

# Banal Nationalism in Iran: Daily Re-Production of National and Religious Identity

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**Öz:** 1979 yılında yaşanan İran İslam Devrimi sonrasında İslamcı politikalar kurulan yeni rejimin hem iç hem de dış politikalarının temelini oluşturmuştur. Ancak milliyetçilik de göz ardı edilmemiş ve daha da ileri gidilerek Şii İslam ve İslam öncesi Pers kültürünün harmanlanması ile bir İranlılık kimliği yaratılmıştır. Bu kimlik devlet tarafından, Şii mitolojisi, İslam öncesi Pers kültürü, anti-emperyalizm, Üçüncü Dünyaçılık ve anti-Siyonizm gibi öğelerle harmanlanmış ve çok etnikli İran toplumuna ortak bir aidiyet olarak sunulmuştur. Bu aidiyet olgusunun hem İran içinde hem de İran dışında cereyan eden olaylar üzerine inşa edildiği iddia edilebilir. Bunu yaparken, İran Devleti basılması kendi tekelinde olan banknotları, madeni paraları ve posta pullarını gündelik milliyetçiliğin aracı olarak kullanmış ve bu 'banal' yollar ile İranlılık duygusunun her gün yeniden üretilmesine katkı yapmıştır. Böylelikle, banknotlar, madeni paralar ve posta pulları gibi görsel semboller aracılığı ile devlet, kendi oluşturduğu kimliği yine kendi içerisinde bulunan alt-ulusal kimliklerin bu resmi kimliğe saldırılarına karşı bir savunma aracı olarak banal milliyetçilik vasıtası ile kullanmış olmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** İran Devrimi, Banal Milliyetçilik, Şiilik, Fars Kimliği, Milli Kimlik.

**Abstract:** After its 1979 revolution, Islamism became Iran's main policy as regards its domestic and foreign affairs. However, nationalism continued to exist. After the revolution, the national identity of Iranianhood based on Shii Islam and pre-Islamic Persian history was created. By merging Shii traditions, pre-Islamic Persian culture, anti-imperialism, Third Worldism, and anti-Zionism, this new identity was introduced as one of belonging. One can claim that it was also built on common values held by Iranians living inside and outside the country. One part of this undertaking was the use of banknotes, coins, and postage stamps, which can only be issued by the state, as instruments of daily nationalism designed to constantly re-produce the desired identity among its people, in this case Iranianhood. In this respect, the state uses such visual symbols to defend the official identity against the existence of sub-national identities.

**Keywords:** Iranian Revolution, Banal Nationalism, Shiism, Persian Identity, National Identity.

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## Introduction

After its 1979 revolution, Iran established an Islamic regime. Despite the popular understanding of Iran as a state following an Islamist ideology, nationalism continued to exist because its new policies combined Persian identity and Shiism in a way that made nationalism subservient to the now-dominant Islamic narrative (Ansari, 2009). The regime's main concern was Islam and the Islamic way of life (Habibi, 1992, p. 254). However, as Ali Ansari (2009) claimed, nationalism has never been far beneath the political surface and engaged with Shiism by nationalizing the religion, which he calls 'Iranian Shiism'. These 'religio-nationalist' policies have been maintained until today. Persian identity and Shii religious identity clarify 'Iranianness' together, as is exhibited in political life as the official state ideology and is being re-produced in the people's daily life.

In this study, I will analyze this daily re-production of 'Iranianness'.<sup>1</sup> Instead of a broad discussion of pre- or post-revolution nationalism studies, I will explain the re-production of religion, nation, and nationalism through the people's post-revolution daily life and political discourses. While doing this, I will use Michael Billig's study on banal nationalism, which defines nationalism as a fact that is produced daily, rather than a political ideology. Nationalism in Iran is generally discussed through ethnic diversities inspired by hot nationalistic discourses. The role of Islam in Tehran's policies towards non-Persian indigenous identities has become a main field of interest. In other words, nationalism studies on Iran have focused either on ethnic diversities that are prone to armed struggle or Tehran's policies toward nationalist separatists.

There have been no contributions in terms of banal nationalism as part of Iranian daily life or indeed any analyses referring to Billig's study. From these viewpoints, viewing daily nationalism there and the state's role in the daily reproduction of national identity will contribute to nationalism studies on Iran. In this respect, this two-part study will present a brief introduction to and criticism of Billig's banal nationalism, after which it will focus on the daily re-production of banal 'Iranianness' via the state's use of banknotes, coins, and stamps.

## Billig and Banal Nationalism

Billig's study represents a significant contribution to the literature on nationalism. He 'saved' nationalism debates from being debates on political ideology to an unnoticed but nevertheless imposed daily event. However, he is not the only one in this regard, for scholars concentrating on the relationship between gender and nationalism are also interested in this subject (Özkırımlı, 2008, pp. 239-240). But Billig is the first one to look at this issue in a systematic manner. In fact, he harshly criticizes those who reduce nationalism debates to separatist movements and/or aggressive-expansionist ideologies. For him, nationalism is not a phenomenon that emerges in times of crisis and then disappears, but as something that exists and is re-produced every day.

1 The role of Shii identity in the Iranian political sphere is widely debated. Turkey and Iran are considered two quintessential instances for Sunni-Shii dichotomy and its reflections in the political domain. For a critical analysis on this debate see, Hazır, Agah, Comparing Turkey and Iran in Political Science and Historical Sociology: A Critical Review. *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 2:1, (2015), 1-30.

