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'Do not say they are dead' : the political use of mystical and religious concepts in the Persian poetry of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88)

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CHAPTER FIVE

DEATH AS A PATH FOR PERFECTION AND SALVATION

INTRODUCTION

The concept of martyrdom, long existing in Islam was applied to Iran-Iraq war poetry. The poets used the concept to mobilize the Iranian public to offer their lives in the fight against the enemy. Martyrdom (*shahādat*) is a pivotal idea in Shiite Islam, and a Qur'ānic concept (5:117), that literally stands for the act of witnessing.⁴⁷⁰ According to traditional beliefs recounted by Kohlberg, the martyr is rewarded by God: His sins are forgiven, he is excused from punishment, marries seventy two houris, is blessed with God's grace and given the right to intercede on behalf of his community. Some traditions assert that, on the Day of Judgment, the martyrs' spirit will enter paradise.⁴⁷¹ Broadly speaking, there are two main types of martyrs. The first are battlefield martyrs (*shohādā' al-ma'rake*): their bodies do not need to be washed. They are called the martyrs of this world and the next (*shohādā' al-donyā va al-ākherat*). The second type is those not killed directly by wounds received on the battlefield: they are called the martyrs of the next world.⁴⁷²

In modern Iran the concept of martyrdom is used as political tool. For instance, during the Revolution, the belief that martyrdom is the path to heavenly rewards and the grace of God was used to motivate Iranians to protest against the Pahlavi monarch at the risk of their lives. Later, during the war against Iraq, martyrdom was propagated as a major element of Iranian identity. One strove to die a martyr's death. It is also connected to mystical and Karbalā themes discussed above.

To show the important role of intellectuals in propagating this concept of martyrdom, the following paragraph explains the ideas of two Iranian theorists of the

⁴⁷⁰ For more discussions on the act of witnessing see the chapter one, p. 38,49; for the motif of the primordial covenant and its witnesses see chapter two, pp. 99-104.

⁴⁷¹ E. Kohlberg, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Shahīd*.

⁴⁷² *Ibid*.

Revolution, ‘Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Morteżā Motahhari (1933-1979). During the Revolution, their works played a major role in persuading the population to revolt against the Pahlavi regime. During the war, their theories were used to inspire the Iranian young men to participate in the war in various ways. I will then show how the concept of martyrdom is used in the war poetry to convince Iranians to wage *jehād* against the faithless and unbeliever Sunni enemy, and to die as martyrs.

TYPES OF MARTYRDOM

After the advent of Islam, martyrdom was identified as an honorable and rewarding action. There are several references to martyrdom in the Qur’ān. Verses 3:169-71 identify who is killed in battle as a martyr, while verse 57:19 says that the one who truly believes in Allah, and His prophets are witnesses (martyrs) in the eyes of God.⁴⁷³ That creates considerable ambiguity, with the result that not only those killed in battle are classified as martyrs. One who converted to Islam, and suffered for its cause, such as Belāl Ebn Rabāh (d. 638,639,641 or 642), is called a martyr. He was the first slave to accept Islam, and was being tortured for this by his master, Abu Sofyān (d. 653), when Abu Bakr (570-634), one of the first believers, and later the first caliph, bought and freed him. Belāl gained the status of a martyr after his death.⁴⁷⁴ One who is tortured or killed because he is connected with the Muslim community, but not for his beliefs, is also called a martyr.

There are Islamic traditions that accord the status of martyrdom to several other types of death. Jalāl al-Din al-Soyuti (1445-1505) quotes the prophet Mohammad, “The one who dies of a stomach complaint is a martyr, the one who drowns is a martyr, the one who dies of plague is a martyr, the one who dies in a structural collapse is a martyr, the one who dies in a fire is a martyr, the one who dies of pleurisy, and the woman who dies in childbirth are a martyr.”⁴⁷⁵ Another tradition states, “Whoever dies from stabbing (*to’ina*) or in a plague is a martyr.” Another type of martyr is one who is tortured by a non-Muslim state

⁴⁷³ D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, pp. 31-32; also see Seyed-Gohrab, “No Reward – Martyrdom as Piety, Mysticism and National Icon in Iran,” in *Der Islam: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients*, issue 1-2, 87, 2012, pp. 248-73.

⁴⁷⁴ D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

for his belief.⁴⁷⁶ There is no doubt that the aim of narrating this tradition is, as Cook puts it, “to move the focus of martyrdom away from its most basic sense: that of dying in the battle.”⁴⁷⁷

Another type of death that is called martyrdom is the death of mystics who have suffered, and are killed, in the path of spiritual perfection. The most famous of these is the martyr mystic Hosein Mansur Hallāj.

During the war, the leaders of the Islamic Republic described several types of death as martyrdom, although the victims did not die in battle: Iranians killed when Iraqi air forces bombarded the cities, and the passengers of the plane downed by a US Navy vessel, USS *Vincennes*, in 1988. However it was still maintained that the divine reward is bestowed on martyrs who participate in the fight.⁴⁷⁸

During the war, a youth who blew himself up to stop an Iraqi tank was called a martyr. Although killing oneself is suicide, and strongly condemned in Islam, the leaders of the Islamic Republic differentiated this from the self-sacrifice of Mohammad Hosein Fahmide.⁴⁷⁹ In the years of the war, youths as young as nine and old men voluntarily walked onto the minefields to clear the way for Iranian military equipment.⁴⁸⁰ This was considered self-sacrifice for the cause of religion. Ayatollah Khomeini said “[As] Shiites we welcome any opportunity to sacrifice our blood. Our nation looks forward to an opportunity for self-sacrifice and martyrdom.”⁴⁸¹ To illustrate the pivotal importance of martyrdom as a fundamental element of Shiite Islam and to emphasise the people killed during the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini praised the Iranians killed during the Revolution in the first speech he delivered after returning to Iran, in *Behesht-e Zahrā* cemetery in south Tehran.⁴⁸² His utterance lead the audience to believe that someone killed for the principles of the Revolution would be treated as a martyr. Khomeini made the image of the martyrs public to

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 21-30.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 33-34; for future instances see Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁷⁸ S.M., Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran*, p.57.

⁴⁷⁹ For Mohammad Hosein Fahmide and his act of sacrifice in the battlefield see p. 155 in this study.

⁴⁸⁰ For the account of the key to paradise see p. 153 of this study.

⁴⁸¹ J.E. Alagha, *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, p. 92.

⁴⁸² A.M. Ansari, *Modern Iran Since 1921*, p. 212.

revive and to cultivate the culture of martyrdom among Iranians.

To mobilize the youth, and to remind the Iranians of the brave men and women who had offered their lives for the cause of Islam, and for the sake of the country, the leaders of the Islamic Republic established museums to show the pictures of the war martyrs.⁴⁸³ The entrance of the martyrs' museum in Tehran, for example, is carpeted in blood red, and there is a sign that says, "In the Name of God of the Martyrs and the Honest."⁴⁸⁴ Rooms are filled with the photos of young martyrs, and their personal possessions, with copies of the Qur'ān. The museum is a memorial to the masses killed during the revolution and eight years of war against Iraq.⁴⁸⁵ To praise the soldiers for giving up their lives, and to remind the people of their responsibility to the Islamic Republic, streets and alleys are named after the martyrs, their pictures are hung from lampposts, and the walls of cities throughout the country are decorated with paintings of the martyrs. Artists make memorials to honor those called the martyrs of Islam, and religious leaders regularly praise those who offered their lives to establish the Islamic Republic. Numerous cemeteries were dedicated to the martyrs' memory.⁴⁸⁶ They are called 'the Rose Garden of Martyrs' (*Golestān-e shohadā*, *Golzār-e shohadā*). The martyrs are compared to the rose that stands for the beloved in literary texts. In the city of Tehran, the cemetery containing the tombs of thousands killed during the war is called 'The Paradise of Zahrā' (*Behesht-e Zahrā*). Fāteme Zahrā was the daughter of the prophet Mohammad, and imam Hosein's mother. The cemetery, located near to imam Khomeini's gold-domed tomb, is a center of pilgrimage for Iranians from across the country. It is decorated with paintings from the Iran-Iraq war and the bloody bodies of the martyrs.⁴⁸⁷ A fountain spouting red water symbolizes the martyrs' blood. The cemetery is not intended to stand for death and destruction, but to be a source of eternal light and inspiration. It memorializes an honorable way to save one's motherland, according to Seyed

⁴⁸³ J.M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance, and Despair in the Middle East*, p. 45.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 46. Also see, Ch. Gruber, "The Martyrs' Museum in Tehran: Visualizing Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Unburied Memories: Politics of Sacred Defense Martyrs in Iran*, ed. P. Khosronejad, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013, pp. 68-97.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 47. For further information on commemoration of war and the martyrdom see: P. Khosronejad, "Introduction: Unburied Memories," in *Unburied Memories: Politics of Sacred Defense Martyrs in Iran*, ed. P. Khosronejad, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-21.

Afzal Haider.⁴⁸⁸ The death of the young martyr Mohammad Hosein Fahmide is honored by naming schools, hospitals, sport clubs and streets after him.⁴⁸⁹ The images of martyrs are also printed on the currency and stamps⁴⁹⁰ to be a constant reminder of the Iranians' responsibility and to cultivate the culture of martyrdom among them.

