

# Heritage Champions and Democracy

## Profiles of Conservation Activists in Iran

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### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Iran werden umstrittene Entscheidungen über Veränderungen des kulturellen Erbes oft hinter verschlossenen Türen getroffen, ohne dass die Öffentlichkeit in nennenswertem Umfang konsultiert wird oder Abläufe transparent gemacht werden. Dies schränkt die Beteiligung der betroffenen Gemeinschaften, der lokalen Interessengruppen und der Expert\*innen ein. Infolgedessen werden den verschiedenen Akteuren die Folgen dieser Entscheidungen erst dann bewusst, wenn die Regierung beginnt, sie in größerem und sichtbarerem Umfang umzusetzen, so dass wenig Raum für öffentliche Interventionen oder Einwände bleibt. Die Rolle der Expert\*innen im Entscheidungsprozess bleibt in diesem undurchsichtigen und oft autoritären Umfeld unklar und sie spielen keine herausragende Rolle bei der Initiierung von Widerstand oder sozialer Mobilisierung gegen undemokratische Praktiken.

Stattdessen sind es Medienaktivist\*innen, die diese Verfahren konsequent und mutig als Akteure des Wandels in Frage gestellt haben. Nach Ansicht vieler Fachmeinungen sind diese Aktivist\*innen allmählich zu den wichtigsten Verfechter\*innen der Demokratie im Bereich des Denkmalschutzes im Iran geworden. Während die Bedeutung der Rolle der Aktivist\*innen und ihre langfristigen Auswirkungen auf die demokratischen Praktiken und die Erhaltung des Kulturerbes in der Literatur gut dokumentiert sind, wurde ihnen als Einzelpersonen nicht genügend Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt. Folglich wurden die Details ihrer täglichen Arbeit nicht angemessen untersucht, ihre Praktiken wurden nicht ausreichend reflektiert, und ihr Einfluss wurde nicht vollständig verstanden. In diesem Artikel wird mit Hilfe von qualitativen Forschungsmethoden und narrativen Instrumenten versucht, die Geschichten dieser Aktivist\*innen aufzudecken, um zu zeigen, wie sie arbeiten und letztlich die bestehende Machtdynamik durchbrechen.

### ABSTRACT

In Iran, controversial decisions regarding changes in heritage environments are often made behind closed doors, without significant public consultation or transparency. This limits the involvement of affected communities, local stakeholders, and experts. Consequently, various groups only become aware of the consequences of these decisions when the government begins implementing them on a broader and more visible scale, leaving little room for public intervention or objection. Although the role of experts in the decision-making process remains unclear in this obscure and often authoritarian environment, they do not play a prominent role in initiating resistance or social mobilisation against these undemocratic practices. Instead, it is media activists who have consistently and courageously challenged these procedures as *agents of change*. According to many experts, professionals, and officials, these activists have gradually become the main champions of democracy in the field of heritage conservation in Iran. While the significance of activists' roles and their long-term impact on democratic practices and heritage conservation has been well documented in the literature, they have received insufficient attention as individuals. Consequently, the details of their day-to-day efforts have not been adequately explored. In other words, their practices have not been sufficiently reflected upon, nor has their influence been fully understood. This article, utilising qualitative research methods and narrative-based tools, seeks to uncover the stories of these activists, to demonstrate how they operate and ultimately disrupt existing power dynamics.

## Introduction

The conservation of heritage environments is often portrayed as a purely technical and managerial endeavour, disconnected from political considerations. This apolitical framing, echoed in Louis and Maertens' observation that even within international organisations, there is a frequent refrain of "we don't do politics", aligns with a broader trend of depoliticisation in decision making, particularly in the post-political era.<sup>1</sup> This era, which has emerged since the end of the Cold War, is characterised by declining voter turnout, decreasing membership of traditional political parties, and eroding public trust in politicians, all of which contribute to a rise in *anti-politics*. Theorists employ terms such as "post-democratic," Crouch (2004) "post-politics," Mouffe (2005) and "post-political" Rancière (2009) to describe a contemporary condition wherein genuine political contestation and conflicting worldviews are suppressed.<sup>2</sup> As Beveridge and Koch argue, this post-Cold War period has fostered a consensus-driven environment centred on global market norms, effectively silencing alternative perspectives, particularly those that challenge neoliberal ideologies.<sup>3</sup> In this context, depoliticisation, defined by Burnham as "the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making", becomes a dominant governing strategy.<sup>4</sup>