He points out two types of nationalisms: hot (defined in terms of aims) and banal (defined in terms of methods) nationalism. Hot nationalism is defined as an ideology that seeks to build a new nation-state or a movement inspired by separatist ideas, whereas banal nationalism is not like a political ideology or movement, but rather a way of daily re-production of the nation and nationalism. It displays itself inconspicuously – in the form of flags on public buildings, banknotes, coins, slogans and logos of newspapers, TV programs, and even the daily language – and thus is not even noticed.

Daily, nation-states are re-produced as nations and their citizenry as nationals. While doing this, a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices are also re-produced (Billig, 1995, p. 6).

Thus, Billig introduces banal nationalism as an attempt to cover the ideological habits that enable the established nations of the West to be re-produced. Nationalism is seen in everyday life, and the nation is indicated or 'flagged' in established Western states on a daily basis (Billig, 1995, p. 6).

Banal nationalism operates with prosaic, routine words that take nations for granted and, in so doing, inhabits them. Small words, rather than grand memorable phrases, offer constant but barely conscious reminders of the homeland, thereby making our national identity unforgettable (Billig, 1995, p.192). Rather than flags waved on national holidays or at meetings, flags on public buildings, which can be seen by anybody, are symbols of banal nationalism (Yumul & Özkırımlı, 1993, p. 6). Political discourse is also important in this undertaking, not because politicians are necessarily figures of great influence (Billig, 1995, p. 96), but because they are familiar. Their faces appear in the newspapers and on the TV screens, and the media treats their speeches as newsworthy by reporting upon them. Moreover, as the nation cannot re-produce the national identity on its own, an 'other' is needed. Various words are used to remind the people of the national identities, for words like 'us', 'our', 'they', and 'here' are the symbols that strengthen national identity against the 'other'.

Billig's major contribution was his identification of a significant lacuna in a great deal of sociological thought, which has largely taken the nation for granted as a unit of analysis, and then point to some of possible ways in which the nationalism becomes embedded in social life (Skey, 2009, p. 342). Although he made a significant contribution to the field of nationalism, his study has been criticized.

First, his work is narrow because its sole focus is on national social groupings. Thus, he neglects other forms of group identity. However, any group, party, and regional or international organization can also use 'banal' ways to build an identity and a sense of belonging. He does not mention sub-national, supra-national, and regional identity, which, I contend, is a mistake on his part. For instance, in their study on national identity in Indiana, Christopher Airriess, Michael Hawkins, and Elizabeth Vaughan (2011) explored the role of cultural governance in the interactions among banal nationalism, the culture wars, and civil religion to reproduce localized national identities during a time of perceived cultural crisis. They examine the re-production of local national identities in the state in reference to the motto of 'In God We Trust'. Furthermore, Marco Antonsich's study (2015, p. 5) on banal national-

ism in Italy reveals that national identity can be defined through sub-national identities.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these, Vera Slatscheva-Petkova (2014) points to supra-national identities within the context of banal nationalism. In her study, she applied banal nationalism to Bulgaria and the United Kingdom and then traced trends of banal Europeanism in the former and banal Americanism in the latter. Slatscheva-Petkova compared and contrasted the banal flagging of symbols in the media and the collective identities of 9- and 10-year-old children as media audiences. Her findings were not the kind of banal nationalism reported by Billig, for she achieved a supra-national level of banal nationalism. In the case of Iran, sub-national groups define themselves according to their sub-national and ethnic identities, such as Kurds, Azaris and Balujis. Each of them has several banal ways of identity and belonging.

Second, and related to the first criticism, Billig's nationalism ignores the people's daily life (Antonsich, 2015, p. 2). People and those groups that share a common ethnicity, religion, or ideology are not passive and unconscious in relation to banal nationalism, for individuals take part in making nationhood both actively and on a daily basis. For example, Billig presents the discourse of newspapers as instruments of the daily re-production of nationhood. He makes a day survey of the British press and searches deixis of words such as 'us', 'our', 'we', and 'they' (Billig, 1995, pp. 109-111). However, he miscalculates the complexity of mass media and overlooks the complexity of national life (Skey, 2009, p. 342), for the press and the audience are not homogenous structures. When a survey on the British press is conducted, one can see Welsh, Scottish, or Irish audiences and symbols. There is a complexity of media landscapes in places such as the United Kingdom and thus a more comprehensive study should be done beyond the state/national level and context.

Lastly, for Billig, banal nationalism is mostly seen in the established nation-states of the 'West'. Here, two critical remarks can be made. One, his work considers that nationalisms beyond the 'West' are separatist movements aiming to establish a new state (i.e., hot nationalism).

...those involved in these 'outbreaks of "hot" nationalist passion' are generally to be found in remote or exotic areas of the globe or, when closer to home, portrayed as members of extreme 'political' movements... In this way, nationalism disappears as an issue for the developed nations of the 'West' both in spheres of politics and academia (Skey, 2009, p. 332).

However, what about the 'East'? Moreover, there is no 'Western' uniformity in terms of how identity is flagged. Do not the movements in Catalonia (Spain) or Quebec (Canada) have separatist aspects? Another remark concerns the concept of 'established nation-state'.

...from the perspective of Paris, London or Washington, places such as Moldova, Bosnia and Ukraine are peripherally placed on the edge of Europe, that makes nationalism not an exotic force but a peripheral one... All in all, established nations see nationalism as the property of others, not theirs (Billig, 1995, p. 5).