The period of 'Āshurā (tenth of Moharram) is an emotional time in Iran, when mourning processions commemorate imam Hosein's death, and the war martyrs are honored. The leaders of the Islamic Republic take advantage of these rituals to point to one's responsibility to support the state. They praise death and suffering for the cause of religion, Ayatollah Khomeini encouraged the 'Āshurā rituals. In his sermon on June 1982, Ayatollah Khomeini said: "These mourning sessions have developed young men and youths who voluntarily go to the war fronts seeking martyrdom and feel unhappy if they don't achieve it. These 'Āshurā mourning gatherings develop such mothers who urge their sons to go to the war fronts and if they do not return, the mothers wish they had more sons to send, or they say, we have other sons to send to the war fronts."⁴⁹¹

'ALI SHARIATI ON MARTYRDOM

In the years leading up to the Revolution, 'Ali Shariati's ideas and sermons had a profound impact on motivating the community to act against the Pahlavi regime. His lectures at Mashhad University attracted many students. Because he was politically charged at Mashhad, in 1967, he moved to Tehran and became a lecturer-preacher at Hoseini-ye Ershād, an institution founded to establish modernized Islam, where his lectures attracted a large audience of university students and leftists.⁴⁹² It is worth noting that, in the mid-

⁴⁸⁸ S.A. Haider, *Velayat-e Faqih, Imam Khomeini and Islamic Revolution*, Lahore: Gautam Publishers, 1996, p. 165.

⁴⁸⁹ J.M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence*, pp. 49-50.

⁴⁹⁰ R. Varzi, *Warring Souls*, p. 26.

⁴⁹¹ J.M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence*, p. 49.

⁴⁹² K. Matin, "Decoding Political Islam, Uneven and Combined Development and Ali Shariati's Political Thought," in *International Relations and Non-Western Thought, Imperialism, Colonialism, and Investigations of Global Modernity*, ed. R. Shilliam, London & New York: Routledge, 2011, p.115. For more information on Shariati and his views see A. Rahnema & F. Nomani, "Competing Shi'i Subsystems in Contemporary Iran," in *Iran after the Revolution: Crisis of an Islamic State*, eds. S. Rahnema & S. Behdad, London: I.B Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1996, pp. 65-93.

1960s, the Hoseini-ye Ershād became an important center where modernist Islamists such as Mehdi Bāzargān (1907-1995), ‘Ali Shariati, and Ayatollah Mortezā Motahhari delivered their lectures to show the important role of clerics in preserving Iranian culture, which, according to them was being destroyed by Western cultural influences. The lecturers played an active role in increasing the political awareness of Iranians, particularly of the middle and lower classes.⁴⁹³ The Hoseini-ye Ershād became “a center of opposition to the Pahlavi regime during 1960s and 1970s.”⁴⁹⁴ In 1977, it was closed by an order from the Shāh.⁴⁹⁵

After his death in 1977, Shariati’s works became a source of inspiration for the poets who wrote to legitimize Iran’s war against Iraq, and self-sacrifice. Shariati emphasizes martyrdom as the only means through which the masses may free themselves from the oppression and injustice imposed upon them. He wrote a pamphlet on this topic, which became very popular among the Iranians, linking imam Hosein’s death to political developments in Iran, calling for a culture of martyrdom. It implies that to fight injustice action is needed. Shariati relies on verse 2:143 in the Qur’ān: “... We have made you a just nation, so that you may bear witness unto the rest of mankind ...” to say that the martyr offers his life to revive forgotten truths. By that he means matters such as the doctrine of the *imamate*, which was neglected during the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate (750-1258). Shariati holds that one who sacrifices his life for a sacred cause will receive all its sacredness. Thus, martyrdom does not mean death. It is eternal life (*baqā*), a martyr awakens the community to demand justice, then he, like the prophet Mohammad, bears witness for this oppressed community. Shariati highlights the martyr’s role to assert that each of the faithful should endeavor to become a role model for his community. The prophet is witnessing us, and we should be a witness (role model) for other people.⁴⁹⁶ The martyr is one who chooses the red death (*marg-e sorkh*) over the black death (*marg-e siyāh*), meaning, an ordinary death.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹³ A. Sreberny-Mohammadi & A. Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 87.

⁴⁹⁴ E.J. Hooglund, *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002, p. 78.

⁴⁹⁵ A. Sreberny-Mohammadi & A. Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution*, p. 87. For further information on Hoseiniye Ershād and the lectures there, see A. Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopia*, pp. 226-79.

⁴⁹⁶ ‘A. Shariati, “bahthi rāje‘ be shahid,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam, majmu‘e-ye āthār 19*, Tehran: Qalam, 1367/1988, pp. 218-9.

⁴⁹⁷ ‘A. Shariati, “Pas az shahādat,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam*, p. 203.

His articulation of the purpose of martyrdom inspired the crowd to rise against the Pahlavi regime. They believed that their protest was their moral and religious duty to their community.

To show the importance of remaining active in society, Shariati praises self-sacrifice and condemns those who follow the mystics' path of spiritual progress, or who simply obey leaders of religion for the sake of personal salvation, while remaining silent about tyranny and the oppression of the community. He asserts that those people weave the dress of piety to clothe the oppressors (*bāfande-ye jāme-ye taqwā bar andām-e zur-and*).⁴⁹⁸ In other words, Shariati holds that two groups support tyranny: the mystics and the clerics. To propagate martyrdom, Shariati cites a saying from Sheykh Khalife, the founder of the Sarbedārān movement, that a community may free itself from tyranny and oppression if it is committed to "the religion of protest and martyrdom."⁴⁹⁹ Shariati's faith in the power of militant protest drew on the examples of revolutionary movements in Cuba and Algeria (1954). In Algeria, the leaders of the revolutionary party had called upon Algerian students, in London, Paris, and Brussels, asking them to cease their studies and return to the mountains of Algeria for military training and to fight colonialism. In the end they gained victory (Algeria became independent in 1962). Shariati suggested a revolutionary plan to dethrone the Shāh and overthrow the regime. He believed that the political awareness in Iran's future generation must be improved. On 15 February 1962 he wrote to a limited number of his political friends stating that because Iran is potentially ready for a political change, they will gain victory. Following the example of the Algerian National Liberation Front, he suggested that the leaders of the revolution should call upon Iranian students studying abroad, and divide them into two groups. The first group should be sent directly to revolutionary training camps, and the other should act as liaison personnel.⁵⁰⁰

Shariati effectively builds on the martyr cult of Hosein elaborating on it to make it into a very effective tool to convince and promote Shiite Muslims to protest. He introduced

⁴⁹⁸ 'A. Shariati, *Tashayo 'e 'Alavi, Tashayo 'e Safavi*, Tehran: Ketābkhāne-ye dāneshjui-ye dāneshgāh-e adabiyāt va 'olum-e ensāni, 1366/1977, p.15.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁵⁰⁰ A. Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopia*, p. 104. For *Shari'ati's* letter to Ibrahim Yazdi and his suggestion for organizing a militant cadre see A. Rahnema, "Ali Shariati: Teacher, Preacher, Rebel," in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. A. Rahnema, London & Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1994, p. 223.

the concept of ‘the culture of martyrdom’ (*farhang-e shahādat*), which in his view, was a means through which members of an oppressed community can rescue themselves from the tyrannies imposed upon them by an illegitimate and unjust government i.e., a foreign power (*solte-ye khāreji*).⁵⁰¹ Self-sacrifice for a higher cause should be cultivated among the Muslims, using the role model of imam Hosein. During the war, the leaders of the Islamic Republic continued to use Shariati’s concept, the Qur’ānic verse (i.e., 2:143), and the belief that a martyr will be rewarded in paradise to propagate the culture of martyrdom. They put emphasis on fighting as the only accepted way that would end to enlightenment comparing to spiritual self-mortification.

In many of his works, Shariati refers to the event of ‘Āshurā and its important role in inspiring the Shiite Muslims. In *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam* (‘Hosein the Heir of Adam’), Shariati globalizes the day of ‘Āshurā, and removes the limitations such as time and place, when he asserts, “each month is Moharram, each day is ‘Āshurā, and each land is Karbalā.”⁵⁰² Later Ayatollah Khomeini used the slogan in several of his speeches. During the War, Iranians used the quotation as a slogan: ‘each day is ‘Āshurā, each land is Karbalā’ (*har ruz ‘Āshurā har zamini Karbalā*). This slogan is a reminder of imam Hosein’s martyrdom. Since he was the legitimate leader of the Muslim community, Shiite Muslims may avenge his blood.

Shariati explains that the day of Āshurā is the continuation of historical injustice. Injustice and oppression began when the son of Adam, Cain, killed his brother Abel. This unjust behavior has been repeated throughout history by the sons of Adam. For instance, the prophets and the pious men have been killed by their enemies. The former symbolize Abel and the latter Cain. This brutal act of killing an innocent person happened again in 680, when the soldiers of Yazid killed imam Hosein. This cycle of revenge that began from the sons of Adam will continue until the Last Day, according to Shariati.⁵⁰³

Shariati effectively refers to commemoration of Hosein’s martyrdom to inspire Iranians to see Shiite Islam and martyrdom as a source of dynamic force in modern society.

⁵⁰¹ ‘A. Shariati, *Tashayo ‘-e ‘Alavi, Tashayo ‘-e Safavi*, p. 20.

⁵⁰² ‘A. Shariati, *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam, majmu ‘e-ye āthār 19*, Tehran: Qalam, 1367/1988, p. 34.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-57.

