

Wartime Losses and Political Gains: State-Led Mobilization Through War Memorials in Iran

Abstract

State-led mobilization is a key tool for autocratic regimes to consolidate power, yet its dynamics remain understudied. Synthesizing existing research, we identify two strategic logics that underpin state-led mobilization: threat, in which regimes mobilize supporters in response to perceived challenges, and resonance, in which they leverage events that align with local sentiments. We extend this literature by examining how war fatalities enable autocratic regimes to organize post-war state-sponsored mobilization, particularly through war memorials. These events serve dual functions: preventing war-related frustrations from fueling dissent and reinforcing authoritarian nationalism. We analyze Iran's post-war mobilization following the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), a paradigmatic case given its prolonged conflict and sustained high levels of state-led mobilization. Using an original dataset of 190,000 war fatalities matched with pro-government events (2015–2019), we find a strong positive association between war fatality rates and war memorial events. By disaggregating fatalities and controlling for pre-war regime support, we show that war fatalities—not prior regime strength—drive this effect. Our findings highlight the strategic use of war memorials as a mechanism of state-led mobilization in autocratic regimes, demonstrating how states transform war losses into political assets. This study advances research on authoritarian resilience, memory politics, and the long-term political consequences of war.

Introduction

In December 2022, amid widespread protests in Iran, the government orchestrated elaborate funerals for soldiers who had died decades earlier in the Iran-Iraq War. State-controlled media framed these ceremonies as moments of national unity, while security forces used them as staging grounds for pro-regime demonstrations. Such commemorations are not just acts of remembrance—they are strategic tools of political mobilization. This paper examines how authoritarian regimes transform war fatalities into mechanisms of state-led mobilization, using war memorials and commemorative rituals to consolidate power, maintain legitimacy, and suppress dissent.

Recent scholarship has examined how authoritarian regimes maintain power and resilience despite persistent domestic and external threats (Levitsky and Way 2022; Slater and Smith 2016; Svobik 2012). One key insight from this research is the state's ability to penetrate civil society (Lee and Zhang 2013; Riley 2010) and mobilize collective action to advance its agenda. While state-led mobilization has long been a strategy for autocratic consolidation, systematic scholarly attention to this phenomenon has only emerged recently. Through such mobilization, regimes not only reinforce their legitimacy but also counter opposition protests, suppress dissent, bolster electoral campaigns, signal geopolitical interests, and promote developmental initiatives (Beissinger 2020; Ekiert, Perry, and Yan 2020; Greene and Robertson 2020).

Existing research has explored how and why autocratic regimes engage in these efforts, highlighting two competing logics that likely guide their strategies. On the one hand, autocratic regimes escalate pro-government mobilization in response to perceived threats (Anderson and Cammett 2020; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020). The other highlights mobilization in areas where regimes have established organizational dominance, leveraging existing networks, shared values, and historical narratives to reinforce loyalty and legitimacy (Khani and Kadivar 2024). These competing

strategies create a strategic dilemma for authoritarian rulers: should they focus mobilization efforts on contentious areas to suppress dissent, or prioritize strongholds where their messaging is more likely to resonate and consolidate existing support?

In this paper, we examine the political consequences of war fatalities on pro-regime mobilization, drawing on studies of war and violent conflict (Eibl, Hertog, and Slater 2021; Feinstein and Wimmer 2023; Slater 2018; Tilly 1992; Wimmer 2014). Existing research highlights two contrasting dynamics: one strand documents how war fatalities, particularly in lost wars, can fuel uprisings and anti-regime mobilization (Berman, Clarke, and Majed 2023; Skocpol 1979; Tarrow 2015), while another demonstrates how war memorials can reframe critiques of war to advance authoritarian nationalism (T. G. Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2013; Juan et al. 2023; Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020a). We synthesize these perspectives to argue that war fatalities can also drive pro-regime mobilization, mainly through war memorials. These events serve dual purposes: mitigating the potential for war-related dissent by reframing grievances and resonating with the regime's social base, particularly those most affected by the war. We hypothesize that postwar regimes organize such events at higher rates in areas with higher war fatalities, strategically addressing both the threat of opposition and the opportunity for consolidating support.

To illustrate this argument, we present a case study of state-sponsored mobilization in Iran, a country with one of the highest rates of pro-government mobilization globally (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020). Iran serves as a paradigmatic case for examining how regimes use war memorials to manage the dual logic of threat and resonance. Our analysis draws on an original dataset of approximately 190,000 Iranians killed during the Iran-Iraq War, compiled from the digitization of 43 volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Martyrs*, which includes detailed information on individuals considered

martyrs by the Islamic Republic. We matched this dataset with data on pro-government mobilization at the district level for 2015–2019.

The findings demonstrate a significant positive association between wartime casualties and postwar state-led mobilization, primarily driven by increased frequencies of war-related events. By disaggregating fatalities into categories—conscripts, volunteers, and civilians—and incorporating data on pre-war and 1979 revolutionary fatalities, we confirm that this relationship reflects the effects of war fatalities rather than pre-existing regime support. Additionally, our analysis identifies a correlation between the rate of martyr families receiving state benefits and the scale of war memorial events, further supporting our main argument. To enhance our statistical findings, we investigate the discourses, organizations, and political strategies underlying war memorial events in Iran, illustrating how autocratic regimes strategically address both threats and opportunities for resonance in their postwar mobilization efforts. While our empirical focus is on Iran, the mechanisms we identify—state-led war commemoration as a tool for mobilization, reframing war losses into narratives of sacrifice, and institutionalizing memory politics—have broader implications for understanding how authoritarian regimes across different historical and geographical contexts use war memorials to consolidate power and shape political legitimacy.

State-led Mobilization

Scholars have long debated the sources of durability, resilience, and strength in autocratic regimes. This literature has identified several key factors, including the role of institutions (Gandhi 2008), managed elections (Schedler 2013), repression (Bellin 2004), origins (Levitsky and Way 2022; Slater 2010), economic growth, oil revenues (Ross 2012), and international linkages (Levitsky and Way 2010). Sociological analysis has added to this discussion by emphasizing the importance of infrastructural power—autocratic regimes’ ability to penetrate and influence civil society (Mann

1984; Klein and Lee 2019). For instance, in China, the Communist regime absorbs social protests through bargaining, clientelist networks, and bureaucratic incorporation (Lee and Zhang 2013). While this dimension of infrastructural power involves allocating resources to counter independent collective mobilization, another critical dimension focuses on mobilizing state supporters to consolidate power and project strength. This dual strategy highlights how autocratic regimes combine suppression of dissent with proactive state-led mobilization to maintain their authority and stability.

Autocratic governments have consistently relied on pro-government mobilization to ensure their survival and rule. States resort to mobilization to showcase legitimacy, counter anti-regime protests, intimidate the opposition, bolster electoral campaigns, signal geopolitical interests, and amplify developmental projects (Frantz 2018; Greene and Robertson 2020; Handlin 2016; Hemment 2015; Palmer and Ning 2020). Reflecting the broader implications of such mobilization, a recent cross-national analysis finds that higher levels of state-led mobilization in autocracies are correlated with a lower likelihood of democratic transitions, underscoring its role in reinforcing authoritarian resilience (Hellmeier and Bernhard 2023).

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 has been prevalent, a scholarly focus on this phenomenon has emerged only recently (Ekiert et al. 2020; Perry and Wolf 2024). State-led mobilization is widely observed across authoritarian regimes. In Russia, Vladimir Putin's “Nashi Movement” targeted youth to build the state's mobilization capacity, especially during elections, organizing large-scale pro-government rallies in response to opposition protests and running annual summer camps for ideological training (Atwal and Bacon 2012; Hemment 2015). In Syria, the regime orchestrated a massive rally on the first anniversary of the 2011 uprising to showcase loyalty to President Bashar al-

Assad and condemn the opposition (Balmer and Evans 2012; Shadid 2011). Cambodia's Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia (UYFC), linked to the ruling Cambodian People's Party, mobilizes youth through extensive humanitarian, educational, and cultural activities to secure support for the regime (Vong 2022). Similar patterns are evident in other authoritarian contexts, with cases from Venezuela (Ulmer and Aponte 2017), Zimbabwe (Lebas and Young 2023), Ethiopia (Rhodes 2020), and Turkey (Yabanci 2021) illustrating the strategic use of mass mobilization to consolidate power and suppress dissent.