What is an established nation? He counts France, the US, and Great Britain as established nation-states. What are the requirements of being an established nation-state? Is banal

2 In an interview that Antonsich made in his study (2015), the participant answers the question of 'What comes to your mind when you think of yourselves as Italians?' as follows: 'In Italy, there is no Italian. Italians are more attached to their cities. I am from Milan!'

nationalism seen only in these states? There are studies about daily production of nationalism in Turkey<sup>3</sup>, Greece<sup>4</sup>, Cameroon<sup>5</sup>, Syria, and Jordan (Philips, 2013), the authors of which apply almost the same methods as did his study and achieve almost the same results. Is it possible to count Turkey and Syria as established nation-states within the same category as the US and Great Britain? Or what about Iran, where nation and religion are re-produced and flagged daily?

In this sense, I make two claims. First, banal nationalism is a means of re-visiting national identity on a daily basis not only at the national level, but also at the sub-national and supra-national levels. Moreover, non-state actors can – and do – use the same tools to re-produce their own specific identities. The political discourses of politicians, flags, and anthems can be regarded as examples. Only several tools are unique to the state and distinguish it from other actors, such as banknotes and postage stamps, for only the state has the authority to officially issue them. By doing so, it seeks to consolidate the nation.

This can be seen in Iran. Whether it is successful or not is the subject of another study. Here, I claim that Billig's national-level study has to be revised in accordance with those tools that are unique to the state. Thus, I explain banal nationalism in Iran through banknotes, coins, and postage stamps. Second, this nationalism is common to all social groups, states, and organizations. Whether 'Eastern' or 'Western', developed or underdeveloped, democratic or illiberal, free or under dictatorship, living within a tribe or a metropolis, a group of people living in a certain place has tools that evoke kinship and identities. I introduce Iran, as both a state excluded by the US and Western Europe, and referred to as an undemocratic one, as a case study that embodies banal nationalism to show the usage of daily reproduction of national and religious identity.

### **Iranian National Identity**

In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious structured society, creating a new identity that can unify all of the internal identities is a huge undertaking. Such a society, for instance Iran, is prone to insecurity and tensions caused by 'hot' nationalist movements and ideas. Iranian national identity has never been coherent, which means that at particular historical moments it has been contentious, which can lead to extreme shifts not only in terms of regime, but also in terms of national identity (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 74).

The Pahlavi dynasty's extensive usage of the country's pre-Islamic past, along with the exclusion of Islam from public and social life, was replaced with the re-enforcement of Islamic rule. Khomeini challenged the Pahlavi dynasty's overemphasis on Persian identity

- 3 Arus Yumul and Umur Özkırmılı (2000) analyzed the content of the news and newspapers in Turkey's media on an ordinary day and studied banal nationalism and daily re-production of national identity in the country.
- 4 Iro Konstantinou (2015) applies banal nationalism to Greece and points out the role of schools in shaping the pupils' understanding of how they see the nation. In addition to study, Sofia Kalogeropoulou (2013) studies Greek folk dances and the re-production of nationalism there. According to her, such events in everyday social events in contemporary Greece constitutes a form of banal nationalism.
- 5 Bea Vidacs (2011) analyzed the relationship between Cameroonian identity and FIFA World Cup in reference to banal nationalism.

through a more inclusive concept: the unity of Islam (i.e., the *ummah*). When combined with the identity of 'Iranianness', this new ulama-controlled identity transcended state boundaries, the fight against oppression, and the neutral path between the tensions produced by the Cold War (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 75). The key question here is whether its Islamic ideology can be reconciled with the realities of nationalism and what, in turn, this means as regards including minorities into an Iranian identity (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 74).

During the first years of the revolution, Khomeini-led revolutionaries attacked secular Persian nationalism, which was the center of the Shah's policies, by defining Islam as the only component of identity for Iranians. As Saleh and Worrall (2015, p. 86) claimed, in the aftermath of the revolution Islamists used religious institutions to expand the influence of their ideology. In fact, they even closed universities for years in order to replace a Western and non-Islamic education with an Islamic one. As Abrahamian (2008, p.178) concludes, the overall aim was to Islamicize Iran.

However, the outbreak of the eight-year war with Iraq caused the new regime to refer to nationalism:

...while continuing to mobilize the masses behind the new ideology...it could no longer appeal to the nationalist identity used by Shahs which soon forced the new regime to reach for a more modern nationalist discourse, which was centered around the unifying nature of the Persian language and traditions and the way this linked to the unique aspects of the Shii past, which was intertwined with Persian culture (Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 88).

The war accelerated this combination<sup>6</sup> and, like the hostage crisis, provided the regime with a highly potent rallying cry. It thus became a patriotic as well as a religious-inspired revolutionary war<sup>7</sup> (Abrahamian, 2008, p. 176). According to Saleh and Worrall (2015, p. 88), this was done to inspire Iran's 'Islamo-national' identity, which Ansari calls a 'religio-nationalist Iranian' identity. This identity formation can also be discussed as policies of religious nationalism<sup>8</sup> (Brubaker, 2012; Juergensmeyer 1993, 1995; Friedland, 2002, 2011). According to Rogers Brubaker (2012, p. 9), religion does not necessarily define the boundaries of the nation, but rather supplies those myths, metaphors, and symbols that are central to the discursive, or ironic, representation of the nation and, therefore, the development of nationalism.