Within heritage conservation, this depoliticisation manifests as a prioritisation of administrative solutions over engagement with the inherently political dimensions of heritage. Decisions regarding which heritage to preserve and how are deeply intertwined with societal values, power dynamics, and competing interests. Samuel emphasises the importance of political opportunities within arenas to the expression of heritage.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Johns asserts that meaningful conservation must be understood as a political act.<sup>6</sup> This study challenges this prevailing depoliticised approach by focusing on the significant political practices of Iranian heritage activists. These activists actively resist depoliticisation, engaging with and often influencing decision-making processes. Employing a narrative-based qualitative methodology, this research explores the lived experiences and strategies of these activists. By examining their narratives, the article aims to illuminate how they navigate the complex interplay of heritage, politics, and activism in Iran, utilising their resources to shape decisions and promote accountability. Ultimately, this investigation seeks to deepen

our understanding of these activists' operations and their contributions to democratising heritage conservation decision-making in Iran.

This article investigates how activism intersects with heritage conservation, focusing on the contributions of activists to preserving cultural heritage. By exploring their strategies and impacts, the study illuminates the ways in which activists navigate challenges and influence decisions to protect heritage within complex political contexts. Drawing on in-depth insights, it highlights the resources and mechanisms employed by activists to effectively address conservation issues and sustain their efforts.

## Literature Review: Transforming Conservation and Challenging Power

The intersection of heritage studies and social movement theory has become increasingly crucial for understanding the evolving landscape of cultural heritage conservation. Scholars now widely recognise that heritage activism – often characterised by organised, collective efforts to challenge dominant narratives and practices – aligns closely with core definitions of social movements. This convergence is particularly evident in the growing number of disputes related to heritage, in which activist groups play a significant role. No longer solely the domain of experts and institutions, the conservation of cultural heritage has become a contested terrain, with activism serving as a driving force behind its transformation. This literature review examines the multifaceted political agency of conservation activists, tracing their trajectory from the margins to the centre of heritage discourse. By analysing key theoretical frameworks and drawing upon relevant case studies, this review aims to illuminate the complex interplay between activism, power, and the future of heritage. It specifically focuses on how social movement theories provide a critical lens for understanding these dynamics. This analysis will not only highlight the significance of activism in shaping heritage conservation but also contribute to a deeper understanding of social movements themselves within the specific context of cultural heritage struggles. The exploration of this intersection will enable a more nuanced comprehension of the transformative potential of activism in the heritage sector, ultimately enhancing our appreciation of the role of collective action in shaping cultural narratives and influencing conservation practices.

The seeds of contemporary conservation activism can be traced back to early critiques of established heritage practices. David Lowenthal's influential work, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985), while not explicitly focused on activism, provided fertile ground for its emergence. Lowenthal's critique of the inherent biases within traditional preservation practices, which often privileged elite perspectives and textual sources over lived experiences, illuminated a crucial gap in heritage discourse. This gap created space for activist voices advocating for a more inclusive and representative approach to understanding and managing the past. Furthermore, Lowenthal's observation – that preservation often serves as a reactive response to broader societal anxieties – foreshadowed the proactive and transformative potential of activism. He argues that written texts are not representative, as they have historically been heavily weighted toward literate elites who took the trouble to record their views. He considers heritage preservation as a limited engagement with the past, stemming from our inability to understand and engage with it, which, in turn, perpetuates this inability.<sup>7</sup> In this framework, heritage organisations are portrayed not as engaged drivers of our understanding of heritage and history but rather as reactive respondents to broader social changes, including feelings of loss, the role of landmarks, and the intertwining of personal and public histories.