While the scholarship on social movements has provided extensive explanations for the drivers of bottom-up mobilization (Almeida 2019; Snow and Soule 2010), the study of top-down state-led mobilization is still in its infancy. Social movement research has emphasized how shifts in political contexts, such as opportunities or threats, contribute to the emergence of contention (McAdam and Tarrow 2018; Meyer 2004). It has also underscored the critical role of formal organizations and informal networks in mobilizing resources, crafting strategies, and framing narratives to inspire recruitment and participation (Ganz 2000; Walker and Martin 2018). Additionally, this literature highlights the subjective and discursive aspects of mobilization, showing how actors interpret their environment and frame their causes to resonate with potential constituencies (Jasper 1997; Jasper and Polletta 2018). Although the dynamics of bottom-up and top-down mobilization differ significantly, these insights offer valuable perspectives for understanding the drivers of state-led mobilization.

Even though states are not limited by the threat of repression, they still have dilemmas about how to effectively use their resources for mobilization. Here we point out to two contrasting logics—threat and resonance—offer potential explanations for the distribution of state-led mobilization. The threat logic suggests that regimes prioritize mobilization in areas perceived as sources of opposition or unrest, using such events to counter dissent and assert dominance. Conversely, the

resonance logic posits that regimes focus their efforts in areas where their narratives and symbols resonate with local populations, leveraging pre-existing support to reinforce loyalty. This dual framework creates a strategic dilemma for regimes: should they invest resources to neutralize threats in contentious areas or concentrate on strongholds where their messages are more likely to succeed?

A key finding in the social movement literature is that threats, such as increasing repression or worsening economic conditions, are significant drivers of bottom-up mobilization (Almeida 2003, 2018). A similar logic applies to states, although the nature of the threats differs. From a threat perspective, regimes are motivated to organize mobilization events in areas with potential for dissent and anti-regime activities. Research shows that autocratic regimes frequently deploy pro-government rallies in response to opposition. For example, Hellmeier and Weidmann (2020) found that such mobilizations surge during heightened domestic opposition, showcasing authority and counterbalancing protests. Similarly, Anderson and Cammett (2020) observed increased pro-government demonstrations in Egypt during the opposition mobilizations of 2011–2013. Beyond domestic threats, regimes also escalate pro-government activities in response to international pressures, such as sanctions (Hellmeier 2020).

On the other hand, states are motivated to hold mobilizational events on occasions that resonate with audiences and can garner support for their rule and agenda. Recent scholarship in political sociology and comparative politics underscores the importance of legitimation as a pillar of stability for both autocratic and democratic regimes (Buckley et al. 2024; Gerschewski 2018; Guriev and Treisman 2022; Kailitz and Stockemer 2017; Luft 2020a; Schoon 2022). Four primary strategies of legitimation include references to regime performance, ideology, leadership, and procedural legitimacy (Tannenbergh et al. 2021). Pro-government public events serve as collective rituals (Collins 2004) for reinforcing government legitimacy. During these events, organizers assert claims about the

sources of the regime's legitimacy, and the emotional energy generated in public gatherings amplifies these claims.

To make such claims more effective, governments employ framing strategies to align their legitimization narratives with frames they believe will resonate with local populations. Social movement scholarship highlights the importance of resonance in the emergence and impact of collective actions (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018). A message resonates when it connects with audiences' lived experiences and offers solutions to their concerns (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017). While regimes ideally aim for their frames to resonate broadly, they prioritize connecting with their core supporters and those with potential sympathy. As a result, governments often target pro-government public events in areas that align with their strongholds or where they can activate existing networks and symbolic resources to bolster their social base.

States seek to organize mobilizational events that resonate with their audiences and strengthen support for their rule and agenda. Recent scholarship in political sociology and comparative politics highlights the pivotal role of legitimization in ensuring the stability of both autocratic and democratic regimes (Gerschewski 2014; Kailitz and Stockemer 2017; Lachapelle 2022; Luft 2020a; Schoon 2022). Four key strategies of legitimization include appeals to regime performance, ideology, leadership, and procedural legitimacy (Tannenberg et al. 2021). Pro-government public events serve as collective rituals that reinforce these legitimacy claims (Vong 2022). Rituals, as social practices, generate and sustain symbolic goods while fostering moral and emotional attachments to a social order and its sources of authority. The emotional energy produced in such gatherings amplifies the regime's narratives and enhances the effectiveness of its claims (Collins 2004; Durkheim 1912).

To maximize effectiveness, governments often employ framing strategies that align their legitimacy narratives with frames that resonate with local populations. Social movement scholarship highlights the critical role of resonance in driving the emergence and impact of collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018). A message resonates when it connects with the lived experiences of its audience and addresses their concerns. While regimes ideally aim for broad resonance, it is most crucial for their claims to resonate with close supporters and potential sympathizers. As Skocpol (1979:32) observes, “what matters most is always the support or acquiescence not of the popular majority of society but of the politically powerful and mobilized groups, invariably including the regime’s own cadres.”

Accordingly, governments prioritize holding pro-government public events in areas they perceive as sympathetic to their rule. These areas often coincide with the regime’s strongholds or regions where they can leverage existing networks and symbolic resources to consolidate their social base.

War Fatalities, Memorials, and State-led Mobilization

In this paper, we argue that war memorials serve as an effective platform for pro-government mobilization, addressing both the logic of threat and the logic of resonance. Our argument builds on the scholarship on the political consequences of war, which explores how war fatalities influence state capacity (Feinstein and Wimmer 2023; Tilly 1975, 1992), shape the militarized trajectory of regimes emerging from violent conflict (Eibl et al. 2021; Slater 2018), and contribute to the durability of authoritarian regimes rooted in revolutionary conflict (Lachapelle et al. 2020; Levitsky and Way 2002). We highlight postwar state-led mobilization as a significant yet understudied consequence of war fatalities, demonstrating how regimes leverage these losses to consolidate power and sustain their rule.

We posit that postwar regimes are particularly motivated to organize war memorials in areas with high war fatality rates. The substantial costs of war—including loss of life, widespread destruction, and economic downturns—pose significant threats to political survival, fueling grievances that can lead to uprisings (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Skocpol 1979). Simultaneously, wars build solidarity, create collective memories, and develop networks that can spur civic activism (Tarrow 2015). For example, in post-civil war contexts such as Iraq, Algeria, and Sierra Leone, wartime experiences have prompted protests, community organizing, and leadership roles (Bellows and Miguel 2009; Berman et al. 2023; Blattman 2009; Gilligan, Pasquale, and Samii 2014; Kilavuz, Grewal, and Kubinec 2023).

We refine this literature by arguing that casualties in lost wars can also drive pro-regime mobilization, particularly through state-sponsored war memorials. These commemorations enable regimes to shape narratives, foster solidarity, and preempt grievances from escalating into protests, thereby reinforcing authority and channeling emotional energies into pro-government activities. As Pfaff and Yang (2001), highlight with their concept of “double-edged rituals,” the same rituals can either empower bottom-up collective action or reinforce and strengthen the established order. Similarly, Morris and Braine (2001) emphasize that opposition movements can emerge from the same cultural material that sustains compliance. This dual potential applies to war commemorations, which can serve either as sites of anti-government dissent or as platforms to enshrine sacrifice for the state. By framing these sacrifices as acts of national loyalty, regimes transform war memorials into cornerstones for amplifying pro-regime nationalism and sustaining state-led mobilization.

Due to two dynamics, areas with high casualty rates present ideal sites for pro-government mobilization. First, these regions may attract organized opposition that leverages casualty-related frames in protests, requiring the regime to respond (threat logic). Second, the same casualty frames

can be reframed into pro-regime nationalism, to resonate with local populations (resonance logic). Research in contexts such as France, Germany, and the United States highlights how authoritarian nationalist politics often resonate in areas with high war casualty rates (Hooks and McQueen 2010; Juan et al. 2023; Kriner and Shen 2020; Surdea-Hernea 2023).

War memorials, with their patriotic significance, offer autocratic governments a unique opportunity to align their claims of legitimacy with narratives of patriotic sacrifice. As Benedict Anderson observes, war sacrifices remind citizens of the cost of belonging and provide the state a means to persuade them to serve and die for their country (Anderson 2006). Scholarly work on collective memory and nationalism highlights how war memorials shape national identities, connect societies to their past, and foster unity and loyalty (Acosta and Braun 2022; Olick 2016a; Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020a). This literature emphasizes the legitimizing power of historical narratives (Jansen 2007). As Hobsbawm (1983) observes, movements often bolster their innovations by referencing a “people’s past,” invoking traditions of revolution and celebrating their heroes and martyrs. For example, after World War I, particularly in defeated nations, the war’s horrors were reframed into a myth of glory and sacrifice, masking its brutal realities while legitimizing its outcomes. Fallen soldiers were venerated as saints and martyrs, creating sacred spaces and symbols central to nationalist sentiment. The far-right exploited this narrative, using the myth of war sacrifice to promote a nationalist utopia as an antidote to postwar disillusionment (Mosse 1990).