As a totalizing order capable of regulating every aspect of life, religion provides models of authority and imaginations of an ordering power (Friedland, 2002, p. 390). When it successfully merges with nationalism within the framework of the nation-state, politics becomes

6 Iraq is a Shii-majority country. During the war, Iran used nationalism to separate itself from the Iraqi people, who were mainly Shii Muslims.

7 The movie industry produced a number of full-length features during the Iran-Iraq War, such as *The Horizon* and *The Imposed War*, both of which glorified martyrdom at the front line.

8 Mark Juergensmeyer (1993) separates religious nationalism into ethnic religious, ideological religious, and ethno-ideological religious nationalism. He defines the creation of the Iranian national identity within the context of ideological religious nationalism. Ethno-symbolic and religio-nationalist contributions help form a national identity in societies like Iran that are designated by both nationalism and religion. This article does not deal with religious nationalism and ethno-symbolism, for both of them are beyond the scope of this article.

a religion, religion is politicized, and the nation-state is transformed into a 'vehicle of the divine' (Friedland, 2002, p. 381). The creation of an Iranian national identity after the revolution has a 'religio-nationalist' ideological dynamic that religionizes politics by transforming political issues and power struggles through a religious perspective. Describing such 'earthly' issues as political, social and economic issues within a sacred context has led to the Islamization of nationalism.

In this context, the post-revolution Iranian national identity has been formed around two layers that are related to domestic and international needs that interact: the Persian language, culture, tradition, the Shii past and myths, and anti-imperialism. Thus this particular identity is defined as feeling responsible for all oppressed people in the world and supportive of all liberation movements. In other words, the new regime formed and politicized a national identity based on Iranian territory, ancient Persian myths and tradition, and Shiism, yet at the same time correlated it with concepts like anti-imperialism and defending the oppressed worldwide.

This approach indicates that Tehran is relating such goals as exporting the revolution to national identity. For instance, Iran protested Iraq's bombardment of Halabja, joined (either directly or indirectly) the war in Bosnia to defend its Muslims, and supports the Palestinians against Israel.<sup>9</sup> These are explained to Iranians in terms of the requirements of having an Iranian national identity. An Iranian, by definition, has the legacy of the Shii past (e.g., what happened at Karbala) and inherits the Persian language and myths. And thus the Iranian national identity necessitates behaving like this.

In order to be taken seriously as a nation, people not only need to have a history, but also must be able to visually display that history (Pointon, 1998, p. 251). This understanding of the obligations associated with being Iranian is daily imposed and re-produced by the state to remind them who they are, to which culture and history they belong, and what obligations that belonging to this nation entails. This banal re-production is performed through visual symbolism and deixis in language (e.g., the discourses of politicians and the language used by newspapers). The visual symbolism located on the official products of 'the state' plays an important role in constructing nations and legitimizing states (Penrose, 2011, p. 429). Visual objects like banknotes, coins, postage stamps, and flags on public buildings, as well as logos and emblems on newspapers, contribute to the material and symbolic construction of nations, national identity, and a geopolitical order based upon nation-states (Penrose, 2011, p. 431). As I mentioned above:

...when states emphasize 'the visual', which includes maps, postage stamps, currency, and official web sites, they inform and educate their populations and those beyond about where they are, who they are, and what they are about... (Brunn, 2011, p. 19)

Currency and postage stamps are regularly viewed as 'products of the state' that create a link between the state's political identity project and its citizens (Penrose, 2011, p. 430).

9 These policies were highly related to *realpolitik*. Although Iran emphasized solidarity with the oppressed, it also followed a pragmatist policy. For instance, it supported India against Pakistan in Kashmir, supported Armenia against Azerbaijan, supported Hafez Assad's Baath regime massacre of the people of Hama.

Public institutions (e.g., post offices and central banks) are contributing factors that participate in shaping relations within the state. In this context, creating a national currency is a key stage in transforming an imagined community into an actual body with executive powers (quoted from Pointon, 1998 in Penrose, 2011, p. 430).

In addition to the daily production of national identity through visual symbolism, deixis in language helps the daily and banal production of national identity. Routine words, rather than grand memorable phrases, are constant reminders of the homeland making the national identity unforgettable (Billig, 1995, p. 92). Words such as 'us', 'our', 'our country', 'our nation', 'they', 'them', and 'others' refer to who you are, who you are not, and where you belong.

As mentioned above, Billig's sole focus on national social groupings is problematical, for banal nationalism can be observed at both the sub-national and the supra-national level (e.g., the European Union). Iran has several sub-national ethnicities, such as the Azaris, Kurds, and Baluchis. In terms of deixis in language, these sub-nations also use the same words such as 'us', 'our', 'they', and 'others'. Their national politicians and leaders define themselves as 'us' or use this kind of 'nationalist' words in their newspaper. For instance, Tehran closed '*Navid* Azerbaijan', the newspaper belonging to its largest minority population, the Azaris, on the grounds that it was a 'threat' to national security and supported ethnic nationalism. Even, the anthem of the Azari football team, Tractor, which plays in Iranian Football League, is full of nationalist slogans. In recent years, it has come to embody the increasingly national mindset and emancipatory aspirations of the Azari people (Souleimanov, 2015). The Kurds, the largest population living along the Iraq-Iran border, have several radio broadcasts and underground newspapers that work with their compatriots in Iraq and Turkey to keep nationalist ideas alive in Iran (Romano, 2006, p. 247).