He builds on the martyr cult of Hosein, explains and elaborates on it to make the martyrdom a very effective tool that should be publicized to inspire the public to give up their lives for a higher cause. He says: “martyr means ‘one who is present, a viewer, a witness, who testifies..., one who attracts everyone’s eyes’, and finally, [martyr] means ‘example’ and ‘model.’” He asserts that: “martyrdom in our culture is not a tragic bloody incident.”⁵⁰⁴ The martyr is alive in the people’s hearts and memory. The enemy can “conquer the body of the martyrs but not their thoughts... martyrdom is a mission, not fighting, it is not a weapon, but a message, it is a word that is pronounced by the blood... it is a light that illuminates in the overwhelming darkness (*zolmat-e ‘ām*), it lightens the environment (*fazā*), and unveils betrayal.”⁵⁰⁵ He asserts, “...In our [Iranian] culture, martyrdom is a stage; it is not a means, but it is a target, it is nobleness. It is perfection, and loftiness. Dying a martyr’s death is a responsibility; it is a short cut toward the choicest human destiny, and it is culture.”⁵⁰⁶

Shariati criticizes those who say, “Hosein was eager to be killed, ‘to sacrifice his life for the cause of the community,’ to intercede on behalf of the lovers of *ahl al-beyt* (literally ‘the people of the house’ i.e., of the prophet, Fāteme, ‘Ali, Hasan, and Hosein). People who are committing sins and believe that [he gave his life] to change their ‘sinful acts’ to ‘praiseworthy acts’ in the hereafter....” He asserts that those who believe that imam Hosein offered his life to rescue them from punishment in the hereafter have been influenced by the spirit of mysticism (*ruh-e sufiyāne*), and by Christian ideology (*binesh-e masihiyyat*).⁵⁰⁷ Christians believe that Jesus sacrificed his life to rescue his people from sin and the hell.⁵⁰⁸ Shariati holds that Hosein’s death was not a planned sacrifice for the sake of the eternal salvation of the community, but when there was no way out, he chose death over life. He did this to awaken the community, not to preserve sinful Muslims from eternal punishment.

⁵⁰⁴ ‘A. Shariati, “Shahādat,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam, majmu‘e-ye āthār 19*, Tehran: Qalam, 1367/1988, pp. 171-2.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 188.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 195.

⁵⁰⁷ ‘A. Shariati, “Shahādat,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam*, pp. 188-9.

⁵⁰⁸ T. Davis, “Is Jesus Superior to all Other Religious Leaders?” in *Evidence for God, 50 Arguments for Faith from the Bible, History, Philosophy and Science*, ed. M. R. Licona & W. A. Dembski, Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Books, 2011, p. 187.

His death conveys a message that one should not live under the authority of an illegitimate and tyrannical ruler. Shariati goes further saying, “to believe, regarding Hosein’s martyrdom, that he was predestined to die relieves his killer of responsibility.”⁵⁰⁹ Such beliefs mean that his killer merely performed what was predestined for him, and for Hosein.

Imam Hosein’s way of fighting and his martyrdom is a model that should be emulated to build an Islamic community (*ommat*), to uproot injustice, and to cultivate the freedom and equality of all individuals. Each member has to protest against an unjust and oppressive ruler. If one has no power to kill the tyrant, he should sacrifice his life (*agar mitavāni bemirān agar nemitavāni bemir*, literally, if you have power, kill; otherwise, die), according to Shariati.⁵¹⁰ He holds that people should seek vengeance their prophets, and their imams’ blood from dictatorial rulers. In *Thār* (which literally means, to pour out the victim’s blood, to avenge blood) Shariati says that one should avenge the blood of an innocent person who is killed. He makes a modern model of the Arab tribal custom of blood revenge. The custom is that if a member of a certain tribe is killed by someone from a rival tribe, any member of the first tribe is allowed to kill the killer.⁵¹¹ Shariati calls the victim *thār* and says that his spirit flies around the heads of members of his tribe until his blood is avenged.⁵¹² The chain of revenge began when Cane killed Abel. Thus, world history is based on two poles: killing, and avenging the act. Shariati cites, “When does this history end? Again, it is *thār* ... the title of the last human savior who rescues man from killing (*thār-koshi*) and being killed (*thār*), who shapes the whole history of humanity. His title is ‘the Avenger.’ Who is he avenging? Everyone has said, ‘the killers of *Seyed al-Shohadā*. No, he is avenging the blood that is on the shoulders of Abel’s sons.”⁵¹³ Therefore, the Shiite responsibility is not limited to avenging imam Hosein’s blood, they

⁵⁰⁹ ‘A. Shariati, “Shahādat,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam*, pp. 188-9. With respect to the purpose for which imam Hosein sacrificed his life, M. Dorraj, quotes from Hamid Enayat “Husayn allowed himself to be killed on the plain of Karbalā to purify the Muslim community of sin.” (M. Dorraj, “Symbolic and Utilitarian Political Value of a Tradition: Martyrdom in the Iranian Political Culture,” *The Review of Politics*, vol. 59, no.3, Non-Western Political Thought (Summer, 1997), p. 495.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁵¹¹ ‘A. Shariati, “Thār,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam*, p. 115.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, p.120.

should “avenge the *thār* that is put on Abel’s shoulders.”⁵¹⁴ Shariati says blood revenge is a responsibility. He encourages the Shiite Muslims of Iran, instead of waiting for the return of the twelfth imam, the Mahdi who will defend them against the unjust ruler, to begin a revolt against despotic rulers. Shariati played a major role in effecting a revolutionary change in Shiite Islam, from quietism to activism.⁵¹⁵ For Shariati religion is an idealism that inspires its followers to struggle against unjust rulers. He uses imam Hosein’s saying, life is faith (*‘aqide*) and struggle (*jehād*) in various ways. In addition, Shariati uses the anecdote of Cane and Abel, recorded in Muslim traditions, to highlight the need to eliminate economic and class status. Cane and Abel came after all from the same family background, parents and cultural environment and neither class nor their economic background figured in their struggle. Shariati classifies people into two poles: the pole of Abel, consisting of the people (*nās*) and God (Allāh), in contrast to the pole of Cane: ownership (*melk*), the owner (*mālek*), plutocracy (*mala’*), and priesthood (*rāheb*). The conflict between these poles ends with a revolution.⁵¹⁶ Dabashi says that Shariati was inspired by Franz Fanon when he said that the “Third-World” countries should abandon their religion to stand against imperialist power or protest against their governments, Shariati intended to introduce the revolutionary “true Islam.” He transformed the universal faith into a universal ideology.⁵¹⁷ He referred to ‘Ali and Hosein as models of a revolutionary way of life. He attacked the doctrine of *taqiyye*, that the believer should conceal his religion when in danger of execution. He referred to *taqiyye* as an outdated way of thinking.⁵¹⁸ Shariati relies on Iranians’ collective memory and the interwoven religious narrations, historical events and doctrines to motivate them to begin a revolutionary movement and replace the Shāh with a just authority, instead of waiting for the savior of the age, the Mahdi (*Emām-e Zamān*). Roxanne Varzi asserts that Shariati’s writing on the hidden Imam (*Emām-e Ghāyeb*) motivated Iranians to protest

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Hamid Dabashi writes that Shariati transformed Shi‘ism into a “revolutionary ideology.” See H. Dabashi, *The Theology of Discontent*, pp. 110-11.

⁵¹⁶ H. Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1982, pp. 156-58. H. Dabashi in his work *The Theology of Discontent* asserts that for Shariati, seeing a well digger’s work in a *Kariz* (a subterranean canal) and the struggle of the drops of water to join together and come to the surface was the first inspiration for his understanding of the way a revolutionary movement takes shape.

⁵¹⁷ H. Dabashi, *The Theology of Discontent*, pp. 110-11.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

against the regime and to welcome Ayatollah Khomeini returning from exile in 1979. She quotes from Shariati: “Human intervention is needed for his (hidden imam) final coming. People need to begin the imam’s work of overthrowing oppression and implementing universal justice in order to occasion his ultimate return and revolution.”⁵¹⁹ Shariati’s words prepared the Iranian population to rise and become prepared for the return of Ayatollah Khomeini, although he was not the ‘hidden imam.’⁵²⁰

In what follows, I explain how the concept of historical injustice, discussed above, is used in the war poetry. The use of this concept leads the public to sacrifice their lives believing their martyrdom will put an end to the injustice and tyranny. The war poet Seyed Hasan Hoseini employed the concept in a quatrain entitled ‘An Unspoken Secret’ (*serr-e magu*):

gar bar setam-e qorun bar-āshoft Hosein
bidāri-ye mā khāst, be khun khoft Hosein
ānjā ke zabān mahram-e asrār nabud
*bā lahje-ye khun serr-e magu goft Hosein*⁵²¹

Hosein opposed tyranny imposed upon man through the centuries
 To awaken us, he slept in his blood
 Where the tongue was not an intimate for the secrets
 He revealed the secret in the language of blood.

In the first line, Seyed Hasan Hoseini uses the word centuries (*qorun*) to show that Hosein could not bear the oppression and injustice imposed upon human beings throughout history. This citation universalizes imam Hosein’s death. It shows that cruelty and injustice are universal phenomena and both Muslims and other believers endure oppression.

