

## **NATIONAL HISTORICAL EVENTS IN IRANIAN COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

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### **—Abstract —**

This study aims to investigate presence of national historical events in Iranian collective memory. According to social theorists remembering is a social phenomenon which occurs in social cadres. In Iranian social context, ethnicity, generation, religion and education are important social cadres of memory. 384 national samples from three different ethnicities, Azeri, Gilaki and Kurd, were chosen by quota sampling. Results of survey indicated three social cadres of generation, religion and education explained remembering national historical events and Iranian collective memory is basically rooted in national historical events rather than ethnic one. ‘The 1979 Islamic revolution’, ‘Iran’s oil nationalization and the following 1953 Iranian coup d’état’ from the last century events and ‘Iranian constitutional revolution’, ‘Russo-Persian wars’ from prior to the last century events are the most important national events remembered by Iranian.

**Key Words:** *Iranian collective memory, Historical events, Social cadres of collective memory,*

**JEL Classification:** Z19.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

These are present concerns that determine what of the past we remember (Halbwachs, 1992) and also the past remembering shapes our present and future behavior. Having considered many political, social and economic changes in Iran, Iranian people remember the past based on the present concerns and accordingly these shape their present and future behavior. So, the current study of Iranian collective memory can help to understand both Iranian historical memories and their present behavior. For example, Iranian Anti-Western sentiment in recent decades can be more understandable by Iranian present collective remembering of 1953 coup which occurred by the company of the United States' CIA and Britain's MI6. Some sociologists, such as Halbwachs (1992) Mannheim (1952) Schuman and Scott (1989), claimed remembering is constructed in social cadres. So in this research, Iranian three ethnic groups (Azeri, Kurd and Gilaki) are asked to report "the most important national events over the past 100 years and before". Considering the mentioned theories, ethnic, educational, generational, religious constructions of Iranian collective memory about national events are studied. Based on the mentioned theories, the following research questions are proposed:  
Is Iranian collective memory rooted in national or ethnic historical events?  
Is there any relationship between the national events remembering and generations / education / religions?

## **2. THEORETICAL APPROACH**

This research is rooted in Halbwachs and Mannheim theories. Halbwachs' (1941) theory is about social framework of memory, he claimed that collective memory in general and remembering and forgetting in particular are 'socially framed'. That is social cadres such as race, ethnicity, religion which determine what to remember and how. Another notion in Halbwachs theory is *presentist* perspective to collective memory. He believes present situation of social groups determine their views of the past (Halbwachs, 1992). Past is continually capable of

reinterpreting and reconstructing by the present situation of people inside the social cadres.

Having used Mannheim's theory of generation (1952), this study considers generation as one of the social cadres. He claimed each generation has unique experiences therefore its collective memory will be various from the other generations. Not only the generation's collective memory is included its direct experiences but also whatever it inherited indirect experiences from environment. Moreover, the notion of generation is more of knowledge and consciousness rather than biological phenomenon according to Mannheim. It is worth mentioning that generational collective memory is constructed at early youth (around 25 years old).

### **3. METHOD**

According to Mannheim theory (1952) generational characteristics are shaped around 25 years old so people above 25 of three different ethnicities, Gilaki, Azeri and Kurd, were population of the research. 384 national samples from three capitals of provinces, 126 from Rasht, 223 from Tabriz and 35 from Sanandaj were chosen by quota sampling. The survey used a questionnaire which divided Iranian national historical events into two periods of 1912-2012 and before. 384 samples fill out the questionnaires but the final data analysis ran on 381 questionnaires.

### **4. RESULTS**

We describe the most important events remembered by Iranian from first to the third mentions before investigating collective memories in different social cadres of ethnicity, generation, religion and education. Results showed 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran's oil nationalization and the following 1953 Iranian coup and 2009 president-elect are the most important events respectively in Iranian collective memory. As far as nearness of event can play an essential role in its remembering (Schuman and Scott, 1989), we can analyze the remembering of 2009 president-elect among four, the most important events. Although 1979

Islamic revolution, Iran's oil nationalization and the following 1953 Iranian coup are so distinct events, Iranian consider them as the important events, because those events affected their present life to a great degree. Table 1 presents highly mentioned national historical events.