As discussed earlier, incumbent regimes use pro-government mobilization as a ritual of legitimation. War memorials, in particular, provide a powerful form of such rituals. Funerals and commemorative ceremonies for the fallen often draw on existing cultural practices, which the state can co-opt and reframe to advance its agenda. By aligning its legitimacy claims with narratives of wartime sacrifice, the regime leverages these memorials to reinforce its authority. Memorials allow

the regime to assert its legitimacy through claims about its performance in the war, the leadership of the dominant party or leader, and the role of its guiding ideology in serving the nation. The heightened emotional atmosphere of war memorials further amplifies the resonance of these claims, as scholars note that resonance is more likely in contexts of strong emotional engagement (Bail 2012; McDonnell et al. 2017).

War fatalities, on their own, do not inherently lead to anti- or pro-government mobilization. Instead, they shape the emotions, narratives, and networks of solidarity that can be harnessed by civil society groups or the government. In democratic settings, governments, political parties, and civil society organizations often contest the interpretation and commemoration of war, using these narratives to advance competing political agendas. In contrast, autocratic regimes typically seek to monopolize war memorials and suppress alternative or dissenting versions of history (T. G. Ashplant et al. 2013; Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020a).

To clarify, we do not argue that state-led mobilization necessarily achieves stronger resonance in areas with higher war fatalities. Rather, we contend that fatalities signal to the government which areas are more likely to exhibit frame resonance, based on their prior engagement in violent conflict in support of the state. As social movement scholarship highlights, the factors that drive the emergence and intensity of bottom-up protests are not always the same as those that determine their effectiveness. Similarly, in the case of top-down mobilization, the factors motivating such efforts may differ from those that ensure their success.

Drawing on insights from social movement scholarship, which emphasizes the critical role of organizations in facilitating bottom-up mobilization (Ganz 2010; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Walker and Martin 2018), autocratic regimes similarly rely on institutional mechanisms to coordinate and manage war memorial events. These regimes establish state-controlled organizations to

orchestrate commemorative activities and develop narratives that align with their political objectives. Through these organizations, autocracies craft frames and discourses that reinterpret war sacrifices in ways that reinforce the regime's legitimacy, bolster nationalist sentiment, and suppress opposition. This strategic approach enables regimes to co-opt the collective memory of war, turning it into a powerful tool for state-led mobilization.

Building on these studies, we hypothesize that districts with higher war fatalities will exhibit increased state-sponsored mobilization, particularly in the form of war commemoration events.

Empirical Strategy

To support our argument, we analyze the case of war fatalities and postwar state-led mobilization in Iran through a mixed-methods approach.

First, we develop a qualitative case narrative to justify our case selection and provide historical context. This narrative highlights how the Islamic Republic of Iran institutionalized war memorials as a core component of its top-down mobilization strategy. We document the state discourse surrounding war commemoration, the organizations tasked with promoting these events, and examples of how war memorials have been used to serve political objectives. This historical overview establishes the significance of Iran as a paradigmatic case for studying the relationship between war fatalities and state-led mobilization.

Second, we introduce a novel quantitative dataset on war fatalities from the Iran-Iraq War and postwar regime-led mobilization events. This dataset underscores the central role of war memorials in Iran's postwar mobilization efforts. We employ regression analysis to examine the relationship between war fatality rates and state-led mobilization at the subnational level. By including additional controls, our models also assess how other sources of regime threat or support,

such as socioeconomic conditions, ethnolinguistic composition, and regime-affiliated organizations, influence the extent of mobilization. This comprehensive strategy allows us to explore the interplay between war casualties, regime narratives, and mobilization practices.

War and Commemoration in Iran

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) presents a compelling case for examining the enduring impacts of war on state-sponsored mobilization. First, it stands as the longest interstate war of the 20th century, mobilizing millions of Iranians and Iraqis on both sides. The war was also exceptionally deadly, resulting in approximately 190,000 deaths for Iranians and 80,000 for Iraqis (Razoux 2015). Secondly, based on the only cross-national dataset of pro-government mobilization in autocracies, Iran has been one of the pioneers of state-sponsored mobilization over the last two decades (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020). The combination of the war's duration, scale of mobilization, fatalities, and subsequent post-war top-down mobilization makes Iran a paradigmatic case for analyzing the legacies of war on regime formation and top-down mobilization in an authoritarian context.

The war officially commenced on September 22, 1980, when Iraqi forces launched an invasion of the Iranian border with the ambitious objective of capturing Tehran within days. Initially caught off guard, the Tehran government found itself ill-prepared to counter the Iraqi offensive, resulting in the loss of several border cities to Iraqi forces. However, despite these setbacks, Iran managed to halt the Iraqi advance towards Tehran. During this phase, Iran initiated a large-scale mobilization effort, enlisting many volunteers alongside the conventional military, which relied heavily on conscription. Facing a disadvantage in terms of equipment and weaponry compared to Iraq, Iran resorted to the “human wave” tactic, which, although practical, incurred substantial casualties (Axworthy 2016).

By 1982, Iranian forces successfully pushed back the Iraqi military and reclaimed major Iranian cities that had fallen under Iraqi occupation. Buoyed by these victories, instead of pursuing a ceasefire, the Iranian leadership opted to launch offensives inside Iraq. Over the ensuing years, from 1982 to 1988, Iran engaged in a series of operations in pursuit of a decisive victory. However, despite their efforts, they failed to achieve a significant breakthrough, partly due to the backing provided to Iraq by the United States and European powers, who were apprehensive about the growing influence of the revolutionary government in Iran.

The decision to prolong the war beyond 1982, coupled with several strategic missteps by Iranian commanders, resulted in tens of thousands of fatalities on the Iranian side during this period. The apparent disregard of these commanders for the human costs of their aggressive approach prompted private criticisms from some middle-ranking officers within the Iranian armed forces (Bastani 2020).

The Iran-Iraq War had significant and lasting effects on both nations involved. In Iran, it was important in the rise and consolidation of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij militia as dominant political forces and tools of repression (Alemzadeh 2018; Golkar 2015, 2020; Ostovar 2016). The conflict intensified the Iranian political elite's siege mentality, fostering a persistent perception of external threats (Razoux 2015).

The war also profoundly impacted Iran's domestic politics. It began while various revolutionary factions within the Islamic Republic competed for control, shaping the emerging social and political order. The Islamists used the war to marginalize nationalist factions and suppress leftist movements, both within and outside the government. By 1981, they had sidelined nationalists and quelled other political groups, employing repression and mobilization of their supporters through elections and public demonstrations (Abrahamian 1989). Recruitment rallies and the funerals of

fallen soldiers became tools for maintaining the Islamists' public presence and political control. At these events, Islamists rallied their supporters around the cause of the Islamic Republic, portraying opposition factions as collaborators with the Ba'thist regime and foreign enemies of the revolution (Arjomand 1989). This strategy of leveraging war-related events to mobilize the regime's social base and assert dominance has endured, becoming a cornerstone of the regime's mobilization repertoire for over three decades following the war's conclusion in the late 1980s.

In addition to war-related state-sponsored mobilization, the Iranian regime has employed a diverse range of events for top-down mobilization. Post-war, the government continued to organize public events to reinforce conservative codes of conduct, including mandating the hijab for women and promoting modest clothing among the youth (Shahrokni 2019; Teimouri 2023). As the student movement revived and reformist factions gained influence in the late 1990s, conservatives used top-down mobilization to counteract these reformist efforts. In subsequent decades, hardliners maintained this strategy to challenge moderate and reformist factions and address various forms of protest that threatened conservative control (Golkar 2012; Razavi 2009). Remarkably, during anti-regime protests in 2009, 2017, 2019, and 2022, hardliners relied on mobilizing their supporters to suppress popular dissent and reinforce the regime's authority.