In the third line, the phrase tongue is not intimate (*mahram-e asrār nabudan-e*

⁵¹⁹ R. Varzi. *Warring Souls*, p. 37.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁵²¹ S.H. Hoseini, *Ham-sedā bā halq-e Esmā‘il*, p.111.

zabān) alludes to the execution of Hallāj in Baghdad. The mystics say he was killed because he revealed the secret of divine love. The poet links this mystical myth with ‘the tragedy’ of imam Hosein at Karbalā. Just as Hāllāj became a model for mystics, Hosein became an example for Shiites. Moreover, Hosein’s death is placed in a mystic context by comparing him to Hallāj. Hosein’s blood is compared to a mystic guide: when it is shed, it shows the path of salvation to the Shiite.

Other war poets relied on Shariati’s view about historical injustice. One poem bears the title ‘O brother! Wear Black, they have Killed the Dawn’ (*siyah bepush barādar sepide rā koshtand*) by Mohammad ‘Ali Mo‘allem from Dāmghān. The poem refers to imam Hosein’s death. The poet names the prophets and those who killed them, to create a chronological chain consisting of the oppressive powers and the oppressed. It begins from Abel’s assassination by Cane, and ends with imam Hosein’s execution by Yazid’s men.

...
do rud-khāne ravān tā karān-e sāhel-e dur
yeki be bestar-e zolmat yeki be bestar-e nur ...
yeki be hey’at-e Hābilyān rahrow khosh
yeki be hey’at-e Qābilyān barādar kosh
yeki sabur dar ātash chonān ke Ebrāhim
yeki ‘anud na, Namrud-e kine-var dezkhchim ...
yeki ‘Ali gowhar-e āfarinesh-e azali
yeki Mo ‘āviye khasm-e khodā-vo khasm-e ‘Ali
yeki Hosein ke mirāth-dār-e Ebrāhim
yeki chonān ke che guyam Yazid yā dezkhchim ...
biyā be nām-e shahidān-e rah be kār shavim
kafan bepush ke bā yekdegar savār shavim.⁵²²

Two rivers streaming to the far seashore

⁵²² M. ‘A. Mo‘allem Dāmghāni, *Rej’at-e sorkh-e setāre*, pp. 63-4

One of them is streaming on the bed of darkness, the other on the bed of light ...
 One like [the tribe of] Able is a cheerful follower
 Other like [the people of] Cane is killing his brother
 One is like Abraham patient when he is put in fire
 One is not only rejecting the truth, but he is like Namrud resentful executioner ...
 One is 'Ali the pearl of the eternal creation
 Another one is Mo'āviye the enemy of God and 'Ali
 One is Hosein, Abraham's heir
 One, what should I say about him, is Yazid or an executioner ...
 Come, let us start our activity in the name of the martyrs of the path
 O brother! Put on a shroud that we may mount together.

In this poem Mo'allem contrasts righteousness with falsehood, protagonists with antagonists. The antagonists are Qābilyān, Namrud, Mo'āwiye and Yazid. They are responsible for killing the protagonists; Hābilyān, Ebrāhim, 'Ali, and Hosein. The poet uses Shariati's historical injustice view to assert that the violent and oppressive actions of the antagonists, which began at the beginning of history, continue until today, and Iranians are duty bound to take revenge. The poet uses familiar historical figures to inspire Iranians to participate in the war. He links the antagonists to the Iraqi regime, and the protagonists to Iranian soldiers. In the last line he asks the soldiers to wear a shroud and follow the path of martyrs. In Persian literature, the compound verb to wear a shroud (*kafan pushidan*) stands for preparation for death. During the Islamic Revolution and during the war, Iranians going to the military front wore shrouds to show that they were ready to lay down their lives for a higher cause.

What distinguishes Shariati from his contemporaries is that he condemns those who mourn and lament for Hosein's suffering and his death without understanding his mission. He says they have changed this historical movement (*nehzat*) into 'the school of mourning.' Therefore, we [Iranians or the Shiite Muslims] commemorate it, mourn, and wail for it, but

we know nothing about it, and we do not understand its importance, Shariati says.⁵²³ He implies that every Shiite Muslim should learn about why imam Hosein journeyed from Mecca to Kufa, although he knew that he would be killed. Knowing the reason imposes a responsibility on the Shiites and encourages them to protest against a tyrant regime.

Other writers before Shariati had elaborated on the events of ‘Āshurā and imam Hosein’s martyrdom. In 1968, Ne‘matollāh Sālehi Najafābādi politicizes the event of Karbalā in his *Shahid-e jāvid* (‘The Eternal Martyr’). He introduces imam Hosein as a courageous soldier fighting for the Faith, not one who simply wants to be killed.⁵²⁴ In his work, Sālehi Najafābādi criticizes the traditional Shiite view of imam Hosein’s martyrdom, as good only for making people cry because it does not give any model to the believers. He asserts that imam Hosein’s protest against the Umayyad caliph, Yazid, was a military action with the aim of overthrowing an unjust authority.⁵²⁵ In his work on martyrdom, Shariati consciously or unconsciously used *Shahid-e jāvid*. But he disagrees with Sālehi Najafābādi, who says that imam Hosein’s protest was a political uprising against Yazid. Shariati uses a quotation attributed to imam Hosein to assert that he fought to be killed: “Death is as beautiful for the son of Adam as the necklace upon the neck of a beautiful young girl.”⁵²⁶

Another book written in 1960s is *Tahlili az nehzat-e Hosein* (‘An Analysis based on Hosein’s Movement’) by the Mojāhedin guerrillas led by Mas‘ud Rajavi and Ahmad Rezā’i, the founder of the *Mojāhedin*. In this book, imam Hosein’s protest against the Umayyad caliph is identified as a model that the masses should emulate. He teaches them to stand up to a tyrant ruler, in this case the Pahlavi monarch.⁵²⁷

AYATOLLAH MORTEZĀ MOTAHHARI

One influential cleric who prepared the ground for the 1979 Revolution in Iran is Ayatollah

⁵²³ ‘A. Shariati, “Shahādat,” in *Hosein vāreth-e Ādam*, p. 172

⁵²⁴ E. Siegel, “The Politics of *Shahid-e Jāwid*,” in *The Towelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political Culture*, eds. R. Brunner & W. Ende, Leiden & Boston: Koln, 2000, p. 160.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.170.

Mortezā Motahhari. He gave several lectures before the Revolution in a building called the Hoseini-ye Ershād, to motivate the Iranians to protest against the Pahlavi monarch. Motahhari did not speak in complicated philosophical language. He was “a simplifier of classical Shi‘i learning.”⁵²⁸ Therefore, it may be assumed that Motahhari’s lectures were understandable to all those who attended.

In his lectures on martyrdom, Ayatollah Mortezā Motahhari says that people who serve humanity in various walks of life, such as scholars, philosophers, and teachers, are indebted to the martyrs while they are indebted to none.⁵²⁹ The martyr’s act of sacrifice provides an opportunity for those servants of society. Motahhari compares the martyr to a candle that burns to light the path for the rest of the community. He distinguishes between a martyr and one who commits suicide: the latter is the worst type of death. Two basic elements make martyrdom an honorable act: “The life is sacrificed for a cause; the sacrifice is made consciously.”⁵³⁰ Ayatollah Motahhari’s statement implies one’s intention (*qasd, niyyat*) is of major importance, when one lays down one’s life. In a theological context, the word intention means that one’s works are evaluated base on one’s intention.⁵³¹ Thus, the martyr who puts his life at risk with the intention of saving the community from unjust ruler will receive divine reward in the hereafter. The martyr chooses honorable death over ordinary life. This notion became a slogan in 1979, *marg-e bā ‘ezat behtar az zendegi-ye bā zellat* (‘honorable death is better than a life in abasement’).

To illustrate the role of intentionality in the path of martyrdom, Ayatollah Motahhari gives the example of imam Hosein’s death at Karbalā. He says: “The imam consciously made the supreme sacrifice.” He knew that if he did not give the oath of allegiance to the Umayyad caliph, Yazid, he must fight him.⁵³² This quotation implies that Iranians should oppose the regime and knowingly lay down their lives if necessary, like imam Hosein. One who does not fight against the Shāh has implicitly given an oath of allegiance to him and submitted to his authority.

⁵²⁸ H. Dabashi, *The Theology of Discontent*, p. 152.

⁵²⁹ A.M. Motahhari, “Shahīd,” in *Jihad and Shahadat, Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 126.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-8.

⁵³¹ For future information about intention and theological discourses, see A.J. Wensinck, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Niyya.

⁵³² A.M. Motahhari, “Shahīd,” in *Jihad and Shahadat Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p.128.

Ayatollah Motahhari refers to the martyr's dignity before God in his literary works. He says that the word *jehād*, or striving, and the necessity of fighting against unbelievers is mentioned in the Qur'ān and in *Nahj al-Belāgheh*, a collection of quotes from Imam 'Ali compiled after his death. A Muslim who fights in the path of God, called a *mojāhed*, is God's chosen friend, and will enter paradise immediately after his martyrdom.⁵³³ Ayatollah Motahhari draws an analogy between a martyr and a 'friend of God.' This notion has a mystic origin. For the mystics, *wali* is a friend of God. The word literally means 'to be near.' A *wali* is chosen by God and attains the divine virtues. God bestows particular powers, abilities and authority on him. He knows that he is close to God and he enjoys the eternal bliss of paradise. During his lifetime, God acts through the *wali*. After his death, he acts as a mediator between God, and the world of existence.⁵³⁴ Motahhari says that one who offers his life in the path of God attains the spiritual-mystical status of a *wali*. Such ideas are interwoven in Persian war poetry, for instance in Abd al-Hamid Ja'fari's allusion in the following couplet, in which the martyr is seen as a sign (*āyat*) of God's throne.

kisti to āyat-e zibā-ye 'arsh-e kebriyā'i
*ruh-e peyghāmat konun dar chah-chahey bolbol berizam*⁵³⁵

Who are you? You are an amazing sign of the throne of God
 I pour the essence of your message in a nightingale's song.