Table 1. Highly mentioned national events

	Historical events	N 1 <sup>st</sup> Mention	% 1 <sup>st</sup> Mention	N 2 <sup>st</sup> Mention	% 2 <sup>st</sup> Mention	N 3 <sup>st</sup> Mention	% 3 <sup>st</sup> Mention
Over past 100 years	1979 Islamic Revolution	153	40.2	78	20.5	35	9.2
	Oil nationalization and The 1953 Coup	54	14.2	56	14.7	33	8.6
	2009 President-elect	43	11.3	37	9.7	29	7.6
	Iran – Iraq war	21	5.5	67	17.6	27	7.1
	Iranian subsidy reform plan	19	5	13	3.4	5	1.3
	Azerbaijan People's Government	13	3.4	2	0.5	8	2.1
	Iranian nuclear power	12	3.1	26	6.8	12	3.1
	Miscellaneous	66	17.3	68	17.8	52	14
	Don't know	0	0	34	8.9	180	47
	Total	381	100	381	100	381	100
Before past 100 years	Iranian Constitutional Revolution	89	23.4	18	4.7	8	2.1
	Russo-Iranian Wars (1804-1828)	38	10	29	7.6	15	3.9
	Entrance of Islam in Iran (637-651)	16	4.2	10	2.6	6	1.6
	Dar ul-Funun establishment	12	3.1	8	2.1	1	0.3
	Reza khan coup	11	2.9	7	1.8	2	0.5
	Mongol's attack to Iran	11	2.9	11	2.9	4	1
	Ashura event	10	2.6	1	0.3	0	0
	Kuchik Khan movement	10	2.6	1	0.3	0	0

Miscellaneous	60	15.8	34	9	6	1.6
Don't know	124	32.5	262	68.8	339	89
Total	381	100	381	100	381	100

Comparing the collective memory among three ethnic groups indicates, in the first mention events, Azeri's and Gilaki's remembering are pretty similar but Azeri's collective memory is more ethnic than Gilaki's and Kurd's. Azerbaijan people's Government as ethnic event is only remembered among Azeri people. Also, Kurd people gave less importance to 1979 Islamic Revolution and more importance to Iranian nuclear power and Iranian subsidy reform plan in comparison with two other ethnicities. Although there are differences in collective memory among three ethnicities, the results show Iranian collective memory is more national rather than ethnic one. The following table indicates importance of Iranian historical events over the past 100 years among three ethnicities.

Table 2. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>st</sup> mentioned national events over the past 100 years among three ethnicities.

Historical events	1 <sup>st</sup>			2 <sup>st</sup>			3 <sup>st</sup>			
		Gilak	Kurd	Azeri	Gilak	Kurd	Azeri	Gilak	Kurd	Azeri
1979 Islamic Revolution	N	60	8	85	28	2	48	7	4	24
	%	48	22.9	48.5	22.4	5.7	21.7	5.6	11.4	10.9
Oil nationalization and the 1953 Coup	N	27	3	24	22	4	30	12	4	17
	%	21.6	8.6	10.8	17.6	11.4	13.6	9.6	11.5	7.7
2009 President-elect	N	16	3	24	10	5	22	9	6	14
	%	12.8	8.6	10.9	8	14.3	10	7.2	17.1	6.3
Iran – Iraq war	N	7	1	13	21	4	42	7	3	17
	%	5.6	2.9	5.9	16.8	11.4	19	5.6	8.6	7.7
Iranian subsidy reform plan	N	4	7	8	5	3	5	1	1	3
	%	3.2	20	3.6	4	8.6	2.3	0.8	2.9	1.4
Azerbaijan People's Government	N	0	0	13	0	0	2	0	0	8
	%	0	0	5.9	0	0	0.9	0	0	3.6
Iranian nuclear power	N	1	4	7	13	4	9	3	3	6
	%	0.8	11.4	3.2	10.4	11.4	4.1	2.4	8.6	2.7
Miscellaneous	N	10	9	47	13	10	45	15	3	34