The Discourse and Organizations of War Commemoration

In Iran, the discourse surrounding the Iran-Iraq War, particularly as articulated by figures like Ali Khamenei, portrays the conflict as a critical struggle against foreign aggression, notably from powerful nations such as the United States. This narrative highlights Iran's resilience, framing the war as a test of faith, martyrdom, and sacrifice. Khamenei emphasizes the spiritual significance of the human wave tactic and the need to convey the war's message of faith and obedience to future generations. Criticisms of the war are dismissed as adversarial propaganda, with the state narrative

sanctifying the conflict as a sacred defense (For further details on the official discourse, see the appendix).

Aligned with this elite discourse, various government institutions and organizations produce a range of cultural products related to the Iran-Iraq War, including war histories, documentaries, fiction movies, music, and memoirs. Many of these entities are affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Samuel 2021). However, the official war narrative faces persistent challenges from social and political actors within Iran, including some war veterans. Simultaneously, the government enforces strict censorship on independent cultural productions that deviate from the state's official narrative (Ehsani 2016; Farhi 2004).

The Iranian state employs several institutions to sustain the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War and use it for pro-government mobilization. The Foundation for the Preservation and Dissemination of Values and Works about the Sacred Defense (Bonyad-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar va Arzesh-ha-ye Defa'e Moqaddas) operates under the General Staff of the Armed Forces, which falls under the Supreme Leader's authority. This institution promotes values of martyrdom and sacrifice through literature, cinema, museums, and news agencies, with one of its branches, *Rahiyān-e Nur*, organizing war-zone tours and memorials for recovered soldiers. The Islamic Propaganda Organization (IPO), founded by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1982 and directly supervised by the Supreme Leader, also plays a crucial role. With a vast nationwide network, the IPO coordinates pro-government mobilization events, produces ideological content, and integrates the war's legacy into its broader mission of propagating Islamic ideology. Similarly, the Basij Resistance Force (*Nirū-ye Moghāvemāt-e Basij*), a volunteer paramilitary organization under the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, was pivotal in mass mobilization during the Iran-Iraq War and continues to shape the state's mobilization strategies (Golkar 2015; Razoux 2015). With extensive branches across Iran, the Basij enforces social norms,

maintains internal security, and organizes war commemorations and funerals, reinforcing narratives of sacrifice and national unity in service of the regime's legitimacy.

The Political Use of War Commemorations

In Iran, the state frequently organizes collective events to commemorate the Iran-Iraq War, using these occasions not only to honor fallen soldiers but also to reinforce its political authority. Among these events, public funerals for recovered soldiers stand out as particularly emotionally charged, often drawing larger crowds than traditional government rallies (Reuters 2015). These commemorations serve dual strategic functions: they engage the *logic of resonance* by invoking collective memories of sacrifice to strengthen public allegiance to the regime, and they address the *logic of threat* by countering opposition and reinforcing state control in moments of political crisis.

To illustrate how the state leverages war memorials for both mobilization and repression, we examine three key events. First, the 2015 mass funeral for fallen combat divers demonstrates how the regime capitalized on war sacrifices to generate broad emotional engagement and reinforce nationalistic sentiments. Second, the 2009 university campus burials reveal how the state used war commemoration to assert control over historically oppositional spaces. Finally, the 2022 post-protest war funerals illustrate how the regime weaponized war memorials in response to mass dissent, framing fallen soldiers as defenders of state policies. Together, these cases highlight the dual role of war memorials in both cultivating support and suppressing opposition within Iran's political landscape.

June 2015 Mass Funeral for Fallen Combat Divers: Mobilizing Collective Memory and Nationalist Sentiment

In June 2015, the remains of 175 Iranian combat divers were interred across multiple cities, drawing millions to participate in these poignant ceremonies. While repatriating war casualties was not new, this event was remarkable for its scale and significance. The divers, buried alive with bound hands, became symbols of sacrifice that deeply resonated with Iranians. The funerals served as a platform for reconciliation, uniting diverse political and social groups. Ideologically divergent organizations like Iran's Basij and the House of Cinema praised the sacrifices made (Karami 2015).

The combat divers were casualties of a bold Iranian offensive maneuver during the Iran-Iraq War, which ended in tragedy due to leaked information that exposed the operation to Iraqi forces. Despite knowing the operation had been compromised, Iranian commanders proceeded, resulting in one of the bloodiest defeats for the Iranian side (Bastani 2015). While critics viewed this as a significant military blunder, the regime skillfully leveraged the somber event to reinforce its narrative. State officials used the funerals to emphasize animosity towards the United States (Farsnews 2015a; Tasnim 2015a), advocate for Iran's nuclear rights (Basijnews 2015a), and highlight the martyrs as symbols of readiness to sacrifice for the nation (Farsnews 2015c; Tasnim 2015b). They portrayed the large turnout as a testament to Iranians' loyalty and resistance, urging adherence to Khamene'i's directives, including proper hijab practices (Farsnews 2015b; Tasnim 2016c).

People coming from diverse social groups but government supporters were prominent. Many crying and as shown in videos touching the coffins for blessing while holding proregime signs, showing how the regime blends emotional intensity and the ritualistic aspect of event into displays for proregime support. Tens of thousands only in Tehran showing the broad appeal of these events.

2009 University Campus Burials: Reasserting Control Over Dissenting Spaces

The 2009 decision to bury the bodies of Iranian war soldiers on university campuses exemplifies how the Iranian government employs war memorials as a response to political threats beyond the war itself. University campuses have historically been hubs of opposition and student activism in

Iran (Elling 2009). By embedding war memorials within these spaces, the regime sought to assert ideological control, neutralizing potential dissent and transforming sites of resistance into arenas of state-sponsored commemoration. When students protested these burials, the government responded with crackdowns, reinforcing its authority. Officials framed the martyrs as paragons of revolutionary values, urging students and teachers to embrace their spirit in defiance of "external liberal influences" (Basijnews 2016; Tasnim 2015c, 2016b). The initiative functioned as a direct intervention to suppress opposition, embedding the regime's ideology within a key site of political contestation while signaling intolerance for dissent.

September 2022 Post-Protest Commemorations: Weaponizing Martyrdom Against Political Dissent

In September 2022, as protests erupted across Iran in response to the death of Mahsa Amini and the government's mandatory hijab policies, the regime swiftly organized another series of war funerals and burials. These commemorations were not just about remembering fallen soldiers; they were explicitly deployed to counteract the growing anti-regime sentiment sparked by the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement. State officials framed the martyrs' sacrifices as a defense of Islamic values, particularly the hijab, and called on Iranian women to honor their legacy by maintaining modesty (IRNA 2022; Mehr News 2022). In this way, the regime instrumentalized war memorials to reassert its ideological authority at a moment of intense political crisis, using the memory of fallen soldiers to delegitimize opposition movements and reinforce state control.

Quantitative Data

Outcomes: State-sponsored mobilization

Our dependent variable consists of three types of state-sponsored mobilization events in Iran. To capture these events, we relied on the dataset collected by Khani and Kadivar (2024) collected on pro-government mobilization in Iran from 2015 to 2019. This dataset is derived from the two-stage coding of reports from three government news agencies in Iran: Farsnews, Tasnim, and Basijnews, which collectively offer the most comprehensive coverage of state-sponsored events. This dataset is notable for being the only one of its kind disaggregated to the sub-national level.

The dataset includes 12,055 unique events, categorized into various subtypes such as war commemoration events, rallies, and other events like the funerals of state officials or Iranian soldiers killed abroad in countries where Iran has a military presence, such as Syria. War commemoration and war funeral events account for 3,910 unique events, representing a significant portion of all events. This is especially notable compared to 3884 rallies, a common method of organizing global street support by various governments.

For our models, we use the total number of pro-government mobilization events, war-related pro-government mobilization events, and non-war-related events by subtracting the war-related events from the total. See Figure 1 for a visualization of these three types of pro-government mobilization in Iran.