In this poem, the martyr is a beautiful sign of God's throne (on earth) who has delivered a message by his death. The poet transmits that message in a 'nightingale's song.' By referring to the *topos* of rose and nightingale, the poet alludes to mystics' passion for union with the Beloved: the rose stands for the beloved and the nightingale for the lover. The poet says that if one knows the purpose for which the martyr sacrifices his life, he will know God.

⁵³³ Ibid., p.130.

⁵³⁴ B. Radtke, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Walī, 1. General Survey.

⁵³⁵ *Kuche por az 'atr-e nāme to: majmu'e-ye ash'ār-e defā'-e moqaddas*, ed. A. Binā'i, p. 62.

Fighting for the cause of God purifies man's soul from negative character-traits, and increases his faith and piety. Ayatollah Motahhari argues that *jehād* is "the garment of piety."⁵³⁶ Piety is the result of purification of the soul. The practice of religious rituals leads to piety, but one who strives in the path of God (one who is a *mojāhed*), and sacrifices his life on the battlefield gains supreme piety. When he offers his head, he renounces the world, and surrenders himself to God. Thus, he is clothed with the garment of piety. On the contrary, Ayatollah Motahhari warns the audience, one who does not fight in the path of God, will be clothed by God in a garment of humiliation because he is a force for evil.⁵³⁷ Such sayings encouraged the audience to give up their lives for the revolution. They intended to take the choice that guaranteed their lives in the hereafter.

Longing for martyrdom is another subject treated by Ayatollah Motahhari. He calls it a religious duty for every Muslim. He bases an opinion on a Qur'ānic verse (29:2) which states that the believers will be tested with hardships. Ayatollah Motahhari offers several examples from the fighting between Muslims and their enemies in the first centuries of Islam. The Muslims longed for martyrdom in the service of God, and they prayed to God to give them the opportunity to die a martyr death.⁵³⁸ These led the audience to draw an analogy between the Iran-Iraq war and each Muslims' battles with infidel enemies. The war between Iran and Iraq provided an opportunity for the believers to prove their faith and fidelity to God.

Another leading cleric is Hosein-'Ali Montazeri (d. 2009), a close friend and companion of Motahhari. The two "shared their personal thought."⁵³⁹ Montazeri states in a Friday sermon: "O God! We each have just one soul, and we have to submit it; the best is that we offer it in your path and become martyrs. O God! Make ennobling martyrdom our portion."⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁶ A.M. Motahhari, "Shahīd," in *Jihad and Shahadat Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p.130.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., pp. 132-34.

⁵³⁹ G. Abdo & J. Lyons, *Answering Only to God: Faith and Freedom in Twenty- First Century Iran*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003, p. 134.

⁵⁴⁰ *Dar maktab-e jom 'e: majmu 'e-ye khotbehā-ye namāz-e jom 'e-ye Tehran*, vol. 1, (sermon of 11-08-1358). Ayatollah Hosein 'Ali Montazeri was designated as his successor by Ayatollah Khomeini until March 1989, when the latter dismissed him. However, Ayatollah Montazeri would be Iran's religious leader if he moderated his criticisms of the government, according to Houchang E. Chehabi, see H. E. Chehabi, *The*

Ayatollah Motahhari distinguishes between the martyr and a reformer who is determined to make an extreme change in the society. He compares the martyr to a zealous mystic lover who offers his life in the path of divine love. Ayatollah Motahhari asserts that the combination of the logic of a mystic lover and of a reformer is the basis for a martyr's motivation.⁵⁴¹ Through the act of self-sacrifice, the martyr transcends worldly life. This attitude toward martyrdom mobilized both reformers, and those interested in spiritual progress, to go to the front-line.

Throughout his revolutionary career, Motahhari focused on Islamic collective consciousness. He relied on the prophetic narratives and anecdotes to awaken the collective memory. Using simple language, Motahhari sought to guide and advise the Iranian public and to revitalize morality in the Islamic community. Motahhari believed that when a community is corrupted, such stories can lead the crowd to ethical purity and elevation and will percolate to the elites. In spite of criticism, Motahhari continued publishing collections of such anecdotes, saying they are beneficial to the public. Many copies were bought by individuals, libraries, mosques and Hoseinyes, and in 1963, during the month of Ramazān, the stories were broadcast on National Radio. All this also spread Motahhari's ideological discourses among the Iranian population. The stories taught virtues such as patience, love of one's neighbor, and benevolence, which were attached to the familiar names of Qur'ānic prophets and the Shiite imams and to Shiite sacred sites such as Karbalā and Kufa. The connection of the stories to Shiite history offered the masses a sense of honor and place in history, and created nostalgia for the past when virtue held the Muslim community together. Now the Iranian public yearned for a renewal of morality.⁵⁴²

Motahhari's view of martyrdom stressed that martyrdom is an act of virtue. He asserts, "*Shahādat* is a virtuous deed as well as a spiritual progress."⁵⁴³ He implies that

Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1990, p. 310. See also M. Mahmood, *The Political System of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, India: Kalpaz Publications, 2006, p. 26.

⁵⁴¹ A.M. Motahhari, "Shahīd," in *Jihad and Shahadat Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p.135. On Ayatollah Morteżā Motahhari's philosophical background, see H. Dabashi, *The Theology of Discontent*, pp. 147-60.

⁵⁴² H. Dabashi, *The Theology of Discontent*, pp. 158-60. The authenticity of the stories is doubtful and the original source is not applicable.

⁵⁴³ A.M. Motahhari, "Shahīd," in *Jihad and Shahadat, Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 141.

following the path of martyrdom increases morality in the community, and is through which the martyr obtains spiritual elevation. He attains the highest rank in the hereafter and may see God (*ro 'yat Allāh*).⁵⁴⁴ This is the highest stage a mystic may attain.

THE CONCEPT OF MARTYRDOM

Having discussed the opinions of two important figures who theorized the concept of martyrdom prior to the Islamic Revolution, I will focus on the application of this term and other concepts related to martyrdom. In the period under research, the concept of martyrdom was very widely used by the war poets, for its power to motivate Iranian youth. In the war poetry, death on the battlefield is identified as martyrdom. It brings honor to the martyr. In addition, martyrdom is considered as a rank, or as a position offered to the people at the dawn of creation when God decided the fate of all human beings. The war poet, 'Abbās Khosh'amal writes,

shāhed-e bazm-e alasti-yo shahid-e rah-e dust
*dāde zivar be mah-o mehr rokh-e anvar-e to*⁵⁴⁵

You are the witness of the banquet of the day of Alast, and the martyr
of the Beloved's path
Your shiny face has adorned the Moon and the Sun

In this poem, the martyr is one who has been chosen; therefore, he sacrifices his life for the cause of the Beloved. The poet relies on the mystical concept of the primordial covenant derived from Qur'ān 7:171 that implies that at the time of *alast* God predestined man's life and death.⁵⁴⁶ However, the soldier's death is predestined before his creation, and

⁵⁴⁴ S.M. Gieling, *The Sacralization of War in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (PhD thesis) Ridderkerk: Ridderprint, 1998, p. 65.

⁵⁴⁵ *Sure-ye adabiyāt-e 'Ashurā 2*, selected by M. 'A. Mardāni, p. 27.

⁵⁴⁶ On the usage of the concept of primordial covenant in the war poetry see the present study pp. 48, 99, 103 - 104, 109 and 162.

martyrdom is his inevitable fate. Because a Muslim is familiar with this myth of our creation, and the concept of his predestined fate, he willingly sacrifices his life; believing this is his fate.

In this poem, Khosh‘amal implies that a soldier who offers his life on the battlefield is fulfilling his eternal covenant with God. Martyrdom is a duty under that ancient covenant, and a robe of honor for the martyred. For only a worthy man deserves to become martyr.

During the war, the war poets extolled the martyr’s status in paradise. Martyrdom is explained as a means through which one attains eternal salvation (*nejāt, rastgāri*). ‘Ali-Rezā Qazve, for example, writes, “Today, we are sitting in the shade of ease/ we owe this to the steadiness of the tall green [cypress] (i.e., Beloved).”⁵⁴⁷ Green is the color of the prophet Mohammad and his family, and the color of the angels in Paradise. According to a tradition, in Paradise, the prophet Abraham is clothed in Green. The martyrs are promised a special status in paradise, in Qur’ān 3:169, and this has been elaborated upon in several traditions such as the following: “God places the souls of the martyrs into the bodies of green birds who nest in the lamps on the divine throne and eat of the fruit of the heavenly garden.”⁵⁴⁸ The martyr’s green clothing in these verses is therefore a sign that they are in Paradise and will receive a divine reward.