Anthems and flags are also means of banal nationalism that flag the nation as one among others, as do flags themselves (Billig, 1995, p. 86). As Cerulo (1993, p. 244) argues, they provide perhaps the strongest, clearest statement of national identity. From empires to contemporary nation-states, every political structure has defined itself with national symbols drawn on fabric and expressed their national identity through anthems. However, sub- and supra-national organizations also have flags and anthems designed to make the same point. For states, national symbols, myths, and moral values are printed on flags and magnified through anthems. For supra-national authorities, flags and anthems are created through common values that have brought several nations together.

Each flag will have its own particular symbols like the *chakra-dhavaja*, or wheel, in the Indian flag, or the Protestant orange and Catholic green in the flag of Eire (Billig, 1995, p. 86). The flag of the United Nations, as a supra-national organization, is composed of a world map surrounded by two olive branches on a blue background in order to symbolize peace and solidarity among all nations. When the flag of the ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), an armed separatist organization in Spain, is analyzed, one notices that its snake represents politics and its axe represents armed struggle.

In conclusion, the state needs to mention itself through state-unique instruments, namely, visual symbolism, to defend public nationalism or national identity against sub-national

identities. This can be accomplished by issuing banknotes, coins, and postage stamps, all of which are designed to daily re-produce national and religious identity and to defend national identity against sub-national identities. Thus, I will refer only to those unique state visual symbolic tools and refer only to the state as regards the daily re-production of national identity.



Figure 1. (<http://www.mebanknotes.com>)

### Banknotes and Coins

Money is both the foundation of the national economy and the mark of national sovereignty. It therefore mirrors the state that issues it (Unwin & Hewitt, 2001, p. 1005). Printing money was, and is, among the symbols of the independence of a state or an empire. Throughout history, printing money that contained symbols of empire or images (e.g., emperors and princes) was one of the first policies implemented by newly established state institutions. Today, states use banknotes to effect the symbolic construction of nations and to advance banal nationalism (Penrose, 2011, p. 438). Using money has become such a constantly repeated banal action that people normally overlook it. Every day, various amounts of banknotes and coins are in circulation. It is also banal because the national emblems and images that grace them go largely unnoticed in commercial transactions (Billig, 1995, p. 41) and because most people never think about either the historical recentness of territorial currencies or the ideological functions that they fulfil (Penrose, 2011, p. 430). As Raento, Mikkonen, Ikonen, & Hamalainen (2004, p. 930) emphasized:

The imaginary of money supports the production and maintenance of a national narrative, written by the national elite. Images of national leaders, famous monuments, and other familiar icons printed or minted on money efficiently promote a sense of collectiveness, as money is present everywhere all the time.

A key stage in the development of new currencies and banknotes is deciding which general themes to depict (Unwin & Hewitt, 2001, p. 1015). This decision has usually been taken by a committee, often including members of the Central Bank, relevant government officials and academics with pertinent expertise (Unwin & Hewitt, 2001, p. 1015).

In Iran, the government is defined as the only authority that has the right to issue banknotes and coins, which are called *rial*.<sup>10</sup> The government has authorized the Central Bank of Iran to execute this right. According to the Monetary and Banking Act of Iran, the denomination, form, material, color, size, design, and other specifications shall be determined upon the recommendation of the Governor of Central Bank of Iran and the approval of the Minister of Finance, with due regard to the provisions of this Act (The Monetary and Banking Act of Iran, Part One, Article 2-f).

10 The monarchy also used the *rial*, which is linked to English word 'royal'. Interestingly, Tehran still uses this word, as well as the word *toman*, which also refers to money. In fact, it is more common than *rial*. One *toman* equals 10 *rials*. However, the *toman* is not considered official currency because it is a historical banknote.

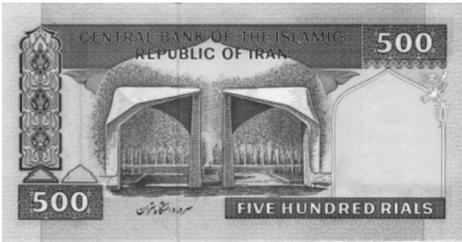


Figure 2. (<http://www.mebanknotes.com>)

The old notes were modified in three stages. The first stage resulted in the obliteration of the portrait of the Shah, the second in the obliteration of both the portrait and the watermark, and in the third stage the Shah’s portrait was replaced with a picture of the mausoleum of Imam Reza in Mashhad and the watermark was covered on both sides with a dark colored seal. The seal bears the words ‘The Islamic Republic of Iran’ in fine calligraphy (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999, pp. 196-197).

During 1980 and 1981, Iran used these third-stage banknotes. Several other places, among them the Chaharbagh school (a.k.a., the Shah school), Avicenna’s mausoleum, the tomb of Hafez, an oil refinery from Tehran, and old building of the Iranian Parliament were depicted on the banknotes’ reverse side during this two-year period. In addition, highly related to the country’s political situation, “Bank Markazi Iran” was written on banknotes (Figure 1). This would be replaced in 1981 with “Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran” (Figure 2).

Between 1981 and 1985, the new ‘Revolutionary Series’ banknotes began to be used. The Imam Reza Shrine was replaced by revolutionary characters and religious symbols. Hasan Modarres, a revolutionary cleric and one of Khomeini’s teachers; the Jame Mosque of Yazd; and the Feyziyeh School, one of the religious centers that had opposed the Shah, were depicted on the obverse sides of the 100-, 200-, and 1,000-rial banknotes, respectively (Figure 3). Photos of the Friday prayers appeared on 500-rial banknotes, and photos of a group of revolutionaries carrying a portrait of Khomeini appeared on the obverse sides of the 2,000, 5,000, and 10,000-rial banknotes, respectively (Figure 3).

