Nushin's grasp is warm and firm. She pulls me through a crowd of women on the street, only a few feet from a similar group of men. I estimate that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of people gathered here on Fars-Abad’s main street in Fars Province, Iran. I use my free hand to clasp my black chador at my chin as I attempt to keep pace with Nushin’s steady progress. But the pressure of bodies increases as we near the slow-moving flatbed trailer pulled by a truck inscribed with the words “Yā Husayn.” I lose her hand in the crowd and call out. She nods briefly in apology but continues on. Nushin is now only a few feet away from the trailer containing two wooden caskets wrapped in Iranian flags. Inside the caskets lie the bodies of two unknown martyrs (shahid), fallen heroes from the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). Their bodies have been brought here from the border of Iran and Iraq during the Week of the Sacred Defense, an annual commemoration of the war, and will be reburied in fresh graves in the town park.

Nushin has already, for just a second, managed to reach out and touch the wooden side of the trailer. Above and around her, other women throw
the scarves that they have brought with them from home to uniformed
male guards riding next to the martyrs. The guards in turn brush the
scarves on the caskets, infusing the fabric with the blessing of the martyrs’
bo
dies and blood, before throwing them back. Behind us on the street’s
median, Reza, Nushin’s teenage son, a budding computer scientist, is film-
ing the proceedings with my camera. The footage he captures shows town
officials, including the mayor, the droning of a military band, hundreds
of townspeople, and a plethora of local media makers participating in the
procession. The martyrs are on their way to their final resting ground, the
town’s park.

The next Friday, the town’s prayer leader and local representative of
state religion, the “Friday Imam,” holds a prayer and votive meal at the
site of the new graves. I sit cross-legged on the ground next to Nushin and
the other women while he introduces a “prayer giver,” who reads the Sup-
plication of Kumail, a fifteen-minute prayer for the protection against the
evil of enemies and for the forgiveness of sins. After the prayer, uniformed
male soldiers distribute to the hundreds of men and women in attendance
cups of yogurt, juice boxes, and plates of freshly cooked “lentils and rice”
(adas polow) from giant metal vats located on the outskirts of the gather-
ing. This food is paid for by the Foundation for the Preservation of Heri-
tage and the Distribution of Sacred Defense, a parastatal group that had
organized the multiday commemoration.5 As we eat the blessed fare, the
Friday Imam speaks: “Because this martyr is unknown, we the people
are his brother, his sister, his mother.” He calls on all of the attendees to
think of themselves as the kin of martyrs, a kinship that is enacted in real
time as the uniformed soldiers and townspeople call one another mother,
father, brother, or sister in thanks as they receive and pass along food.

What aspirations compel Nushin and her fellow townspeople to reach
out and touch the unknown martyrs’ caskets, attend their commemorative
prayers, and eat blessed food at the site of their burial? What is the signifi-
cance of this heartfelt participation in state ritual? And how does it relate
to the everyday experience of living as kin in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

This book draws from a year and a half of ethnographic research among
Shi’i state–supporting families in the provincial town of Fars-Abad, the
city of Shiraz, and Iran’s capital, Tehran, in order to understand how ideas
and practices of kinship and religion are linked to state power. I ask: What
Introduction

Can an analysis of home life and everyday piety tell us about contemporary nation-making? Answering this question requires an investigation into the metaphorical and analogical resonances between the intimate spaces of the home and the state. It also requires an on-the-ground exploration of how the substances and practices of kinship—from blood, to food, to family prayer—are being deployed in state rituals to create ideal citizens who embody familial piety, purity, and closeness to God.

This book is for anyone interested in reimagining the interstices between kinship, religion, and the nation-state. It is about the hopes and dreams of ordinary Iranian supporters of the Islamic Republic. And it is the first account of these supporters outside of Iran’s urban centers since the 1979 Revolution.

Despite hegemonic narratives of modernity that position kin-based societies as prior to modern state-based societies, kinship has a persistent power in modern nation-making. In the same way, religion has not receded into the confines of the private sphere in the manner assumed by liberal theory. It continues to shape diverse local, national, and transnational political allegiances and affinities. This is particularly apparent in Iran, where since the 1979 Revolution a cohort of religious scholars and intellectuals has argued that the nation’s authentically Islamic interior—composed of virtuous Muslim brother and sister citizens—has to be (re)generated while resisting a spiritually vacant, “Westernstruck” exterior. Supporters of the Islamic Republic, like Nushin, her husband, and her children, are on the front lines of these efforts. They are members of the Basij, Iran’s paramilitary organization, and they claim that other Iranians have forgotten the sacrifices of the martyrs. They worry that their society is losing its morals in favor of the frivolity of urban and middle-class life. Postwar Iran seems no longer to aspire to the revolutionary values of simplicity, piety, and self-sacrifice to the Supreme Leader of Iran that they uphold (Sadeghi 2009).