In the war poetry, the martyr’s blood saves (*nejāt, rastgāri*) him from punishment in the hereafter. This is based in the first place on Qur’ān 9:111: “God has bought from the believers their selves and their properties against the gift of Paradise; they fight in the way of God, kill and are killed...” According to this verse, fighters, whether they are killed or not, receive heavenly rewards. The martyrs are with God, “Count not those who were slain in God’s way as dead; but rather living with their Lord, by Him provided ...” (3:169). Islamic traditions expand on the martyr’s privileges: he lives forever in paradise, his sins are forgiven, and his soul is among the souls of the early martyrs of Islam.⁵⁴⁹

Classical Persian poets had treated martyrdom in the context of love. Jalāl al-Din

⁵⁴⁷ ‘A.R. Qazve, *Az nakhlestān tā khiyābān*, p. 19.

⁵⁴⁸ G. S. Reynolds, *The Qur’an and its Biblical Subtext*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2010, p. 160.

⁵⁴⁹ S. M. Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran*, p. 55.

Rumi combines martyrdom with preserving faith and salvation. In one of his stories, he writes that a Jewish king forced people to bow down before an idol. When one refused the order, the King threw him into the fire. A woman refused to prostrate herself. To punish her, her child was thrown into the fire. When she moved to bow before the idol, the child spoke to her from the fire: “Verily, I am not dead. Come in, O mother: I am happy here, although in appearance I am amidst the fire. The fire is a spell that binds the eye for the sake of screening (the truth)... Come in my mother, and see the evidence of God, that thou mayst behold the delight of God’s elect.”⁵⁵⁰ The child in this story is an example of one who sacrifices his life to be true to his beliefs. He encourages his mother to offer his life and see that the divine words are true. She responds to his call and enters the fire rather than bowing down before the idol. Many members of the community emulate her. Following the Qur’ānic verse, which celebrates martyrdom, they knowingly chose death over life to enjoy the bliss of heaven. In the above story, the child may symbolize a martyr who encourages the community to sacrifice their lives to receive divine rewards.

Because mass participation in the revolution was very important, Ayatollah Mahmud Tāleqāni (1911-1979) compares one killed by the Pahlavi regime to the martyrs. The martyrs of the Revolution are promised eternal life: “Because they [martyrs] have experienced an internal revolution and have envisioned the truth, the *shohadā*, once martyred have been guaranteed the sure gift of eternity by God.”⁵⁵¹

During the war years, the concepts of the martyr’s salvation, and his eternal life in paradise were a matter of concern for the leaders of the Islamic Revolution. They referred to the Qur’ānic verse “Count not those who were slain in God’s way as dead, but rather living with their lord, by Him provided, rejoicing in the bounty that God has given them...” (3:169-70) to emphasize the martyr’s place in the hereafter, and encourage young men to go to the battlefield. The verse was frequently cited in television and radio programs. In a sermon at Friday prayers, in April 1981, Ayatollah Khāmenei refers to a personal testimony written by Rezā Rezāi who killed on the battlefield, and says: “You should know that the

⁵⁵⁰ D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 70.

⁵⁵¹ A.S.M. Taleqani, “*Jihad and Shahadat*,” in *Jihad and Shahadat, Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, eds. M. Abedi, & G. Legenhausen, Houston: The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986, p. 68.

pāsdār (guard) who wrote this testimony is now in paradise, close to God's grace and bounty, and besides the angels of God. He says that he welcomes martyrdom. This is an invitation to the people who are guided."⁵⁵² Ayatollah Khāmenei uses the martyr's words to persuade his audience that they will enter paradise if they are killed in battle.

Another implication of martyrdom is that a martyr is permitted to intercede on behalf of his community. Intercession (*shafā'at*) is a Qur'ānic concept. The Qur'ān says that in the hereafter, man is judged by his own acts and his intentions, which allows no room for intercession. Verse 6:51 rejects the possibility of intercession. There are several references to *shafā'at* that show that *shafā'at* belongs to God. Others may intercede, if He gives permission (34:23). In Qur'ān 53:26, God permits the angels, and others acceptable to God, to intercede. According to Shiite tradition, intercession has been granted to the prophet Muhammad and after him to the twelve Shiite imams.⁵⁵³ Shiites also believe that Fāteme, the prophet's daughter, may intercede on their behalf. Thus the martyr, who can also intercede on behalf of the believers, is being accorded a very lofty rank.

In Islamic tradition, a martyr may intercede on behalf of his family, his friends, his parents and the children who died in infancy.⁵⁵⁴ The collector of prophetic *hadith*, Al-Tarmazi (825-892) holds that one of the qualities of the martyr is that "... he gains the right to intercede for 70 of his relatives."⁵⁵⁵ Thus, one who sacrifices his life in the path of God will save many from the torments of hell. Motahhari too says that a martyr is allowed to intercede in the hereafter. He writes: According to one tradition, three types of people are allowed to intercede on the Day of Judgment: the prophets, the religious scholars (*'olamā*), and the martyrs. They can intercede because they have led people to the right path.⁵⁵⁶ The martyr's death is a path that leads to eternal salvation for the community.

The concept of intercession is highly developed in the war poetry to elevate the spiritual status of the martyr. The martyr lives eternally, and rescues his family from punishment in the hereafter. During the war, Iranians believed that martyrdom leads to

⁵⁵² *Dar maktab-e jom'e: majmu'e-ye khotbehā-ye namāz-e jom'e-ye Tehran*, vol. 3, p. 185.

⁵⁵³ A. J. Wensinck & D. Gimaret, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Shafā'a*, 1. In Official Islam.

⁵⁵⁴ A. Schimmel, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Shafā'a*.

⁵⁵⁵ D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 37.

⁵⁵⁶ A.M. Motahhari, "Shahīd," in *Jihad and Shahadat, Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 137.

salvation and happiness; thus, they popularized the slogan, “The only path to happiness is faith, *jehād* and martyrdom” (*tanhā rah-e sa‘ādat; imān, jehād, shahādat*). Faith leads the believer to fight against God’s enemies. If the fight ends in his martyrdom, he will obtain eternal happiness.⁵⁵⁷ Happiness in this context means attaining union with God, being close to God, and if man purifies his soul, attaining divine knowledge and to see God.⁵⁵⁸

In addition to attaining to the highest stage in the hereafter, martyrdom purifies the martyr’s body so that he does not need to be washed when he dies. Ayatollah Motahhari asserts that the spirit of the martyr affects his blood, body and garments, and purifies them. Thus the martyr’s virtue, spirit and sacrifice affect his outward appearance.⁵⁵⁹ On this account, the war poet Shahāb writes, “If there is no water, shed tears for my death/ because the martyr’s body does not need to be washed.”⁵⁶⁰ According to Islamic law (*shari‘a*), a dead body should be washed and wrapped in a clean shroud. Then, after prayers, he may be buried. But the martyr is buried in his bloodstained clothes because martyrdom cleanses his body and clothing.⁵⁶¹ A pleasant smell given out by the body is a sign that the soul of one who is martyred ascended to paradise. In contrast, the loathsome smell of the enemies of Islam shows that they will go to hell.⁵⁶²

The martyr’s smell has become a topos in war poetry. Nasrolāh Mardāni, in ‘The Lost’ (*gomshodegān*), combines the martyr’s smell with the smell of the rose.

*‘atri ke darāmikhte bā fetrat-e golhā
bu ‘i-st ke az pirhan-e gomshodegān ast*⁵⁶³

The attar, which is inherent to the nature of the rose

⁵⁵⁷ According to the Qur’ān and tradition, at the time of predestination men are divided into two groups: the happy inhabitants of Paradise versus the unhappy inhabitants in the Hell. For further information see H. Daiber, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Sa‘āda.

⁵⁵⁸ H. Daiber, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under Sa‘āda.

⁵⁵⁹ A.M. Motahhari, “Shahīd,” in *Jihad and Shahadat, Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 127.

⁵⁶⁰ M. ‘A. Mardāni, *Sure-ye adabiyāt-e ‘Ashurā* 3, p. 73.

⁵⁶¹ M. Abedi & G. Legenhausen, “Introduction,” in *Jihad and Shahadat, Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, eds. M. Abedi, & G. Legenhausen, Houston: The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986, p. 26.

⁵⁶² D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, p. 118.

⁵⁶³ *Gozide-ye she‘r-e jang va defā‘e moqaddas*, p. 303

Is a scent from the clothing of the lost

In this poem, the rose's scent is borrowed from the martyrs. The word lost (*gomshode*) refers to soldiers killed on the front whose bodies have not been found. In this poem, the martyr's scent may stand for the flowers growing from martyrs' blood. In Persian literature, the rose is a metaphor for the beloved. The martyr of love offers his life for the Beloved to show His loftiness and superiority.

Another reference to the scent of martyrdom is by the poet Soleyman Farrokhzād, in which he refers to the unique experience of martyrdom, likening it to the prophet's ascension to God's throne, where the nocturnal traveller encounters God in absolute solitude:

*... Az marzhāy-e dur
shab bu-ye khun
bu-ye nāb-e shahādat miāyad
insān 'azim parvāz ra
dar bikarān-e khet-te-ye eslām
hargez kasi sorāgh nadārad...*⁵⁶⁴

... Night: from distant borders comes
The smell of blood
And the pure scent of martyrdom.
No one remembers
Such a lofty flight
In the vast bounds of Islam ...

Aqdas Binā'i gathered a collection of war poems and called it 'The Alley is Filled with the Perfume of your Name' (*kuch por az 'atr-e nām-e to*). She says that the martyr's name has

⁵⁶⁴ *Mosābeqe-ye she'r-e jang*, pp. 68-9.

a scent, which has filled the alley. The title may be connected to the renaming of streets in honour of the martyrs.