During this period, these banknotes became even more ‘Islamized’. Photos of the Dome of the Rock (i.e., Qubbat Al-Sakhrah), the Kaaba, the Fatimah

The country’s political and economic situation after the revolution was not suitable for applying radical changes to banknotes and coins, and thus, at least for a while, the currency of the Shah’s era was used. Later on, it began to be replaced with the newly designed currency:



Figure 3. (<http://www.mebanknotes.com>)

Masoumeh Shrine in Qom, and the Imam Reza Shrine began to appear (Figure 4), as did national buildings like University of Tehran's main entrance and the Islamic Consultative Assembly (a.k.a., the Iranian Parliament) (Figure 4). A photo of working farmers was also issued to emphasize new regime's interest in agriculture (Figure 4). These banknotes did not picture Khomeini. Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999, p. 205) remarked that this was a clever manipulation of symbolism, suggesting that the Ayatollah Khomeini was not being imposed as a ruler but was the 'chosen' representative of the people, who, out of love and devotion, were carrying his portrait.

After 1992 the number of banknotes increased due to the issuance of 20,000-, 50,000- and 100,000-*rial* banknotes (Figure 5). Photos of the face of Ayatollah Khomeini, who died in 1989, dominated the obverse sides of this current series, which remains in use today (Figure 6).<sup>11</sup> Most appropriately, this series is known as the Imam Khomeini series. Chelkowski and Dabashi argue that this figured portrait of him:

...inspires awe in its simple grandeur. The proportions of his turbaned and bearded head are perfect. His sparkling eyes are situated equidistant from the top of his turban to the bottom of his beard (1999, p. 208).

These banknotes link him with liberation of Jerusalem (on the 1,000-*rial* banknote) and is designed to present him as the successor of Iranian national heroes who protected the country in times of crisis (on the 10,000-*rial* banknote).

The reverse sides portray traces of Iran's domestic and international policies as well as Tehran's ideology. In other words, they signify epochs related to national identity. For instance, photos of religious places that connect ideology with Islam and the Palestinian issue continue to be issued, such as the Dome of the Rock (the 1,000-*rial* banknote), the Kaaba (the 2,000-*rial* banknote), and Al-Aqsa Mosque (the 20,000-*rial* banknote) (Figure 7).<sup>12</sup> Direct connections are also made to the country's pre-Islamic and Islamic cultural heritage. A photo of pottery from Zabul, an ancient city within the pre-Islamic Persian Empire (the 5,000-*rial* banknote) and a photo of Mount Damavand, which has a special



Figure 4. (<http://www.mebanknotes.com>)

11 To protect Khomeini's portraits from being desecrated, all banknotes that bear his portrait are deemed by the government to have lost their value, and are less likely to be accepted for financial transactions, if they are damaged or defaced in any way.

12 From 1992 until today, three kinds of 5,000-*rial* banknotes, three kinds of 20,000-*rial* banknotes, and two kinds of 50,000-*rial* banknotes circulate in Iran.



Figure 5. (<http://www.banknote.ws>)



Figure 6. (<http://www.banknote.ws>)

place in Persian mythology and folklore (the 10,000-*rial* banknote) (Figure 7). A photo of flowers and birds on the 5,000-*rial* banknote, Naqsh-e Jahan Square on the 20,000-*rial* banknote, the Aghazadeh Mansion on the 20,000-*rial* banknote, the University of Tehran’s main entrance on the 50,000-*rial* banknote, and the mausoleum of Iranian poet Saadi, on the 100,000-*rial* banknote all refer to Iran’s Islamic cultural life (Figure 5 and Figure 7, respectively).

Interestingly, contemporary issues are also featured. Given that atomic and nuclear programs have occupied Iran’s agenda, authorities naturally would want to show its capabilities and technology in these fields. A look at the 5,000-*rial* banknote and 50,000-*rial* banknotes clearly contain some clues. The former banknote features a satellite called ‘Omid’ and a rocket called ‘Safir’ (Figure 7). ‘Omid’ means hope, the country’s first domestic satellite. ‘Safir’, which means ambassador, is the first expendable launch vehicle that placed a satellite in orbit (Iran says it

has..., 18 August, 2008). On the 50,000-*rial* banknote is a map with Iran in the center and the symbol of an atom (Figure 7). On the map, a hadith is quoted in Persian: “If science exists in this constellation, men from Persia will reach it”. In addition to this, on the map the gulf between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula is called ‘Persian Gulf’; it is also called the ‘Basra Gulf’.

Similar changes can be seen in the coins minted during this transition period. After the revolution, the new government did its best to remove all portraits, just as it had done for the banknotes. This also took some time. Although images of the Shah appeared on the coins, the new regime designed more ‘Islamized’ ones, mainly those that pictured religious places related to Shiism and Iranian cultural life (Figure 8). Iranian coins currently have five denominations: 50, 100, 250, 500, and 1,000 *rials*. All of the obverse sides list the value and the year of minting. Exceptionally, Mount Damavand is portrayed on the obverse side of the 1,000-*rial* coin. Each of them bears the ‘Islamic Republic of Iran’ at the top. The Fatima Masoumeh Shrine graces the 50-*rial* coin, the Imam Reza Shrine appears on the 100-*rial* coin, the Feyziyeh Madrasa is depicted on the 250-*rial* coin, Saadi’s Mausoleum on the 500-*rial* coin, and the city of Esfahan’s Khaju Bridge on the 1,000-*rial* coin.

