iranian national identity project of the protesters was one of pragmatic, civic nationalism. In this regard, Dabashi (2011) noticed that the Green Movement goals were essentially “a manifestation of the celebration of life” in contrast with the larger-than ideals of the Revolution (15). “Where is my vote?” was the movement’s civic motto, highlighting how the protesters believed in ballot boxes as a “viable means of showing protest without risking their lives,” and how the Green Movement did not want to provoke another revolution (Dabashi 2011, 58).

The Green Movement implicitly defined new aspects for Iranian civic identity, such as inclusiveness and hope. This is represented in the narrative of Mousavi which extended inclusiveness even to those who attacked the protesters. In his twelfth statement after the election, he stated: “our victory is not the one in which someone should be defeated. We should all be triumphant together, even though some perceive it later” (Mousavi 2012, 50).

To make my argument that the Iranian national identity is surpassing the bounds of ethnic, cultural, and/or religious nationalism, and thus seeking civic nationalism, I am thinking with Sussan Siavoshi’s (2014) concept of “dualistic ethnic/cultural vs. civic Nationalism” to analyze “National Identity” (253). Siavoshi (2014) explains that “Civic Nationalism” can be blind to the characteristics such as race, religion, and ethnicity and thus can be more inclusive, universalistic, and liberal (254). On the other hand, ethnic and/or cultural Nationalism is based on a particularistic, illiberal, and therefore exclusive nationhood (2014, 254).

“*Natarsid, Natarsid, Ma hameh Ba ham Hastim*” (Do not Fear, Do not Fear, We are all together) was one of the chants I frequently heard during the protest demonstrations, in which traditional stratifications in terms of age, social class, gender, or religiosity waned among the participants. The Iranian Green Movement, therefore, can be understood as inclusive, incorporating a variety of political and social groups “without being reduced to any of them” (Dabashi 2011, 11). The movement sought a political power structure that would encompass the desires, ideals, and demands of the “whole nation” (Dabashi 2011, 11). The Green Movement emphasized the importance of democracy and plurality as well as “a vibrant public sphere,” and approached the conception of the nation from political dimensions such as citizenship, constitutionalism, and democratic rules (Dabashi 2011, 11).

Furthermore, “*Omid Bazr-e-Hoviat-e-Mast*” (Hope is the seed of our identity) is one of the other main slogans, still used in reformists’ campaigns. This motto was part of the ninth statement declared by Mir-Hossein Mousavi: “I am particularly telling the youth that if you want to remain Iranian, protect the flame of hope in your hearth, because hope is the seed of our identity” (Mousavi 2012, 39). The Green Movement illustrated civic nationhood which was a political identity built on shared citizenship rather than Islamic and/or Persian characteristics.

## Conclusion

In this article I demonstrate how the Green movement's narrative and slogans reflect a different kind of formation of national identity in Iran, that of a plural identity which allows for the inclusion of more citizens. I examined the central components of the nation-building project produced by the state of Islamic Republic, investigating the political, social, and economic processes contributing to the doing/undoing of identity projects; specifically, by using the 2009 election and its slogans as the lenses through which I analyze the nationalist ideologies and discourses in Iran. The significance of these election slogans is contextualized within the post-Islamic Revolution time period and specified to the slogans shouted during Green Movement demonstrations.

Ultimately, I argue that one could identify significant components of Iranian National Identity by placing the slogans under scrutiny. To demonstrate this, I typify and deconstructed three different categories of the slogans which include: Anticolonial Nationalism (fear of foreign domination), religious nationalism, and civic nationalism. These types are indeed revealing, yet further research may uncover other components contributing to the Iranian nation building project.

## Notes

- 1 Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi were the political leaders of the 2009 Green Movement. Both have been under house arrest since February 2011.

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