STRIVING FOR MARTYRDOM

Striving for a martyr's death (*talab al-shahādat* or *shahādat talabi*) is another theme in the war poetry. Often the poet expresses his own regret that he survived the war. The concept is derived from the Khawārej, who protested against the Umayyad rulers in the first two centuries of Islam. They used the concept of *talab al-shahādat* in their works, celebrated their fighters' martyrdoms with impressive poetry, and praising longing for death, and self-annihilation.⁵⁶⁵ Yearning for death is expressed in the war poetry through motifs such as the journey of the companions (*safar kardan-e yārān*),⁵⁶⁶ flying (*parvāz kardan*), and making a covenant (*peymān bastan*), all showing the martyr's longing for self-sacrifice and an active death.⁵⁶⁷ These motifs occur repeatedly, and negligence and indifference to martyrdom are condemned.

During the war, the leaders of the Islamic Republic praised the martyrs and those who yearned for a martyr's death. For instance, in one sermon, Ayatollah Khāmenei holds that God's power is revealed by miraculous events such as yearning for martyrdom, "The power of faith (*imān*) transforms man to undefeated existence. Striving for martyrdom motivates man to seek death while others are escaping from it. This is the secret power of God."⁵⁶⁸ He implies that the divine secret of God is manifest when a soldier intentionally chooses death and goes to the front. Clerics propagated this notion at the Friday congregation prayers. For instance, Ayatollah Musavi Ardebili offers an example of the soldiers' enthusiasm for martyrdom in a sermon: "When I went to the corps of the special guards (*sepāh-e pāsdārān*), I asked them what the name of this corps was. They replied 'the

⁵⁶⁵ A. Neuiwrth, "From Sacrilege to Sacrifice: Observation on Violent Death in Classical and Modern Arabic Poetry," in *Martyrdom in Literature*, p. 263.

⁵⁶⁶ See M. 'A. Mo'alleem Dāmghāni, *Rej'at-e sorkh-e setāre*, p. 42.

⁵⁶⁷ See *Kuche por az 'atr-e nāme to: majmu'e-ye ash'ār-e defā'-e moqaddas*, ed. A. Binā'i, p. 40.

⁵⁶⁸ *Dar maktab-e jom'e: majmu'e-ye khotbehā-ye namāz-e jom'e-ye Tehran*, vol. 3, p. 87, (sermon of 06/02/1981). For further instances see *Ibid.* pp. 138-9 and 237.

station of waiting for martyrdom' (*pāyghāh-e entezār-e shahādat*)."⁵⁶⁹ In the war poetry, the concept of striving for martyrdom is used to mobilize the young men to lay down their lives on the battlefield. In this state, the soldier wishes to become both undefeated, and a means through which God reveals His secret.

The concept of *talab al-shahādat* is treated in the martyrs' testaments (*vasiyyat-nāme-ye shohadā*), their poems, and in the letters of potential martyrs. The martyr Nasrollah Shahābi wrote to his mother, "I have preferred the martyr's path, which is divine prosperity, to mundane hope. I am ready to die."⁵⁷⁰ The war poet Jalāl Mohammadi writes:

...
hargez az pā naneshinim ke dar qāmat-e mā
khun-e bidār-e shahidān-e khodā dar jush ast
lezzat-e zakhm-e shahādat na to dāni-yo na man
*dānad ān kas ke ze minā-ye jonun madhush ast*⁵⁷¹

We never stop striving because in our bodies
 The awakened blood of the martyrs of God is boiling.
 Neither you nor I know the pleasure of the wound that causes martyrdom
 He who is bewildered by the cup of madness, he knows it.

In this poem, there is a reference to the martyrs' blood boiling in an Iranian's body (literally, his stature). The implication is that Iranians are ready to give up their lives to avenge the martyrs' blood. He says no one knows the pleasure of martyrdom but one who is bewildered because of drinking from the cup of madness. For the poet, martyrdom is something joyful, which few may taste.

In the war poetry, being prepared for self-sacrifice is seen in the themes such as regret for not becoming a martyr. 'Ali- Rezā Qazve regrets his survival in a *ghazal* titled

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 98; also see Ibid. pp. 139, 206 and 247.

⁵⁷⁰ N. Nazemi, "Sacrifice and Authorship: a compendium of the wills of Iranian war martyrs," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3-4, (Summer /Fall 1997), p. 269.

⁵⁷¹ A. Makāreminiyā, *Barrasi-ye she'r-e defā'-e moqaddas*, p. 48.

‘The Brands’ (*dāghdārihā*).

*az in meydān khodāyā tak-savārān-e rahā raftand
che khāhad kard tefl-e hemmatam bā ney-savāri-hā*⁵⁷²

O God! The liberated horseman left this field
What has become of my childish ambition, riding a reed cane

The soldier killed in battle is liberated. One who is detached from worldly pleasures and is metaphorically indicated as a warrior riding on a horse (*tak-savār*). The horse may be seen as martyrdom, through which the soldier reaches the end of the path, which is union with God. In contrast, the survivor is a child whose ambition is worth no more than pretending in play that a stout reed is a horse.

Striving for martyrdom penetrated deeply into the hearts of the Iranians. Very soon after the beginning of the war, young men went to the front-line to sacrifice their lives, simply to die as martyrs. The martyrs’ testaments mention several reasons for which they were willing to sacrifice their lives: for the cause of Islam, the revolution, for Iran, or for a reward in the Hereafter. It is important to note that during the war not only those who died in the path of God (*dar rāh-e haqq*) on the battlefield were identified as martyrs, but also those who died for the sake of their country. Thus, self-sacrifice for national goals was identified as martyrdom.⁵⁷³ This definition transforms martyrdom, originally conceived as dying for the cause of God or in the fight against unbelievers, to a core element in national identity. However this development was foreshadowed in secular literature even before the revolution.

MARTYRDOM IN SECULAR LITERATURE

The Muslim community venerates the martyrs, and identifies them as holy figures. During

⁵⁷² ‘A.R. Qazve, *Az nakhlestān tā khiyābān*, p. 17.

⁵⁷³ S.M. Gieling, *Religion and War in Revolutionary Iran*, pp. 56-57.

the Revolution, the concept of death for a higher cause was so strong that secular groups such as Marxists wrote about it. For instance, a leading Marxist theoretician in the early 1970s, Bizhan Jazani (1937-1975) asserts that the sacrifice of blood is a way of initiating protest against a dictatorial regime. Although Marxists were not widely popular among Iranians, their deaths in the Siyāhkal uprising (1971) proved their authenticity. For them, martyrdom was a means towards their goal. In *Iranian Irony: Marxists Becoming Muslims*, Abdy Javādzadeh refers to Khosrow Golsorkhi's last defense in the court before his execution by the Pahlavi regime. Golsorkhi uses the example of imam Hosein's fight and death to say that he was sacrificing his life for the cause of the oppressed.⁵⁷⁴ From Golsorkhi's defense and the works of secular writers and poets, it may be concluded that they too strove for martyrdom, or praised the act of martyrdom. In their works, generally, they create a character who is an ideal, entirely devoted to the norms and values of the community. Single handedly, he fights against the oppressor to preserve the community. He may offer his life. Samad Behrangi's 'Little Black Fish' (*Māhi-ye siyāh-e kuchulu*) is an example of this type of literature. This is the story of a hero, the little black fish, who in spite of all odds chooses to fight against the enemy, the Fish Eater. The Black Fish is aware of his fate, but fights for the freedom of the community.⁵⁷⁵ Iran's famous writer of the 1960s, Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad (1923-1969) wrote on martyrdom. Rezā Barāheni writes, "... He [Āl-e Ahmad] expected to become a martyr but he did not. I feel he wanted to become a living witness to martyrdom. And those who are put in the position of martyrdom possess charisma."⁵⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the poet Ahmad Shāmlu (1925-2000) in his 'Repetition' (*tekrār*) calls the poets prophets and martyrs.⁵⁷⁷ The poet tries to awaken people, and shows them that, if they protest, they may achieve at least "material well-being."⁵⁷⁸ The poet

⁵⁷⁴ A. Javadzadah, *Iranian Irony: Marxists Becoming Muslims*, Pennsylvania: Rose Dog Books, 2011, pp. 51-54.