To conclude, Tehran sought to reflect a new national identity based upon Islam, and, stage by stage, applied this to the national currency. While liberal and nationalist characters accepted by large numbers of people appeared on these banknotes between 1979 and 1981, Islamist characters began to be used after 1981, when an Islamic identity specifically began to dominate regime. The revolution was introduced as an Islamic one, dedicated to all Iranians, and portrayed as having a common significance. Related to the effort to create a new and predominantly Islamic national identity, the Iranian identity was defined as one that defends oppressed people worldwide. Iran introduced itself as a powerful country, one that is advanced in terms of technology, culture, and military capacity. It also points out that it champions all Muslims, not just the Shii Muslims. Today, this identity is being re-produced daily through the national currency.

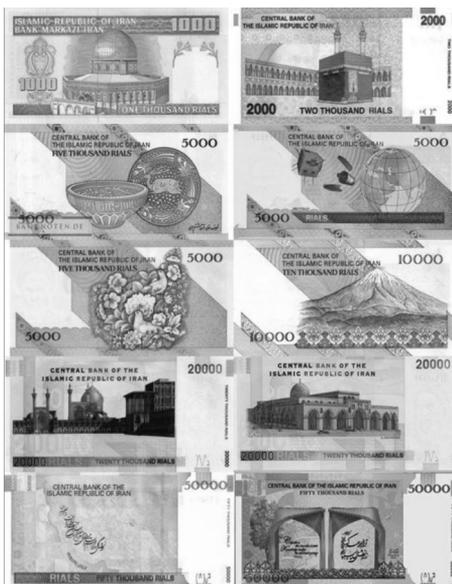


Figure 7. (<http://www.banknote.ws>)

### Postage Stamps

First used in Great Britain in 1840<sup>13</sup>, postage stamps are small objects of messages upon which myriad images of everyday life can be printed. In fact, stamp collecting has become such a significant market that several countries design stamps that are sold only to philatelists. Rather than being an economic object, a hobby, or an object stuck on letters, postage stamps are also national symbols that carry political messages.



Figure 8. (<http://www.cbi.ir/>)

Although seen and used frequently, people rarely stop to think of their rich imagery and multiple messages (Raento & Brunn, 2005, p. 145). In fact, these stamps contain many overt and subtle messages about what the state deems important for its residents and others to see and identify with (Brunn, 2011, p. 20).

13 When it was used for the first time in Great Britain, a photo of Queen Victoria appeared on stamps.



Figure 9. (<http://www.stampworld.com>, <http://www.free-photos.biz>)

A stamp’s visual qualities make it an important messenger that implements the state’s official outlook in its citizens’ everyday life (Raento & Brunn, 2005, p. 143). In their study on postage stamps as socio-political artefacts, Phil Deans and Hugo Dobson (2005, p. 3) define them as messengers that “... can and should be read as texts, often with expressly political purposes or agendas, which are conveyed through the images they depict”. According to them, these items emerge as vehicles for identity creation and propagation, as well as mechanisms for regime

legitimation (Deans & Dobson, 2005, p. 6). In this respect, they are tools of banal nationalism and seek to unite and foster a common heritage and an imagined community (Raento & Brunn, 2005, p. 145).

Postage stamps in Iran also became instruments of nation building, political transition, and re-production of ‘religio-national’ identity. As Deans and Dobson (2005, p. 6) claimed, their importance in changing concepts of the state over time and the changing aspirations of its elites were clearly visible while Iran was undertaking its political and socio-cultural transition from monarchy to an Islamic republic. Changes in the Iranian state’s identity, as well as changes of leadership and the current leader’s worldview, are all ‘secreted’ in stamps. For instance, pre-revolution stamps continued to be used even after the Shah fell. Moreover, since Iran’s political situation in Iran was not clear early on, photos of political figures and intellectuals from different ideologies were used.

...stamps in commemoration of champions of liberal nationalism, such as Mohammad Mosaddeq, or revolutionary Islam, such as Ali Shariati, were issued along with stamps that propagated the mainstream political line led by Ayatollah Khomeini (Philately, 28 January, 2011) (Figure 9).

Furthermore, stamps honoring Dehkhoda, the famous writer of the 1906 revolution and Jalal Al-e Ahmad were designed during the first years of Bazargan’s provisional government (Abrahamian, 2008, p. 178), (Figure 9). However, later stamps reveal a complete departure from the past (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999, p. 214). After the ulama seized power, stamps were transformed into propaganda instruments to re-produce the Iranian identity inspired by Shiism and Iranianness. This can be explained as a two-layered structure. One reminds the people of Iran’s national identity through their common history, religion, historical characters and language. These are such events as anniversaries of the Islamic Republic, Shii identity and the personality of Imam Ali, the tragedy of Karbala those involved in it (e.g., Imam Hussein and Fatimah), martyrs, issues related to Prophet Mohammad, the legacy of revolution and Khomeini, photos of ulama and intellectuals who contributed to the revolution, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and the Persian language (Figure 10). On stamps, Khomeini was symbolized as the one who protected and saved the nation. Mar-

tyrdom was represented by red tulips, a deeply rooted identification in the Iranian literary and epic imagination (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999, p. 41).