Lowenthal's insights highlight the necessity for a shift towards a more dynamic and participatory heritage practice – one that recognises and values diverse narratives and experiences. This foundation has inspired contemporary activists to challenge existing practices and advocate for the inclusion and representation of marginalised voices within heritage discourse. As a result, they are transforming the way we conceive of and engage with cultural heritage, moving beyond traditional views to embrace a more holistic understanding that encompasses a wide array of perspectives. This transformation not only enriches the narrative surrounding heritage but also fosters deeper connections between individuals and their cultural histories, empowering communities to assert their identities within broader societal contexts. By advocating for inclusivity and engagement, these activists play a crucial role in redefining the practices and meanings associated with cultural heritage in today's complex world.

Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country* (1985) and Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry*

(1987) offered more pointed critiques of the political instrumentalisation of heritage.<sup>8</sup> Building upon Lowenthal's critique of institutional bias, these authors explicitly linked heritage to broader power structures. They argued that national heritage, particularly in the British context, was frequently deployed to reinforce conservative ideologies and maintain existing social hierarchies. By exposing these inherent power dynamics, Wright and Hewison provided a crucial impetus for the rise of activist movements seeking to challenge dominant narratives and reclaim heritage as a site of contestation.

Shifting the focus from critiques of institutional practices to the agency of individuals and communities, Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994) offered a powerful counter-narrative to traditional depictions of heritage enthusiasts as passive consumers of official history.<sup>9</sup> Samuel's work celebrated the active role of individuals in shaping historical narratives and engaging in collective acts of remembrance. His evocative metaphor of heritage as the work of a thousand hands underscored the democratic potential of heritage practices, and therefore requires an approach that addresses the ensemble of activities and practices in which ideas of history are embedded or a dialectic of past–present relations is rehearsed. This emphasis on collective participation laid the groundwork for understanding the legitimacy and power of activist interventions.

Laurajane Smith's groundbreaking *The Uses of Heritage* (2006) further solidified the theoretical foundation for understanding the political dimensions of conservation activism.<sup>10</sup> Extending Samuel's focus on participatory heritage practices, Smith introduced the critical concept of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). She also argued that the AHD, with its emphasis on expert knowledge, top-down management, and universalising narratives, systematically marginalised the perspectives and experiences of local communities. By challenging AHDs, activists sought to decolonise heritage practices, empower marginalised voices, and promote more equitable and inclusive forms of heritage management.

Rodney Harrison's (2013) application of actor–network theory (ANT) provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of contemporary heritage activism.<sup>11</sup> Harrison's exploration of heritage within contemporary debates about structure and agency moves beyond bipolar models, such as dominant–subaltern and local–global. This per-