	%	8	25.6	21.2	10.4	28.6	20.3	12	8.5	15.4
Don't know	N	0	0	0	13	3	18	71	11	98
	%	0	0	0	10.4	8.6	8.1	56.8	31.4	44.3
Total	N	125	35	221	125	35	221	125	35	221
	%	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Investigating remembering in social cadre of religion shows degree of religiosity affect remembering of the events. For example, the more the degree of religion, the more remembering of Iran-Iraq war and 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the less remembering of 2009 president-elect. On the other hand, the less the degree of religion, the less remembering of Oil nationalization and the 1953 Coup.

Table 3. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>st</sup> mentioned national events over the past 100 years among samples with different degrees of religiosity.

Historical events		1 <sup>st</sup>			2 <sup>st</sup>			3 <sup>st</sup>		
		Low	middle	High	Low	middle	High	Low	middle	High
1979 Islamic Revolution	N	31	47	75	27	24	27	9	14	12
	%	26.5	40.9	50.3	23.1	20.9	18.1	7.7	12.2	8.1
Oil nationalization and the 1953 Coup	N	24	15	15	25	21	10	10	15	8
	%	20.6	13	10.1	21.4	18.3	6.7	8.5	13	5.4
2009 President-elect	N	29	9	5	12	13	12	13	10	6
	%	24.8	7.8	3.4	10.3	11.3	8.1	11.1	8.7	4
Iran – Iraq war	N	2	5	14	10	13	44	8	9	10
	%	1.7	4.3	9.4	8.5	11.3	29.5	6.8	7.8	6.7
Iranian subsidy reform plan	N	2	9	8	3	4	6	0	3	2
	%	1.7	7.8	5.4	2.6	3.5	4	0	2.6	1.3
Azerbaijan People's Government	N	2	5	6	2	0	0	7	1	0
	%	1.7	4.3	4	1.7	0	0	6	0.9	0
Iranian nuclear power	N	3	3	6	4	10	12	1	7	4
	%	2.6	2.6	4	3.4	8.7	8.1	0.9	6.1	2.7
Miscellaneous	N	24	22	20	27	19	22	21	13	18
	%	20.4	19.1	13.4	23	16.6	14.8	18	11.3	12.1
Don't know	N	0	0	0	7	11	16	48	43	89
	%									

	%	0	0	0	6	9.4	10.7	41	37.4	59.7
Total	N	117	115	149	117	115	149	117	115	149
	%	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Results indicate education as a key variable has effect on people's past remembering. For instance, the more education, the more important the Oil nationalization and the 1953 Coup and 2009 president-elect events and the less important the 1979 Islamic Revolution and Iran-Iraq War events. This finding confirms Schuman and Scotts' claim (1989) which emphasize the noticeable effect of education on collective memory.

Table 4. 1<sup>st</sup> mentioned national events over the past 100 years among samples with different levels of education.

Historical events	Levels of education					
		Elementary	Diploma	Bachelor	Master	PhD
1979 Islamic Revolution	N	17	55	65	13	3
	%	45.9	50	36.5	27.1	37.5
Oil nationalization and the 1953 Coup	N	2	12	28	9	3
	%	5.4	10.9	15.8	18.8	37.5
2009 President-elect	N	0	2	23	18	0
	%	0	1.8	12.9	37.5	0
Iran – Iraq war	N	8	6	7	0	0
	%	21.6	5.5	3.9	0	0
Iranian subsidy reform plan	N	4	3	12	0	0
	%	10.8	2.7	6.7	0	0
Azerbaijan People's Government	N	3	5	4	1	0
	%	8.1	4.5	2.2	2.1	0
Iranian nuclear power	N	0	5	5	2	0
	%	0	4.5	2.8	4.2	0
Miscellaneous	N	3	22	34	5	2
	%	8.2	20.1	19.2	10.3	25

Don't know	N	0	0	0	0	0
	%	0	0	0	0	0
Total	N	37	110	178	48	8
	%	100	100	100	100	100

Table 5. Distribution of 1<sup>st</sup> mentioned national events over the past 100 years among generations.