Faced with these perceived challenges, state elites, including provincial town officials, and ordinary state supporters, such as Nushin, are deploying ideas and practices of kinship and religion in very tangible ways to
configure citizens as Muslim “kin” while reinforcing the Revolution’s values. To regenerate and sanctify the Iranian nation, its citizens, and its landscape, the state displays the blood of kinship, spilled from the veins of Iranian citizens, throughout the country. This blood appears on street signs, in graveyards, and in ongoing ritual commemorations of Iran-Iraq War martyrs. It organizes the bodies of Iranian subjects around the paradigmatic martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet, Imam Husayn, at the Battle of Karbala (680 CE). Imam Husayn’s martyrdom is thought to have kept Islam alive and has become an inspiration for fighting injustice, including during the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. At the same time, the Islamic Republic and its supporters draw from ordinary and extraordinary acts of making pure kinship at home—acts such as the sharing of food—to bless citizens and create divinely sanctioned relationships in the wider sphere of the nation-state. Indeed, a full spectrum of material substances, immaterial qualities, acts, and processes of kinship in Iran is being deployed in the grand rituals of state power to create and legitimize an ideal society organized by the revolutionary values of pure kinship, piety, and closeness to God.

Comprehending the precise ways this occurs requires an investigation not only of how kinship and nation can transform each other via shared ideas and metaphors, but also of how kinship’s more subtle substances, ineffable qualities, acts, and processes appear in state ritual to create convincing concordances between the intimacies of family life and the nation. Home life and piety connect to state power in multiple ways. Even as common kin-based tropes such as blood and law give a sense of coherence, legitimacy, and inevitability to nation-states, other locally salient aspects of kin-making—such as sharing blessed food in public commemorations—provide vital means of creating and shaping moral, pious, and familial relations among citizens.

SACRALIZING KINSHIP, NATURALIZING THE NATION

Kinship is often deeply entangled with contemporary nation-making. Indeed, the two fields share similar forms of inclusions and exclusions, hierarchies and equalities, as well as shared essences and essential differences
In Iran and elsewhere, these cross-connections are not lost on state elites, who strategically use notions of kinship, including gender, reproduction, and marriage, to naturalize dominant ideologies of patriarchal authority, race, class, and religion (Heng and Devan 1992; Joseph 1999; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989).

Perhaps the most striking way that kinship informs nation-making in the contemporary world is through shared ideas of ancestry, origins, genealogy, procreation, and blood (Alonso 1994; Bear 2013; Bryant 2002). As imaginations of the biological or “the natural,” these concepts help make sameness and difference seem inevitable with respect to a nation, “race,” or ethnic group (Nash 2008, 10). Blood is an especially compelling medium in this regard. Simultaneously a substance and a metaphor, blood is powerfully involved in notions of kinship, life and death, nurturance and violence, and connection and exclusion (Carsten 2013). It further has a special capacity to participate in and flow among domains that scholars often presume to be distinct, such as kinship and economics or kinship and politics (Carsten 2013).

In Iran, blood is strikingly visible in both home life and politics, participating in and flowing between these seemingly distinct domains. It appears in commemorations for martyrs as a substance of kinship and as a reminder of the sacred history of martyrdom and prophetic genealogy. Indeed, the resonances of blood as a “natural” and “sacred” substance pile onto each other, increasing its power to shape citizens, thus adding both a naturalizing and a sacralizing dimension to blood in the political project of regenerating the Islamic Republic (see chapter 3).

Yet blood, law, genealogy, and ancestry are not the only traditional aspects of kin-making that inform the nation. Kin relations can be formed through materials such as food, land, hearths, and houses, and they can be constituted through “processes of doing” such as care, nurturance, feeding, exchange, and making choices (Bahloul 1996; Carsten 1995; Labby 1976; Weston 1991). Kin relations can further be created via immaterial, ethical, or sacred acts and qualities that work alone or alongside the substances of kinship (Wellman 2017b; Cannell 2013). In Iran, this may include cooking the right food, praying, memorializing, remembering, moving through sacred space, or participating in a ceremony or event. Kinship is not a