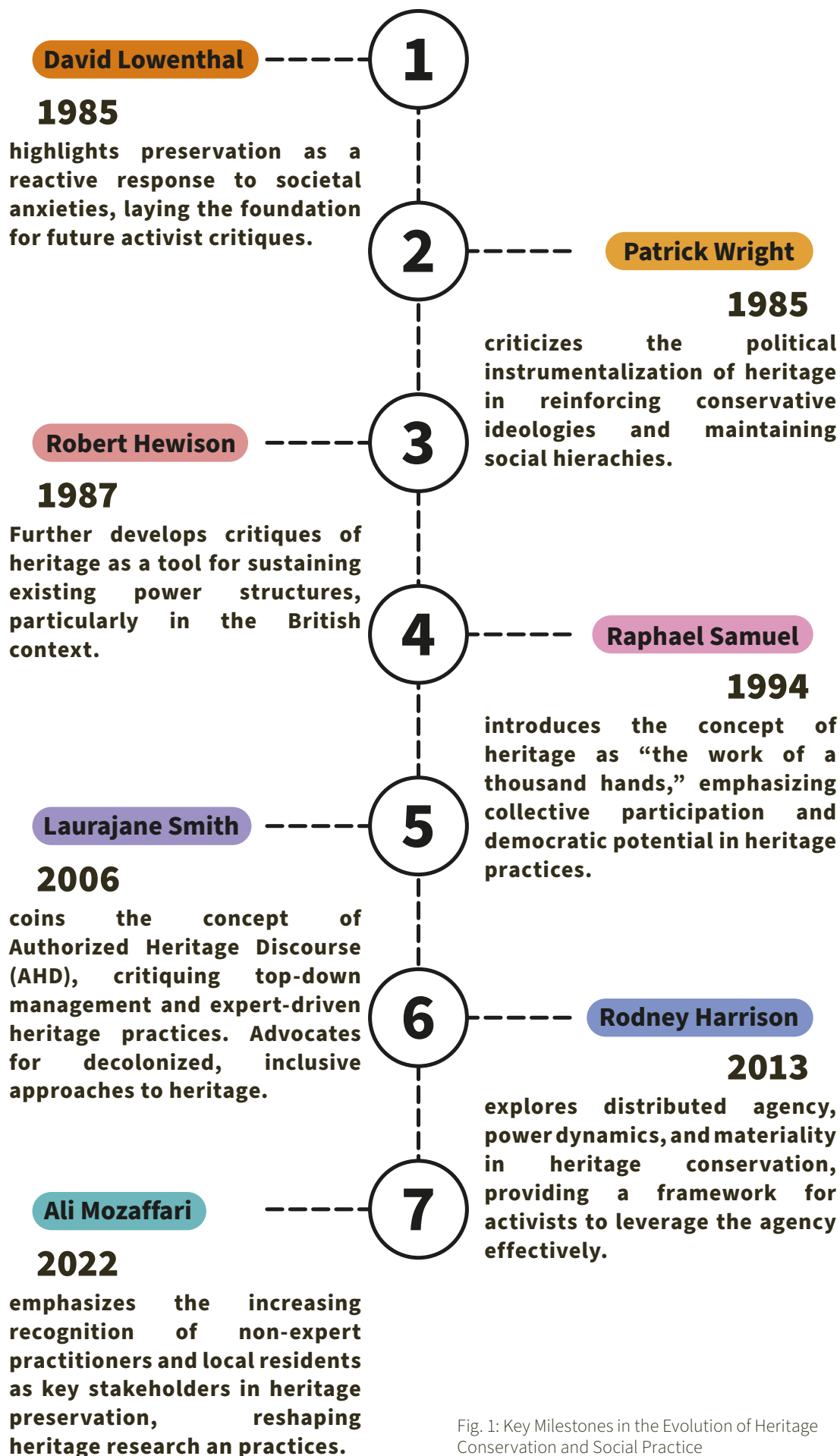


Fig. 1: Key Milestones in the Evolution of Heritage Conservation and Social Practice

spective highlights the distributed nature of agency and the intricate relationships between power, knowledge, and materiality in heritage conservation. By understanding these complex networks, activists can more effectively leverage their agency to achieve desired outcomes.

Continuing the trajectory of challenging established power structures within the heritage field, contemporary scholarship highlights the increasingly central role of social movements in shaping heritage discourse and practice. The work of Mozaffari et al. (2022) emphasises the growing recognition of non-expert practitioners and local residents as essential stakeholders in heritage preservation.<sup>12</sup> They argue that social movements have always been important to the generation of heritage and are now increasingly central to how researchers define heritage, due to the recognition of the importance of residents and other non-expert practitioners to its creation and upkeep.

The emergence of heritage activism and NGOs in Iran, though a gradual and intricate process, can be symbolically linked to the controversy surrounding the construction of the Sivand Dam in 2008. Located near the World Heritage Site of Pasargadae, the dam's construction sparked widespread outrage among academics, professionals, and heritage enthusiasts, beginning as early as 2004 with initial reports documenting violations. The ensuing controversy rapidly escalated into public protests due to perceptions of governmental mismanagement and lack of transparency. These protests coalesced around a shared narrative that emphasised the importance of safeguarding pre-Islamic heritage as an integral component of Iranian national identity. This episode underscored the potent social and political significance of pre-Islamic heritage in modern Iran. The government's response, which framed dissent as a threat to national security, further galvanised heritage activists, who organised demonstrations across multiple cities. This marked a significant turning point in the open engagement between civil society and the state regarding heritage issues. The Sivand Dam controversy became a catalyst, bringing heritage activism into the public sphere and demonstrating its capacity to challenge official narratives and mobilise public opinion.