Figure 1. Pro-government Mobilization in Iran

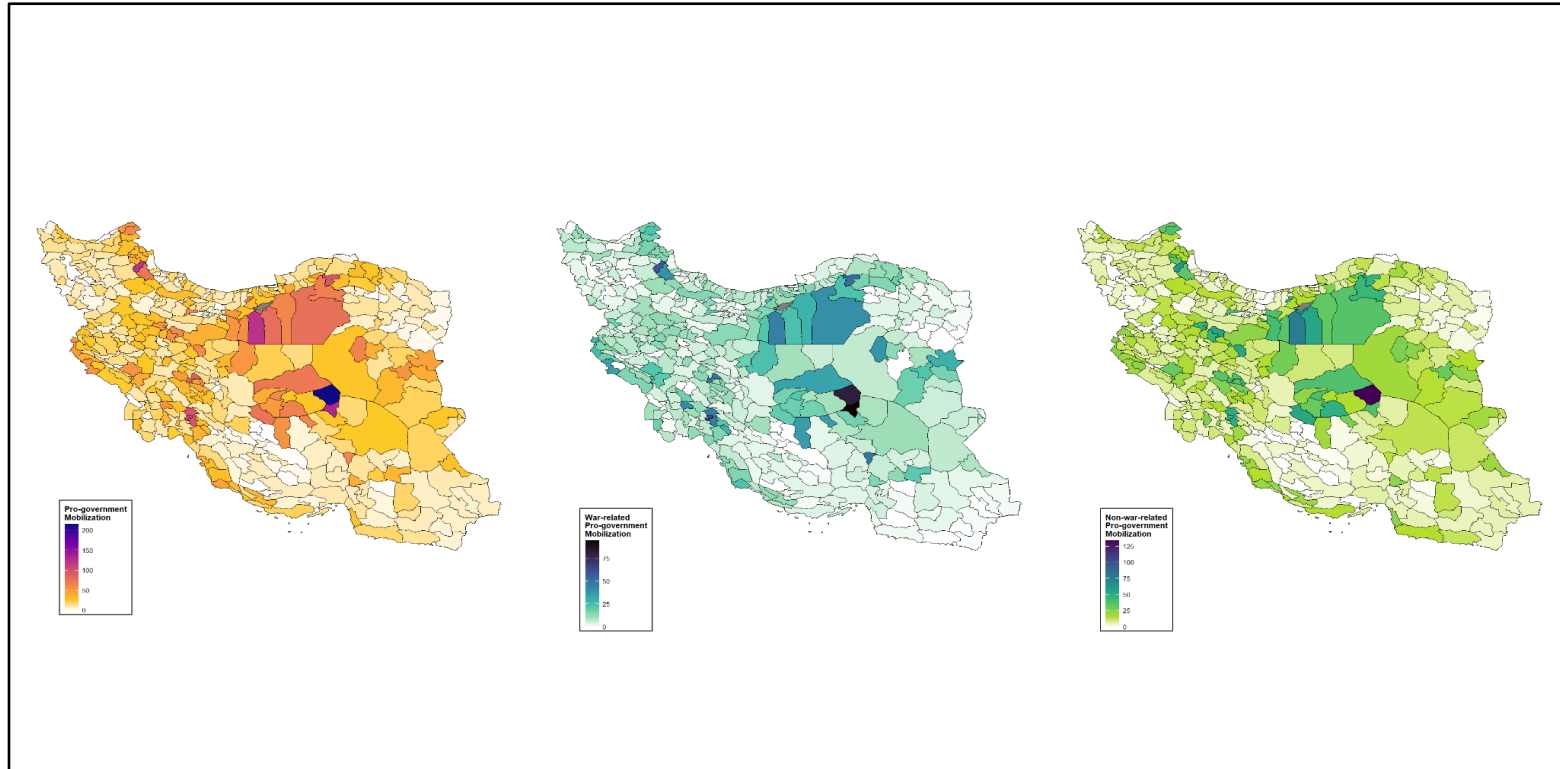


Figure 1 presents three maps of Iran, showing different measures of pro-government mobilization (overall, war-related, and non-war-related) normalized per 100,000 district population. Each map uses a distinct color to represent the intensity of mobilization across districts, ranging from light colors for low values to darker hues for high values.

Islamic Republic Martyrs Dataset (IRMD)

While historical narratives of the Iran-Iraq war exist, the quantitative analysis of war mobilization and its aftermath remains notably absent. This gap in research can be attributed to the scarcity of detailed data, a common obstacle for studying wars in the global South. Recent quantitative studies on war have predominantly focused on conflicts involving global North countries such as the United States, France, and Germany (Juan et al. 2023; Koenig 2023; Kriner and Shen 2020). Even in cases like World War I, existing data predominantly reflects fatalities from global North countries, leaving the involvement of conscripts from colonies largely unexplored.

To address this gap, we introduce a new dataset concerning Iranian fatalities during the Iran-Iraq war, compiled from published biographies of these individuals.¹ This data is sourced from a 43-volume encyclopedia of martyrs published by the Islamic Republic's Martyrs Foundation. This dataset encompasses information on 214,882 individuals, including 117 Islamists killed in protests or executed under the Pahlavi regime at the start of the revolution, 2,461 fatalities from revolutionary protests of 1978-79, 3,498 fatalities from post-revolutionary clashes involving the security apparatus of the Islamic Republic and various opposition groups, 194,647 war fatalities, and 15,302 individuals killed after the war in clashes with smugglers, separatist groups, or accidents while on duty (Iran Martyr and Martyr Affairs Foundation 2016).

Our dataset fills a significant gap in the study of armed conflict, particularly in bridging the data scarcity divide between the global North and South. Providing detailed information on fatalities

¹ See Tezcür (2016) for another example of utilizing obituaries to create a dataset of war fatalities, specifically in the context of a civil war in the global south. A key distinction in our approach is that, while Tezcür uses war fatalities as a proxy for war mobilization, we employ our fatality data to precisely measure the number of war fatalities. Additionally, we incorporate a separate measure of war veterans as a proxy for wartime mobilization, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between mobilization and fatalities.

from a war in the global South offers a unique contribution to the social scientific studies of armed conflict.

To transform the biographies into a usable format, we obtained the PDF for all 43 volumes and used computational text analysis methods to extract and transform all the biographies into a usable digital format. The biographies include information about each individual's birth and death dates, birthplace, cause of death, education, and employment (For further details on our coding procedure and data construction, see the appendix).

War Fatalities

Our primary independent variable focuses on individuals killed during the Iran-Iraq war. To measure this, we aggregated the number of fatalities at the district level based on individuals' birthplaces. This approach was necessary because the bodies of fallen soldiers have not been universally found. As an alternative measure for robustness tests, we used the burial place.

Further disaggregation of the fatalities was done using information from biographies to identify volunteers, conscripts, and civilians killed during the war. We recorded 84,059 conscripts, 110,437 volunteers, and 19,531 civilian deaths in total. These categories carry different implications for our argument: volunteers presumably originate from areas with high levels of regime support, while conscripts and civilian deaths necessarily come from areas with varying levels of support for the regime. In Iran, males over 18 are mandated to serve in the military. Civilian deaths include those from border cities attacked during the Iraqi invasion and urban areas subjected to bombardment (See Figure 2 for the visual representation of these variables). Finding an association between conscript and civilian fatalities and post-war state-sponsored mobilization provides more substantial evidence for the effect of war fatalities on postwar pro-government mobilization. This is because

such an association cannot be solely attributed to higher levels of support for the regime from the pre-war period.

For all our war fatality variables, we take the percentage of fatalities out of the district population based on the 2016 census.

As an alternative measure, we also use the percentage of families of martyrs out of all families in a district. Specifically, these are the families designated as martyrs by the Foundation of Martyrs, who receive a stipend in addition to several other benefits. A limitation of this data is that it includes families of martyrs before and after the war, as well as martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war. Nonetheless, war fatalities make up about 84% of all fatalities accounted for in the Encyclopedia of Martyrs. While we are not able to break down the number of families the same way we broke down the war fatalities, this is the only existing data source on those families affected the most by war and covered by the state. We use this variable as additional support for our hypothesis connecting war fatalities and postwar pro-government mobilization.

To collect this data, we relied on provincial statistical yearbooks of each of the 31 provinces in Iran published by Iran's Statistical Center. Each yearbook has information across topics, including veteran numbers at the district level, all in PDF and table format (Statistical Centre of Iran 2016). We used a combination of computational and manual coding techniques to transform veterans' data into a digital, usable format (For further details on our coding procedure and data construction, see the appendix).