The second purpose is to remind Iranians of their national identity by combining several external events. Since the revolutionary regime declared itself the protector of all oppressed people worldwide, several independence movements and disasters were attached to this identity. Devoted to the concept of exporting its revolution, Tehran struggled to present Iranian national identity as an integral part of oppressed people, tragic events, important cases, anti-imperialism and



Figure 10. (<http://www.stampworld.com>, <http://www.stampsforiran.com>, <http://www.iranaiconline.org>)

anti-Zionism, and liberation movements. For example, numerous stamps supported the Palestinian and Afghan resistance movements (Philately, 28 January, 2011), (Figure 11). In addition, stamps to ‘honor’ Khalid Islambouli, who assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981, and to commemorate the Iranian victims killed in riots during the 1987 hajj season, and Saddam Hussein’s chemical bombing of Halabja in 1988 were issued (Figure 11). Furthermore, a stamp issued on World Health Day contrasted a starving African child to a well-fed European one in an attempt to sharpen Tehran’s profile as a champion of all oppressed people, regardless of religion or location (Philately, 28 January, 2011), (Figure 11). According to Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999, pp. 41-42), within this context stamps can be read as Islamic, Shii, and Iranian in some significant sense, and yet be perfectly universal in the range of meanings they intend to invoke.

Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999, p. 214) point out that Tehran has issued a huge amount of stamps since the revolution to convince and consolidate its people:

...these stamps bear the message that the Islamic Republic of Iran is the leader of worldwide and resurgent Islam, unafraid of any threat, even from the superpowers. These stamps, the silent but evocative heralds of revolt, proclaim to the world the triumph of a revolution founded on faith and based on an unflinching and emphatic conviction regarding all moral and ideological commitments that matter to a resurrected political culture.

The Iranian people, who see these stamps daily, view themselves as a part of the national identity based upon a combination of Shii Islam and Iranianess. This emphasizes that there is a connection between the Iranian nation and the oppressed people worldwide. In other words, an Iranian is considered responsible for all oppressed people, and the latter’s salvation depends upon the Iranian nation that, on its stamps, is symbolized as defending Palestinians, Quds (Jerusalem), and the Al-Aqsa Mosque against Zionism and Israel while being simultaneously depressed with the Iraqi regime’s massacre of the Kurds of Halabja.



Figure 11. (<http://www.stampsofiran.com>, <http://www.iranstamp.com>, <http://www.stampworld.com>, <http://www.iranicaonline.org>, <http://thecahokian.blogspot.com.tr>)

Tehran is usually portrayed as defending Iran against outsiders. In addition, stamps also depict the Iranian nation as rising on the legacy of Imam Hussein (martyred at Karbala), Imam Khomeini, and those martyrs who died during the revolution and the war with Iraq. In short, Iranian stamps daily reproduce the ‘religio-national’ Iranian identity.

### Conclusion

By considering banal nationalism in the Iranian case, this study makes several contributions to studies on banal nationalism as a whole as well as to nationalism in Iran. First, it shows that studies dealing with this concept on the national or state level should examine only those tools that belong to the state. Although Billig argues that the language used in newspapers

and the discourses of politicians include signs of banal nationalism, one cannot handle either of these, or the audience, as homogeneous agents. As Skey (2009), Airriess (2011), Slatcseva-Petkova (2014), and Vidacs (2011) claimed, sub-national and supra-national levels also exist, a fact that tends to create sub-national and supra-national identities.

Iran has a multi-national structure, for its society contains several non-Persian ethnicities, the most populous ones being Azaris, Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchis – all of which have their own publications, national leaders and anthems. Despite Billig’s claim that ‘us’, ‘our’, ‘they’, ‘them’, and similar words refer to national identity and causes the daily re-production of nationalism and national identity, the nation is not homogeneous. As shown above, Iran’s sub-national identities also refer to themselves and their identities by these same words, which indicate that no homogenous national identity exists. This is why I examined only visual symbols like banknotes, coins and stamps, all of which are state-specific, rather than the language found in newspapers, the discourses of politicians, national anthems, national flags, and TV broadcastings.

As shown above, almost every ethnical-national identity or social group uses a language, an anthem, and a flag to define their identities. The Azaris’ newspaper and the anthem of its football team, Tractor, can be given as examples. However, they are seen as parts of the Iranian national identity introduced by Tehran’s attempt to create an official identity based upon common values from Iranian history and Shii Islam that appeal to the majority of Iranians. By doing so, it seeks to include the public as much as possible via the national symbols and visual messages embedded in banknotes, coins, and postage stamps.

Second, this study reveals that banal nationalism is not seen only in 'Western' and 'established' nations, as Billig alleged. Just because a state is a democracy does not mean that it has no 'self-conscious, systematic, and prescriptive' rules about displaying national symbols (Philips, 2010, p. 83). In terms of banal nationalism, there is no need to distinguish countries as democratic, 'Western', or well-established because whether they are ruled by a secular ideology or a hierarchy, states refer to symbols and common values in order to create national identities. Maintaining this identity and consolidating the people requires the creation of common values in every society. In Iran, the Shii understanding of Islam is presented as the glue that holds people together.

Third, after the revolution Tehran implemented a Sharia system of governance inspired by Shii Islam. Although Islam was Tehran's main priority, nationalism was not ignored. In fact, Tehran formulated a new national identity based upon 'Iranianness', a two-layer identity defined by the values contained within Shii myths and pre-Islamic Persian history and the ones inspired by Third Worldism, anti-imperialism, and anti-Zionism. On the one hand, Iran seeks to use this identity to consolidate the public around responsibilities of being an Iranian and to 'deflate' separatist and anti-regime movements and, on the other hand, justifies its actions in both inside and outside of Iran by citing these responsibilities.

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