This shift reflects a broader democratisation of the field – driven in part by the rise of social media, which has amplified the voices of activists and facilitated new forms of organisation and advocacy. However, this democratisation also presents new

challenges, as activists must navigate increasingly complex political landscapes and negotiate with a wider range of stakeholders. Conservation activism has fundamentally transformed the field of heritage studies, challenging traditional power structures, advocating for inclusive practices, and pushing the boundaries of what constitutes heritage. From early critiques of institutional bias to contemporary movements challenging globalisation and climate change, activists have played a crucial role in shaping the discourse and practice of heritage conservation. As heritage continues to be a site of contestation and negotiation, the political agency of conservation activists will remain essential in ensuring a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for cultural heritage worldwide. The ongoing dialogue between activists, institutions, and communities will ultimately determine the future trajectory of heritage, underscoring the need for continued research, critical engagement, and collaborative action.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing narrative inquiry as the primary methodology to explore the experiences and strategies of cultural heritage activists in Iran. Narrative inquiry was chosen for its ability to illuminate human experiences through stories, which serve as powerful tools for understanding actions, values, and the broader social and institutional contexts in which they unfold. As Forester highlights, stories fulfil multiple functions, including descriptive, moral, political, and deliberative roles, offering deep insights into what truly matters in specific contexts.<sup>13</sup> Building on this perspective, Throgmorton emphasises the importance of the networks, settings, and processes that shape storytelling,<sup>14</sup> while Van Hulst notes that stories can articulate both what is and what ought to be.<sup>15</sup> Together, these perspectives underscore the relevance of narrative inquiry for examining the intricate dynamics of heritage activism and its broader implications.

Participants were selected using an information-oriented approach as outlined by Flyvbjerg, focusing on maximising information richness from a small, purposefully chosen sample.<sup>16</sup> The study engaged four activists who played pivotal roles in halting significant projects that threatened Iran's cultural heritage. These participants were chosen due to their notable success in preventing the destruction of heritage sites, offering unique and impactful narratives of effective activism. The selected



cases represent tangible instances where activist efforts resulted in meaningful outcomes, making them particularly suitable for understanding the dynamics of heritage activism in complex socio-political contexts.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over an extended period, from 6 May to 30 June 2024. This prolonged engagement allowed the research team to establish trust with participants, fostering an open and collaborative environment for dialogue. The interviews were designed as extended conversations, often requiring multiple sessions to enable a comprehensive exploration of the activists' experiences, strategies, and challenges. This iterative process encouraged the co-construction of meaning, with both researchers and participants actively contributing to deepening the understanding of heritage activism.

The interviews were analysed using MAXQDA software, which facilitated systematic coding and thematic analysis of the narratives. The use of MAXQDA allowed the research team to identify patterns, themes, and insights across the data, ensuring a rigorous and transparent analytical process. This approach provided a structured framework to delve into the activists' strategies, motivations, and the broader implications of their work on cultural heritage conservation in Iran.

This methodology, which integrates narrative inquiry, purposeful participant selection, and advanced analytical tools, enabled the study to provide a nuanced and rich understanding of heritage activism. By deeply engaging with the activists' stories and employing systematic analysis, the research highlights the complexities and transformative potential of their work within the broader context of cultural heritage preservation.