Figure 2. War Fatalities in Iran

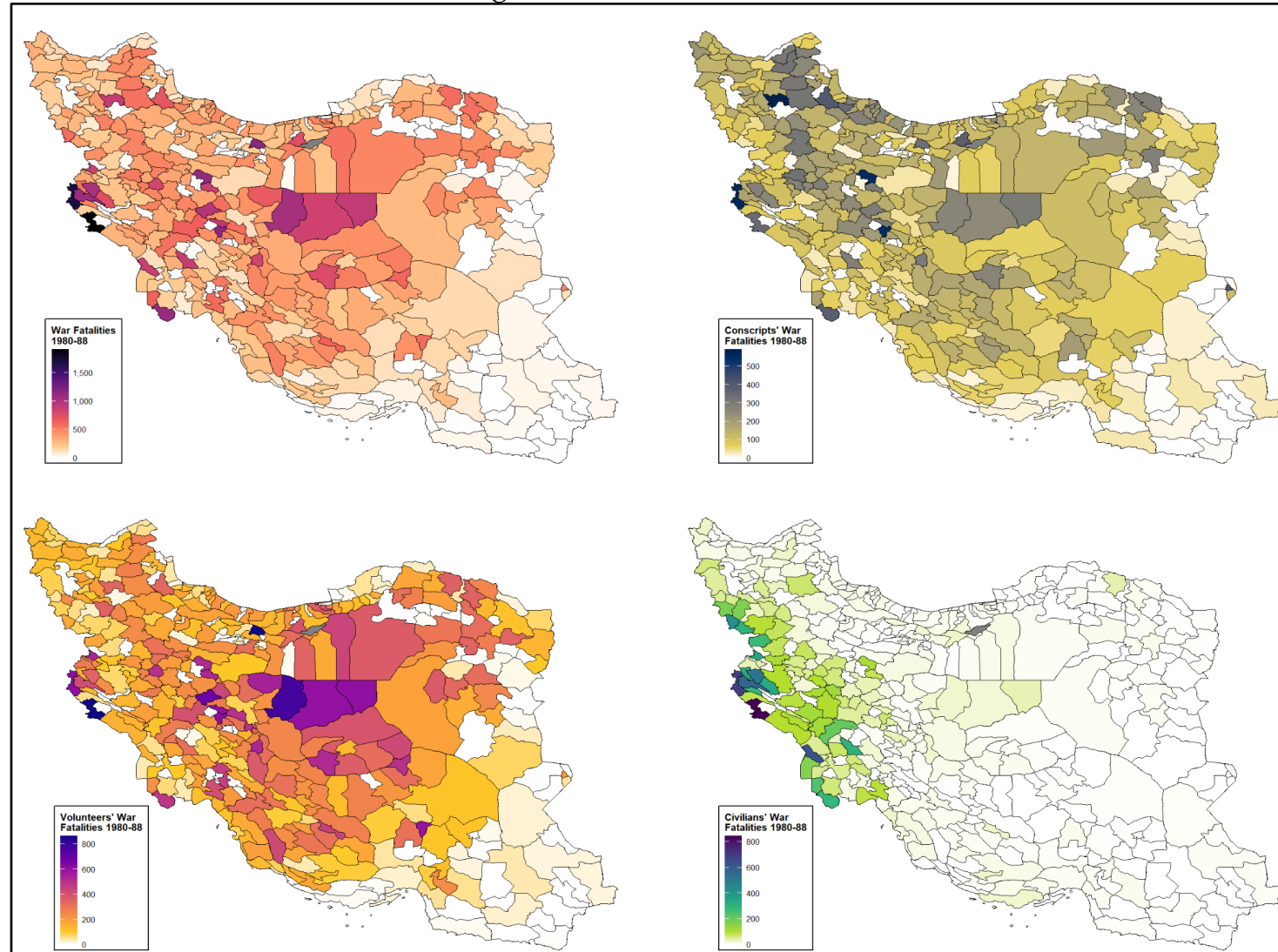


Figure 2 presents a map of war fatalities during the 1980-88 period, normalized per 100,000 district population. The maps show total war fatalities, conscript war fatalities, volunteer war fatalities, and civilian war fatalities across Iran's districts.

Alternative Explanations and Controls

One prominent alternative explanation is that areas with higher pre-existing social support for the Islamic Republic experienced more tremendous success in war mobilization, which is likely correlated with higher war fatalities. Conversely, the state might naturally hold more pro-government mobilization events in regions where it already enjoys greater support. Consequently, any observed association between war fatalities and post-war state-sponsored mobilization could be primarily attributed to existing levels of regime support across different areas. To address this alternative explanation, we employ several measures.

First, we use the Islamic Republic Martyrs Dataset (IRMD) to measure pre-war pro-regime support. The IRMD provides data on Islamists killed under the monarchy before the revolution, individuals killed during the revolution against the monarchy, and those killed in clashes between the Islamic Republic and opposition groups in the period between the revolution and the outbreak of war. Together, these measures reflect varying levels of regime support across three distinct pre-war periods. In our main model, we aggregate fatalities from all three periods to capture overall Islamist pre-war support at the district level. In one of our sensitivity tests, we further disaggregate this measure to examine fatalities separately from the pre-revolution period, the revolutionary period, and the post-revolution/pre-war period.

Second, we incorporate a measure for the percentage of conservative votes in the 2017 presidential election as a contemporary indicator of regime support in the postwar period. This measure is based on Ebrahim Raisi's share of all votes in that election, as he was the leading conservative and hardline candidate. Additionally, we use the levels of conservative votes in the 2013 presidential election as an alternative measure of conservative votes for robustness checks. These election data are sourced from Iran's Ministry of Interior.

Third, we include a measure for membership in mosque centers. Mosque centers are state-sponsored organizations across numerous mosques in the country that engage in community activities and mobilization efforts for the regime. To collect this data, we used computational web scrapping methods to collect the membership data of more than 25 thousand mosques across districts in Iran. For these variables, we take the natural log to reduce skewness.

Fourth, we also incorporate a measure for the share of public employees out of all employees in a district and the share of students out of the district population. The source for the public employee share is the 2011 census, as the 2016 census does not include this information, and the source for student share is the 2016 census. The regime has extended its influence through these sectors, using them for pro-government mobilization.

Fifth, we include a measure from the 2016 census capturing the percentage of college students in a district. As in many other countries, university campuses in Iran have historically been hubs for anti-regime activities. In response to this potential threat, the Iranian regime has established and nurtured numerous pro-regime student associations across campuses. This variable serves a dual purpose: it reflects the presence of students as a source of potential dissent and captures the regime's efforts to forge and maintain pro-government organizations among university students.

Additionally, we include a measure for Sunni-majority districts. Sunnis constitute the largest religious minority in Iran, and while Shi'ism has been the official religion since the Safavid Empire, the Islamic Republic has developed its own version of Shi'ism as a central component of state ideology. During the Iran-Iraq War, the state heavily relied on its Shi'i discourse of martyrdom to recruit volunteers for the front lines. In the postwar period, the regime continued to incorporate Shi'ism as a key element in its propaganda efforts. It is plausible that the state mobilized fewer recruits from Sunni districts during the war and, similarly, engaged in lower rates of state-led

mobilization in Sunni areas after the war. By including a measure for Sunni districts, we ensure that these potential differences do not confound the observed relationship between war fatalities and postwar regime-led mobilization.

Finally, we account for the size of the district population, the proportion of the urban population in the district, and the distances from the district to both the capital and the provincial capital. We take the natural log to reduce skewness for the district population and distance variables. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics. Furthermore, in our robustness checks, we introduce a series of other control variables to ensure the robustness of our findings.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Pro-government Mobilization	28.07	52.90	0.00	591.00	429
War-related Pro-government Mobilization	11.39	20.17	0.00	208.00	429
Non-war-related Pro-government Mobilization	16.68	33.49	0.00	383.00	429
War Fatalities (%)	0.27	0.25	0.00	1.91	429
Pre-war Fatalities per 10k	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.11	429
Volunteer Fatalities (%)	0.16	0.15	0.00	0.86	429
Conscript Fatalities (%)	0.11	0.10	0.00	0.59	429
Civilian Fatalities (%)	0.03	0.09	0.00	0.84	429
Martyrs' Families (%)	1.67	1.55	0.00	12.89	429
Sunni District	0.25	0.43	0.00	1.00	429
Conservative Votes (%)	41.96	15.67	4.43	86.12	429
Mosque Members (%)	4.63	5.52	0.08	40.28	429
College Students (%)	3.60	1.65	0.85	19.73	429
State Employees (%)	18.51	7.87	3.73	73.38	429
Urban Population (%)	55.93	22.04	5.76	99.51	429
District Population (logged)	11.48	0.97	8.91	15.98	429
Distance to Province Capital (logged)	4.36	1.42	0.00	6.49	429
Distance to Capital (logged)	6.29	0.85	0.00	7.50	429

Statistical Model

Our unit of analysis is the district. The outcome variable is the disaggregated count of state-sponsored events at the district level over the five years from 2015 to 2019. Given that our outcome

is a count variable, we use negative binomial regression to estimate the effects of war fatalities and other confounders on the frequency of these events (Allison and Waterman 2002; Hilbe 2014).