Historical events	generations							Total
	1925-1941	1942-1951	1952-1961	1962-1971	1972-1981	1982-1988		
1979 Islamic Revolution	N	1	28	49	28	10	2	118
	%	0.8	23.7	41.5	23.7	8.5	1.7	100
	%	3.6	50	79	43.1	12.5	2.2	31
Oil nationalization and the 1953 Coup	N	18	2	0	0	0	0	20
	%	90	10	0	0	0	0	100
	%	64.3	3.6	0	0	0	0	5.2
2009 President-elect	N	0	1	0	2	28	51	82
	%	0	1.2	0	2.4	34.1	62.2	100
	%	0	1.8	0	3.1	35	56.7	21.5
Iran – Iraq war	N	1	6	8	26	26	6	73
	%	1.4	8.2	11	35.6	35.6	8.2	100
	%	3.6	10.7	12.9	40	32.5	6.7	19.2
Iranian subsidy reform plan	N	0	0	0	0	4	2	6
	%	0	0	0	0	66.7	33.3	100
	%	0	0	0	0	5	2.2	1.6
Azerbaijan People's Government	N	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
	%	100	0	0	0	0	0	100
	%	10.7	0	0	0	0	0	0.8
Iranian nuclear power	N	0	0	0	1	0	6	7
	%	0	0	0	14.3	0	85.7	100
	%	0	0	0	1.5	0	6.7	1.8



Miscellaneous	N	5	18	4	8	10	12	57
	%	8.8	31.6	7	14	17.5	21	100
	%	17.8	32.1	6.5	12.3	12.5	13.3	15
No events	N	0	1	1	0	2	11	15
	%	0	6.7	6.7	0	13.3	73.3	100
	%	0	1.8	1.6	0	2.5	12.2	3.9
Total	N	28	56	62	65	80	90	381
	%	7.3	14.7	16.3	17.1	21	23.6	100
	%	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Concept of inventory experience of Mannheim has essential place in investigating generational collective memory. So beside questions about the most important national events, respondents are requested to answer questions about the most effective events during their late adolescence and early adulthood. Before data collection, we used a generational classification inspired by Chitsaz Ghomi (2007). Although there are some differences, our finding is in line with Chitsaz Ghomi' research. Mannheim's generation is a combination of cohort and inventory experience. Table 5 showed the combination clearly in Iranian social context and we can distinguish different generations.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Islamic Revolution, Iran's oil nationalization and the following 1953 Iranian coup, 2009 president-elect and Iran-Iraq war which anchored in Iranian memory during the last century could be considered as the main part of Iranian collective memory. The above mentioned events are reported as the most important events by all the samples who did experience or did not. This study found Iranian collective memory is mainly nationalist and in spite of few differences, remembering among three ethnicities is more national rather than ethnic. It may be interpreted as formation of national collective memory and gradually disappearing of ethnic one among Iranian ethnicities.

Although the four events are remembered by all the generations, generational distribution of their remembering indicates generation is an important variable in preference of each four event. The samples experienced most of the events (the last 50 years events) remembered as the most important ones during their late

adolescence and early adulthood. The findings confirm Mannheim's theory which emphasizes the importance of late adolescence and early adulthood in generation and collective memory formation. Application of Mannheim's theory and his phenomenological definition of generation give the possibility of new conceptualization of generation in Iranian society. Therefore, we can distinguish the samples who were born from 1921 to 1941 as "1953 coup generation", from 1940 to 1960 as "Islamic revolution generation", from 1960 to 1970 as "Islamic Revolution and Iran-Iraq War generation", from 1970 to 1980 as "Iran-Iraq War generation", and from 1980 to 1990 as "2009 president-elect generation".

Another noticeable point in this research is the importance of education in forming the Iranian collective memory. Education has positive or negative, continuing but weak effect on remembering three events of Iran-Iraq war, 2009 president-elect and Islamic revelation. Moreover, Most of the respondents chose "don't know" for the events prior to last century, this can be interpreted that Iranian collective memory of the past historical events is too few.

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