## Results and Discussion

Interviews with activists in Iran reveal that, while each employs specific tools depending on their area of focus, they share common strategic resources that empower them within the Iranian context. Although these resources may not be universally applicable to all fields or even to all projects within a specific field, they have yielded undeniable results in recent years within Iran's conservation movement. Activists in Iran have developed and refined a multifaceted and successful approach to advocating for cultural and natural heritage. Their activities span a broad spectrum of heritage sites – from individual

historic houses as examples of architectural heritage, to entire historic urban fabrics, and even ancient cemeteries intertwined with natural heritage. For example, they have been involved in campaigns to prevent the destruction of the historic Agha Najafi Street in Isfahan, the historic fabric of Shiraz, the historic Sabet Pasal House in Tehran, and the ancient LahSavareh cemetery in Dena. Their activities are characterised by the seamless integration of various resources in relation to their objectives. These efforts are sustained by an unwavering commitment to continuity. Each of these elements plays a crucial role in their conservational strategy, amplifying their impact and inspiring broader movements.

Media has been a cornerstone of these activists' endeavours, serving as a powerful tool for raising awareness and mobilising action. One activist recalls the significant role of visual evidence in his experience in stopping the illegal excavation of an ancient mound: "I took pictures of the destruction and sent them to several news agencies. I received numerous calls, and a media wave was created that stopped the illegal excavation."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this documentation served as irrefutable evidence, drawing public attention to the violations. Another activist explained how media campaigns often evolve into broader movements, recounting his experiences in stopping the destruction of historic gardens and houses in Tehran: "Whenever a historical site or garden was threatened, we would launch a media campaign. If that didn't work, we would escalate by mobilising locals, organising protests in front of the city council, and inviting the media to cover it."<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, social media platforms such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram have amplified their reach, providing avenues for the rapid and widespread dissemination of information. One activist elaborated: "I set up WhatsApp and Telegram groups, created an Instagram page, and started a campaign. Within days, the issue gained traction across multiple platforms."<sup>19</sup> Another activist, with years of experience in preserving historical sites and ancient mounds in Khuzestan, noted: "We were among the first organisations to launch a heritage news website, and we were very successful in disseminating our news."<sup>20</sup> These efforts enable activists to galvanise public attention and generate momentum in support of their objectives.

Documentation forms the backbone of these activists' advocacy efforts, providing the necessary evidence to substantiate their claims and engage with

the public and authorities. Activists meticulously gather and organise various records, including photographs, videos, and official documents. One activist described their experience in trying to stop the destruction of an ancient cemetery: “We compiled violations of a major dam project that would submerge a heritage site, and this was the beginning of obtaining a series of documents. Once the information was gathered, a package was created against the dam construction. This same information became the starting point for documenting the violations that we collected and published.”<sup>21</sup> Another activist emphasised how documentation can transform isolated incidents into significant public concerns: “Our documentation of the walls of Hormuz Ardeshir, along with news reports, turned this issue into a major public concern.”<sup>22</sup> This level of detail not only validates activists’ positions but also equips them with credible resources for media campaigns and legal action, making their arguments more persuasive and difficult to dismiss.

The legal system serves as another powerful avenue for these activists, who leverage legal mechanisms to hold violators accountable and enforce the protection of cultural and environmental assets. Through formal complaints, lawsuits, and procedural challenges, they compel authorities to address their concerns. One activist explained their approach: “We submitted requests to the government structure in writing, through complaints and formal notices, and this correspondence allowed us to obtain a substantial amount of documentation.”<sup>23</sup> They further elaborated on the outcomes of their legal interventions: “By filing formal objections to unlawful decisions, we exposed major flaws in the permitting process and compelled authorities to undertake a comprehensive review of environmental and heritage impact assessments for projects.”<sup>24</sup> These legal strategies can not only delay or halt destructive projects but also establish important precedents and open pathways for systemic change and reform. The activists strategically utilise the legal system to challenge harmful projects, forcing transparency and accountability from governmental bodies. Their actions create a body of evidence that can be used in future cases, contributing to long-term legal and societal change.