Analysis

Table 2 presents the regression results for state-sponsored mobilization in Iran at the subnational level for 2015-2019. Model 1 examines the association between confounders and the total number of pro-government events in each district. The coefficient for the number of war fatalities during 1980-1988 is positive and significant, indicating that districts with higher levels of war fatalities also have a higher number of state-sponsored events.

This model includes measures to capture regime support at the district level, such as the percentage of conservative votes and the number of mosque center members. A potential alternative explanation is that higher levels of war fatalities occurred in districts where the regime already had strong social support. Thus, increased state-sponsored mobilization could simply reflect this existing support base rather than the impact of war fatalities. However, even after controlling for the regime's social base through conservative votes and mosque center membership, the measure for war fatalities remains statistically significant.

Additional controls include the share of public employees and the percentage of students in each district. These measures account for the regime's efforts to establish organizations within these social sectors. Including these controls reassures us that the relationship between war fatalities and pro-government events does not merely reflect other aspects of regime strength.

Models 2 and 3 differentiate between war-related and non-war-related events. The results indicate that war fatalities significantly predict war-related events but not non-war-related ones, suggesting a specific link between war casualties and state-sponsored events commemorating the

war. Additionally, Model 2 shows that mosque centers and the percentage of university students are positively and significantly associated with war-related state-sponsored mobilization events. Previous research on pro-government events in Iran suggests that the regime has expanded its organizational infrastructure in mosques and university campuses to facilitate pro-state mobilization. Model 2 further demonstrates that the state leverages this infrastructure for war-related mobilization events. This indicates that war fatalities are not the sole driver of war-related mobilization events; the state appears to hold higher rates of war memorial events in areas with a more substantial organizational presence.

Table 2. Pro-Government Mobilization Regression Models

	(1) Pro-government Mobilization	(2) War-related Pro-government Mobilization	(3) Non-war-related Pro-government Mobilization	(4) War-related Pro-government Mobilization
War Fatalities %	1.336 ⁺ (1.85)	1.820*** (3.41)	1.085 (0.49)	2.108** (3.27)
Pre-war Fatalities per 10k				0.948 (-1.03)
Sunni District	1.054 (0.52)	1.047 (0.42)	1.062 (0.56)	1.079 (0.66)
Conservative Votes %	1.007** (2.58)	1.010*** (3.38)	1.005 ⁺ (1.71)	1.010** (3.21)
Mosque Members %	1.017* (2.33)	1.016* (2.03)	1.016* (2.03)	1.016 ⁺ (1.94)
College Students %	1.138*** (3.88)	1.200*** (4.73)	1.109** (3.06)	1.195*** (4.60)
State Employees %	1.012* (2.23)	1.009 (1.36)	1.014* (2.38)	1.009 (1.45)
District Population (logged)	1.622*** (9.98)	1.669*** (9.25)	1.593*** (9.01)	1.670*** (9.27)
Urban Population %	1.005* (2.15)	1.005 ⁺ (1.95)	1.005 ⁺ (1.87)	1.005* (1.99)
Distance to Province Capital (logged)	0.877*** (-4.15)	0.909** (-2.73)	0.856*** (-4.68)	0.907** (-2.78)
Distance to Capital (logged)	1.000 (-0.01)	1.071 (1.32)	0.956 (-0.87)	1.068 (1.25)
lnalpha	0.436*** (-10.40)	0.463*** (-7.92)	0.467*** (-8.72)	0.461*** (-7.95)
Observations	429	429	429	429
AIC	3259.3	2571.2	2846.0	2572.2
BIC	3308.1	2620.0	2894.7	2625.0
<i>Exponentiated coefficients; t statistics in parentheses</i>				
⁺ <i>p</i> < 0.1, * <i>p</i> < 0.05, ** <i>p</i> < 0.01, *** <i>p</i> < 0.001				

In Model 4, we introduce three measures to assess potential contexts of support for the regime before the war. These measures capture the number of individuals killed before, during, and after the revolutionary period of 1978-79, up to the beginning of the war in 1979-1980. The regime considers these individuals martyrs, and their fatality rates are likely correlated with different waves of mobilization in support of the regime prior to the war. These measures served as proxies for potential sources of regime support before the conflict began. Despite including these measures, the association between war fatalities and state-sponsored events remains positive and significant, indicating that the effect is not solely attributable to pre-existing regime support.

Table 3. War-related Pro-government Mobilization Regression Mobilization Regression Models

	(1) War-related Pro-government Mobilization	(2) War-related Pro-government Mobilization	(3) War-related Pro-government Mobilization	(4) War-related Pro-government Mobilization
Volunteer Fatalities %	2.795*** (0.842)			
Conscript Fatalities %		2.624* (1.143)		
Civilian Fatalities %			3.015* (1.475)	
Martyrs' Families %				1.082** (0.0301)
Sunni District	1.047 (0.116)	1.021 (0.114)	0.999 (0.110)	0.993 (0.109)
Conservative Votes %	1.009** (0.00297)	1.010*** (0.00298)	1.011*** (0.00302)	1.010*** (0.00298)
Mosque Members %	1.014+ (0.00798)	1.017* (0.00809)	1.018* (0.00812)	1.017* (0.00800)
College Students %	1.187*** (0.0463)	1.206*** (0.0471)	1.233*** (0.0486)	1.210*** (0.0474)
State Employees %	1.010 (0.00629)	1.011+ (0.00641)	1.006 (0.00655)	1.007 (0.00634)
District Population (logged)	1.674*** (0.0929)	1.652*** (0.0919)	1.652*** (0.0921)	1.705*** (0.0972)
Urban Population %	1.005+ (0.00276)	1.007* (0.00273)	1.006* (0.00274)	1.006* (0.00277)
Distance to Province Capital (logged)	0.906** (0.0320)	0.921* (0.0324)	0.924* (0.0323)	0.927* (0.0323)
Distance to Capital (logged)	1.071 (0.0564)	1.076 (0.0570)	1.068 (0.0571)	1.067 (0.0569)
lnalpha	0.463*** (0.0451)	0.475*** (0.0458)	0.475*** (0.0457)	0.470*** (0.0454)
Observations	429	429	429	429
AIC	2571.4	2578.2	2577.7	2574.9
BIC	2620.2	2627.0	2626.5	2623.6
<i>Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses</i>				
⁺ <i>p</i> < 0.1, * <i>p</i> < 0.05, ** <i>p</i> < 0.01, *** <i>p</i> < 0.001				

Another approach to addressing the counterargument about the mutual effects of prewar conditions on both war mobilization and post-war state-led mobilization is to break down the war fatalities into subcategories—volunteers, conscripts, and civilians—as shown in Table 3. Volunteers are more likely to have been recruited from areas with preexisting support for the regime, whereas conscript and civilian fatalities are more randomly distributed. In Iran, all males above 18 are required to serve in the military, and civilian deaths are heavily concentrated in border districts with

Iraq. Therefore, a meaningful statistical correlation between conscript and civilian deaths and pro-government mobilization would provide stronger support for our argument than a correlation between volunteer deaths and state-led mobilization. This breakdown allows us to isolate the impact of war fatalities on post-war mobilization, demonstrating that the observed effects are not merely a reflection of prewar regime support but are driven by the broader consequences of war on the population. Models 1-3 confirm that all three categories of fatalities are statistically significant predictors of war-related state-led mobilization events, further reinforcing that the effect of war fatalities on mobilization is not solely a reflection of preexisting regime support.

Model 4 incorporates a measure for the percentage of families designated as martyrs by the state who receive pensions and benefits from the government. This variable emerges as a positive and significant predictor of war-related state-led mobilization events, offering further support for our primary hypothesis. This result suggests that at least part of the state's activities for war-related events may be directed toward and based on the cooptation of the families of fallen soldiers from the war.

We also conducted a series of robustness checks to ensure the reliability of our findings. First, we addressed the possibility that the ethnolinguistic composition of districts could influence 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. Additionally, we introduced various measures for the socioeconomic profile of districts, such as 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 utilized a five-year average of night lights data from satellite imagery as a proxy for GDP at the district level, given the unavailability of direct district-level GDP data. These measures ensure that the socioeconomic

conditions of a district are not driving the observed association between war fatalities and postwar state mobilization.

To further validate our findings, we excluded the 10 largest districts in one of our models to verify that the largest districts did not disproportionately influence our results. Moreover, we applied spatial regression analysis to account for potential spillover effects, incorporating a spatial lag representing the weighted sum of mobilization events in neighboring districts. Furthermore, we tested an alternative measure for war fatalities by aggregating them based on burial location rather than birthplace. Importantly, our main results remained consistent and robust across all these models. The detailed output of the robustness tests can be found in the appendix.

Conclusion

Scholars have examined various strategies authoritarian regimes employ to consolidate power and maintain stability (Levitsky and Way 2022; Slater and Smith 2016; Svolik 2012). Recent research highlights how these regimes penetrate civil society (Klein and Lee 2019; Lee and Zhang 2013; Mann 1984), organize supporters, and mobilize them for political gain. This literature primarily seeks to explain where and when autocratic regimes resort to mobilization (Ekiert and Perry 2020; Perry and Wolf 2024). We contribute to this scholarship by identifying the dual logics of **threat** and **resonance** as key drivers of state-led mobilization. On the one hand, regimes deploy mobilization to counter anti-government protests and suppress dissent (Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020). On the other, they strategically hold mobilization events in areas and on issues that resonate with their supporters and broader constituencies.

Building on research in war studies (Wimmer 2014), we argue that war memorials serve as a particularly effective platform for pro-government mobilization, addressing both the logic of *threat*

and the logic of *resonance*. The costs of war—particularly destruction and fatalities—can threaten postwar regimes by fueling grievances and opposition (Berman et al. 2023; Skocpol 1979). However, regimes can reframe these losses as narratives of sacrifice and loyalty, using commemorations to reinforce legitimacy and maintain control over collective memory. We refine existing research on the political consequences of war fatalities by demonstrating that casualties in lost wars not only fuel bottom-up contention but also drive pro-regime mobilization, particularly through state-sponsored war memorials. Drawing on scholarship on ritual (Collins 2004; Durkheim 1912), frame resonance (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 2018), and legitimation (Luft 2020b; Schoon 2022; Tannenbergh et al. 2021), we further argue that war memorials provide an emotionally charged setting that enhances the regime’s ability to assert authority and cultivate public support. To translate war fatalities into state-led mobilization, we draw on social movement scholarship (Ganz 2010; Walker and Martin 2018) to highlight how states establish institutions that craft war narratives and coordinate these events, ensuring their alignment with broader regime objectives.

To substantiate this argument, we presented a case study of state-led mobilization in Iran, decades after the Iran-Iraq War. Our qualitative analysis illustrates how the Islamic Republic institutionalized control over the war narrative, transforming memorials and rituals into a cornerstone of postwar state-led mobilization. We document state discourse and organizations in charge of this type of mobilization and demonstrate how the regime uses emotionally charged commemorations to showcase legitimacy and respond to different sources of threat.

Our statistical analysis further confirms a robust association between war fatalities (1980-88) and postwar state-led mobilization, particularly in the form of war memorials. This analysis is based on a comprehensive, original dataset of war fatalities, addressing a gap in quantitative research on war casualties, which has largely focused on cases in the Global North. A key alternative explanation

is that areas with higher war fatalities were already more supportive of the regime. However, our findings suggest otherwise. We show that conscript and civilian fatalities—categories less likely to be driven by voluntary political commitment—are also strongly associated with increased state-led mobilization. This reinforces our argument that war fatalities play a causal role in shaping postwar mobilization rather than merely reflecting pre-existing regime support.

Our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we expand research on the political consequences of war by identifying state-led mobilization as a long-term outcome of war fatalities. While much of the existing scholarship has examined war's effects on state-building, militarization, and bottom-up contention (Feinstein and Wimmer 2023; Slater 2018; Tarrow 2015; Tilly 1992), we demonstrate that top-down mobilization is also a likely and consequential response to war fatalities. War memorials, in particular, function as an overlooked mechanism through which regimes transform war losses into tools for mobilization.

Second, we contribute to the study of state-led mobilization by synthesizing previous research and introducing a new theoretical framework centered on the dual logics of threat and resonance. While prior studies have primarily examined state-led mobilization in the form of mass rallies and election-driven events (Anderson and Cammett 2020; Handlin 2016), we argue that war memorials constitute a distinct and highly effective mobilization strategy, enabling regimes to suppress dissent while fostering public support.

Finally, we bridge insights from scholarship on war memorials (Olick 2016b; Zubrzycki and Woźny 2020b), state-led mobilization (Perry and Wolf 2024), social movements (Almeida 2019), legitimation (Gerschewski 2014), and ritual (Collins 2004), demonstrating how these bodies of research intersect. By highlighting the role of state-led mobilization in postwar authoritarian

governance, we advance our understanding of how regimes sustain power and reinforce their legitimacy through strategic memory politics.

Our findings about the effect of war fatalities on postwar state-led mobilization in Iran are consistent with existing data and analyses. While publicly available survey data in Iran is scarce, limiting our ability to directly test the relationship between war fatalities and regime support, existing studies offer indirect support for our findings. One recent analysis using survey data documents that families with direct experiences of the Iran-Iraq War exhibit higher levels of distrust toward international organizations such as the UN (Asadzade 2024). Another study based on the World Values Survey finds that Iranians who experienced war during adulthood demonstrate stronger preferences for robust defense forces (Farzanegan and Gholipour 2021). These findings align with our argument that war fatalities and their commemoration have contributed to sustaining regime legitimacy and mobilization. Future research could further explore how wartime experiences shape varying levels of popular support for the Islamic Republic and other postwar autocratic regimes.

While we provided evidence on the relationship between war fatalities and pro-government mobilization in Iran, historical accounts from other revolutionary autocratic regimes—such as Russia, China, and Algeria—suggest that these patterns are not unique to Iran. In the Soviet Union, Brezhnev's regime used youth programs and thousands of war monuments to recover soldiers from World War II and instill patriotism (Tumarkin 1995). Maoist China fostered the “cult of the red martyr” through cemeteries, martyrs’ days, and ceremonies to justify Party authority and promote socialist ideals (Hung 2008). In Algeria, the state embraced the memory of the War of Independence, using monuments and commemorations to position martyrs as central to national identity, especially during political crises (Branche 2011). In each case, war commemoration legitimized the regime by invoking collective memories of sacrifice and unity.

Beyond explaining patterns of postwar mobilization, our findings also raise broader questions about the relationship between war commemoration and authoritarian durability. Prior research suggests that sustained state-led mobilization can deter anti-regime opposition, reinforce legitimacy, and undermine democratic transitions (Beissinger 2020; Hellmeier and Bernhard 2023; Hellmeier and Weidmann 2020). However, most studies on authoritarian resilience focus on regime survival, while less attention has been paid to the persistence of authoritarian politics even beyond regime change. The case of Russia is instructive in this regard. During the Soviet era, the state institutionalized war commemoration, framing World War II sacrifices as a foundation of national legitimacy. After the Soviet collapse, these commemorative practices remained deeply ingrained, with Vladimir Putin reviving and repurposing them to justify his rule and military aggression in Ukraine (Wood 2011). Likewise, in Iran, the institutions responsible for war commemoration have extended their narratives beyond the Iran-Iraq War, using similar frames to legitimize Iran's military interventions in Syria. By portraying fallen Iranian soldiers as defenders of Islamic values and national security, the regime reinforces its broader geopolitical objectives. These patterns align with findings that certain forms of war commemoration can facilitate future state militarization and external aggression (Timothy G. Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2013).

While war memorials represent a distinct mechanism of state-led mobilization, they function alongside other tools of authoritarian legitimation, such as elections, elite co-optation, and repression. Future research should examine how these strategies interact and whether the effectiveness of war commemorations varies depending on regime type, state capacity, or opposition strength. Although our study focuses on revolutionary authoritarian regimes, the mechanisms we identify—mobilization through war commemoration, reframing war losses into narratives of sacrifice, and institutionalizing memory politics—are not exclusive to autocracies. Even in hybrid

and democratic settings, ruling elites strategically deploy war commemorations to consolidate nationalist sentiment and sustain political legitimacy.

A comparative approach would further illuminate how post-revolutionary regimes use war memorials as instruments of state-led mobilization. Such research could reveal both common patterns and context-specific strategies, providing deeper insights into the role of war commemoration in reinforcing authoritarian stability. By demonstrating how war fatalities are transformed into tools of state-led mobilization, our study advances understanding of how regimes sustain power through strategic memory politics, with broader implications for authoritarian resilience worldwide.

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