Direct engagement with opponents, including policymakers, developers, and officials, constitutes another vital component of their strategy. Engaging with these stakeholders allows activists to challenge

counter-arguments and negotiate for better outcomes. One activist commented on this aspect of their work: “After one of these official meetings, I wrote a letter to the Minister of Cultural Heritage, stating that interventions in the historical context of Isfahan are being conducted based not on the preservation of that context but on a detailed plan, and the members of the technical council are not heritage defenders but rather the infantry of the municipality.”<sup>25</sup> Another activist highlighted the value of understanding opponents’ motivations: “Attending these official meetings allowed me to gain a better understanding of the challenges and problems of registering national monuments. With this understanding, we subsequently held courses for journalists and activists in Khuzestan province. Moreover, a relationship was formed that made the officials accountable to us as well.”<sup>26</sup> These interactions, while often contentious, provide opportunities to influence decisions and ensure that preservation concerns are considered. By directly confronting those who threaten cultural heritage, activists can expose flawed arguments, exert pressure, and foster a more informed dialogue that can lead to positive change. This direct engagement demonstrates a commitment to finding solutions through communication and negotiation, even with those who hold opposing views.

Another crucial aspect is the activists’ engagement with the public. Building popular support is paramount for their movements to be sustainable and to effect meaningful change. Activists conduct workshops, launch local campaigns, and employ accessible language to ensure constructive engagement with the local community. One activist described their efforts: “I receive many reports from people. I read these reports, meet with each individual, and talk to them. In fact, I co-write the scenario for disseminating news in the media with the people.”<sup>27</sup> Another activist emphasised the importance of this interaction: “In the past two years, we have travelled to various places. Our continuous follow-ups have led to the creation of businesses in some villages in the tourism sector, but at the same time, people are also taking care of their cultural heritage. They keep us informed about the state of their city’s heritage.”<sup>28</sup> By fostering these relationships, activists transform scattered protests into cohesive, community-based initiatives that carry greater weight in advocacy efforts. All these strategies are underpinned by a deep emotional

Resources	Description/Usage
Media	Exclusive media; Communication with other media
Legal levers	Lawsuits; Administrative correspondence; Registration in the list of national monuments
Documents	Data collection; Analysing information to understand situations and sometimes presenting alternatives
Interaction with antagonists	Coalitions; Raising the cost (financial, legal, political, reputational, etc.) of illegal activities by agents
Interaction with people	Social mobilisation; Cooperation with NGOs or active individuals; Achieving strategic planning through dialogue
Emotions and beliefs	Childhood and family influences; Understanding the emotions and personalities of antagonists and supporters, to determine how to influence them
Continuity	Constant efforts to prevent destruction in critical situations; Preventative strategies; Resistance to threats and challenges

Table 1: Strategic resources of Iranian activists

connection to their work. Activists are driven by a shared belief in the importance of cultural heritage preservation and environmental protection. One activist explained: “It’s all because of the love for this land and the commitment that we have no right to remain silent in the face of the destruction of this land’s heritage.”<sup>29</sup> Another activist added: “I believe that everyone, in every position, should do something for their country as much as they can. Do something for the people, without any expectations.”<sup>30</sup> This emotional foundation not only sustains their efforts but also inspires others to join their cause, creating a ripple effect that amplifies their movements. The activists understand that public support is essential for long-term success. By connecting with people on an emotional level, sharing their passion for preservation, and empowering communities to take ownership of their heritage, they create a powerful force for change.

Continuity is a hallmark of their activism. The activists maintain sustained efforts over the course of years, adapting their strategies to meet evolving circumstances and challenges. Activist 1 repeatedly emphasises that “this path continues, and we will stand firm until the last moment.”<sup>31</sup> Activist 2 be-

lieves that “one must strive for the country. I should not abandon the path I have learned after all these years.”<sup>32</sup> Activist 3 defines activism as “the prominence of an individual or association through continuous activity.”<sup>33</sup> Activist 4 underscores the importance of perseverance: “If we want to back down, this whole past will be questioned. There are some achievements that society may not see because they are very small. In a space where nothing can be done, I am working; that itself is an achievement. It’s an art to be able to adapt yourself to a situation and stay.”<sup>34</sup> This steadfast commitment to their cause, in the face of setbacks and obstacles, demonstrates profound dedication. Their persistence emphasises a long-term vision, recognising that protecting cultural heritage and the environment is an ongoing struggle requiring sustained effort and adaptability. They view their work not as isolated events but as a continuous process of engagement, adaptation, and resistance. This enduring commitment is crucial for achieving lasting change and ensuring the preservation of cultural and environmental treasures for future generations. They understand that setbacks are inevitable but refuse to be discouraged, drawing strength and motivation from their unwavering be-



lief in the importance of their mission. Their ability to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining their core values allows them to remain effective advocates for preservation in a complex and dynamic environment.

As demonstrated in Table 1, activists in Iran have established a comprehensive and impactful advocacy framework by employing innovative uses of media, meticulous documentation, strategic legal levers, effective interaction with antagonists and local communities, and an unwavering emotional commitment. Their efforts not only contribute to the protection of cultural heritage and environmental resources but also inspire broader movements worldwide, showcasing the power of grassroots activism in driving meaningful and systemic change.

The success of these activists lies in their ability to integrate diverse strategies and tools into a holistic approach that addresses immediate threats while fostering long-term resilience and transformation. Their work demonstrates that grassroots activism, when combined with creativity, determination, and inclusivity, can effectively challenge established power systems. By bridging the gap between the local and the global, as well as the personal and the political, they not only champion their causes but also define new possibilities for collective action in an increasingly interconnected world. Their innovative use of media amplifies their message and reaches a wider audience, while meticulous documentation provides crucial evidence that supports legal challenges and advocacy efforts. Strategic legal action holds powerful entities accountable, and effective engagement with both opponents and local communities builds broader support and fosters collaborative solutions. Underpinning all of this is an unwavering emotional commitment – a deep passion that fuels their tireless efforts and inspires others to join their cause.

This comprehensive approach allows them to tackle complex challenges on multiple fronts, creating a synergistic effect that magnifies their impact. They understand that lasting change requires more than isolated actions; it necessitates a multifaceted strategy that addresses the root causes of the problems they seek to solve. By working at both the local and global levels, they create a powerful network of support and influence, ensuring that their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed. In essence, these activists are not just preserving the past; they

are shaping the future, by demonstrating the transformative potential of collective action and inspiring others to join the fight for a more just and sustainable world.

## Conclusion

This study has delved into the dynamic landscape of heritage activism in Iran, revealing the intricate strategies and unwavering dedication of individuals working to protect cultural and environmental treasures. Through a qualitative lens and employing narrative-based tools, the research has illuminated the lived experiences of these activists, highlighting their resourceful approaches and significant contributions to a more democratic discourse on heritage conservation. The findings underscore that Iranian heritage activists operate within a complex socio-political context, often challenging decisions made behind closed doors with limited public engagement. By strategically employing media, meticulous documentation, legal action, and engagement with opponents and local communities – fuelled by an unwavering emotional commitment – these activists have carved out a potent and effective advocacy framework. Their actions not only safeguard heritage but also serve as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of grassroots activism in driving systemic change and fostering democratic principles within this specialised field. The research demonstrates that these activists are not merely reacting to threats; rather, they are proactively shaping the future of heritage conservation in Iran. Their holistic approach, integrating diverse strategies and tools, allows them to address immediate challenges while simultaneously advocating for long-term resilience and systemic reform. Their persistent efforts, driven by a deep passion for their cause, inspire broader movements and contribute significantly to a global understanding of the power of collective action. By bridging local concerns with global implications, these activists redefine the possibilities of collective action in an increasingly interconnected world, leaving a lasting legacy through the preservation of cultural heritage for future generations. Further research could explore the long-term impacts of these activist movements on policy changes and institutional practices within Iran's heritage sector, as well as the broader implications for participatory democracy in the country.

## Figures

- 1 Key Milestones in the Evolution of Heritage Conservation and Social Practice

## Endnotes

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