⁵⁷⁵ M. Dorraj, "Symbolic and Utilitarian Political Value of a Tradition: Martyrdom in the Iranian Political Culture", in *The Review of Politics*, vol. 59. no. 3, Non-Western Political Thought (Summer, 1997), p. 513. For more analysis of the *Little Black Fish* see K. Tallatof, *The Politic of Writings in Iran: A History of Modern Persian*, pp. 75-76.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 514.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁷⁸ L.P. Alishan, "Ahmad Shamlu: The Rebel Poet in Search of an Audience," in *Iranian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2/4, Sociology of Iranian Writer (Spring-Autumn, 1985), p. 386.

writes:

*jangale ā'ine foru rikht
va rasulāni khaste be tabār-e shahidān peyvastand
va shā'erān be tabār-e shahidān peyvastand
chonān kabutarān-e āzād-parvāzi ke be dast-e gholāmān zebh mishavand
tā sofre-ye arbābān rā rangin konand.*⁵⁷⁹

The thicket of mirrors fell off
And the wearied messengers joined the generations of martyrs
And the poets joined the martyrs' generation
Like doves, fly freely; be slaughtered by the hands of slaves
To make the masters' table-cloth colorful

Shāmlu draws an analogy between the prophets and the poets and likens them to doves, the bird that symbolizes freedom. Perhaps Shāmlu believes that poets are as lonely as the prophets (the 'wearied messengers') when they are conveying the message of freedom, and when they are leading ignorant people to rebel against those in power. The celebration of martyrdom can be seen among leftist groups such as Mojāhedīn-e Khalq. In 1975, in a declaration (*bayāniyye*), the Mojāhedīn announced that the organization would follow Marxism-Leninism because it is the true path to man's liberation.⁵⁸⁰ Yet they maintain that a man distinguishes himself from the animals, and may settle beside God, by means of self-sacrifice. For this reason, during the Revolution when they showed their opposition to the Pahlavi regime, several of them suffered torture, but did not reveal any secrets of their organization.⁵⁸¹ In the poems of war, martyrdom is a means to deliver the soldier to the heaven, and it is prayer that connects them to God. If the soldier is not martyred he will

⁵⁷⁹ A. Shāmlu, *Majmu'e-ye āthār*, vol. 1 (1323-1376), selected by Niyāz-e Ya'qūbshāhi, Tehran: Zamāne, 1378/ 1999, p. 489.

⁵⁸⁰ E. Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 145.

⁵⁸¹ M. Dorraj, "Symbolic and Utilitarian Political Value of a Tradition: Martyrdom in the Iranian Political Culture," *The Review of Politics*, p. 516.

regret his survival. These are the themes treated in the following paragraphs.

THE LITTER OF MARTYRDOM

The war poet Soleymān Farrokhzād combines the concept of martyrdom with that of a *howdaj*, a framework placed on the back of camel in which people in the Arab lands traveled.

...

bā hejrat-e to

dar howdaj-e shahādat

'ommāl-e sar-seporde-ye doshman

*nābud mishavand*⁵⁸²

...

When you are emigrating,

in the howdah of martyrdom,

the enemy's devoted agents are becoming non-existence.

In the above poem, martyrdom is called a migration (*hejrat*). The word alludes to the journey of the prophet and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622.⁵⁸³ Also a Muslim's act of leaving his homeland to fight in the cause of God (*fi sabil Allāh*) is called *hijrat*. The martyr is pictured as emigrating, mounted on a howdah. The howdah itself alludes to imam Hosein's death at Karbalā, when his family were captured and carried away in a howdah. There is an analogy between the Iranian soldier and *Mohājerun* who, in seventh century, participated in *futuhāt*.⁵⁸⁴ They both are fighting to preserve Islamic principles. The combination 'howdah of martyrdom' may symbolize a coffin. In the above poem, martyrdom does not mean death alone, but also victory, because in the last line quoted,

⁵⁸² *Mosābeqe-ye she'r-e jang*, pp. 68-9.

⁵⁸³ See M. Khalid Masud, "The Obligation to Migrate: the Doctrine of *hijra* in Islamic Law," in *Muslim Travellers, Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination*, ed. D. F. Eickelman & J. Piscatori, California: University of California Press, 1990, p. 33.

⁵⁸⁴ See P. Crone, "The First-Century Concept of Higrā," in *Arabica*, T. 41, Fasc. 3, Nov., 1994, pp. 356-360.

martyrdom guarantees the destruction of the Iraqi enemy, who are *sar-seporde*: this compound would literally mean ‘with a beaten head’ but it is used in the sense of obedient, submissive and dependent. The poet criticizes the enemy because they are uncritically following an illegitimate ruler. According to the Shiite tradition, imam Hosein and his heirs, the twelve Shiite imams and the leaders of the Islamic Republic are legitimate rulers. Saddam Hosein and his soldiers are on a wrong path, which leads to their destruction. In this poem, there is also an allusion to the religious belief that imam Hosein’s martyrdom destroyed and dishonored Yazid. The former gave up his life to bear witness to the latter’s illegitimacy. Like imam Hosein, the soldier’s martyrdom unveiled the fact that Saddam Hosein’s authority is illegal and illegitimate, according to the poet.

THE CRYSTALLINE CALL OF MARTYRDOM

To legitimize the Islamic Republic, and to establish that participating in the war was a religious duty, the war poets used religious elements such as the call to prayer in the context of martyrdom, so as to mobilize the soldiers to fight and to preserve Shiite Islam. ‘Abdollah Giviyān uses the phrase ‘the crystal call of martyrdom (*azān-e bolurin-e shahādat*) in a poem entitled ‘I Know my Ancestry Well’ (*tabār-e khod rā khub mishenāsam*):

*pish az ān ke ruznāme-hā benevisand
yā mowjhā beguyand
az me ‘rāj-e sabz-e pedar
yā forud-e mushak-e noh metri (...)*

*bozorg-e khānevāde-ye mā
dar dasht-e neynavā
nimehāy-e shab
azān-e bolurin-e shahādat mikhānad*

*man tabār-e khod rā khub mishenāsam ...*⁵⁸⁵

Before the newspapers announce,
 Or the waves speak,
 Of a father's green ascension
 Or the landing of a nine-meter missile
 ...
 The ancestor of our family
 In the plain of Neynavā
 At midnight
 Recited the crystalline call to martyrdom
 I know my ancestry well.

'Abdollah Giviyān addresses imam Hosein and his companions as the 'ancestors' or 'origin' of the Iranians. Their fight against the Sunni enemy is justified by stating that imam Hosein calls his companions to support him on the plain of Neynavā (the locality of Karbalā). The poet asserts that he is deeply aware that his 'ancestors' (the founders of Shiite Islam, rather than ancient Iranians) sacrificed their lives in the path of imam Hosein. Therefore, both an Iranian soldier killed in the fight and innocent citizen killed when the enemy attacked the cities are martyrs and will ascend to the throne of God. Such references to the civilian victims of the war cultivate hatred and a desire for revenge in the readers' heart.

In the third line, the poet draws an analogy between death on the military front and a spiritual ('green') ascension.⁵⁸⁶ He employs the motif of the crystal call to martyrdom (*azān-e bolurin-e shahādat*), and juxtaposes it with imam Hosein's martyrdom, to assert that martyrdom is a cultural heritage of Iranians (conflated with Shiites) that is handed down from one generation to the next. The compound *azān bolurin* (crystalline call) implies that participation in the fight is as important as daily prayer. The word used for

⁵⁸⁵ *Gozide-ye she'r-e jang va defā'e moqaddas*, pp. 136-7.

⁵⁸⁶ For a brief explanation about the concept of ascension in the war poetry see this study chapter 3.

calling (*azān*) usually refers to a call to prayer. Crystalline, in poetic use, connotes hard and unyielding. The compound may refer to the night before the battle at Karbalā, when, according to Shiite accounts, imam Hosein prayed and reminded his followers that they would die as martyrs the next day. As the events of ‘Āshurā are celebrated every year, Iranians are taught by this account that imam Hosein consciously welcomed death at Karbalā. For Hosein, fighting against an unjust ruler was more meaningful than saving his life by keeping silence. This idea is also reflected in Sunni classical chronicles such as *the History of al-Tabari* by Abu Ja‘far Mohammad Ebn Jarir Tabari. He writes: “When evening came, Hosein and his followers spent the whole night in performing the prayer, in calling on God’s forgiveness and in making invocations and humbler entreaties.”⁵⁸⁷ Thus imam Hosein and his followers prepared themselves to stand before the throne of God, because they knew they would not survive. By using such references, which are familiar to an Iranian audience, ‘Abdollah Giviyān compares the Iran-Iraq war to imam Hosein’s battle, and asserts a bond of blood between Iranian soldiers and imam Hosein or his companions. To show that Iranians are imam Hosein’s heirs, he uses the word ancestry (*tabār*). What they have in common is that they are not afraid of death, are eagerly waiting to see God, and therefore do not flee the battlefield and desert their leader (Ayatollah Khomeini). In this poem, imam Hosein’s prayer and recitation of the Qur’ān is compared to Ayatollah Khomeini’s call to participate in the war. The poet asserts that it is a duty for the Iranian community to fight against the enemy. Ayatollah Khomeini used this rhetoric during the Islamic Revolution to motivate Iranians to protest against the Pahlavi monarch and he continued to do the same during the war

REGRET FOR SURVIVAL

The war poets also express their regret that they have survived, even as they use that opportunity to inspire the population to offer their lives passionately, and die a martyr’s death. In the following excerpt, ‘Ali-Rezā Qazve shows a deep sense of nostalgia:

⁵⁸⁷ Abu Ja‘far Mohammad Ibn Jarir Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, p.119.

gol-e ashkam shabi vā mishod ey kāsh
hame dardam modāvā mishod ey kāsh
be har kas qesmati dādi khodāyā
*shahādat qesmat-e mā mishod ey kāsh*⁵⁸⁸

I wish the rose of my tears would blossom at night
 I wish all my pains would cure,
 Everyone received his portion, O God!
 I wish, martyrdom had been my portion.

The poet wishes that martyrdom would be his portion. The word *qesmat* means “The portion of fate, good or bad, specifically allotted to and destined for each individual.”⁵⁸⁹ In this poem, martyrdom is considered as a cure for all pain, and as the portion bestowed by God on certain individuals as an act of grace. God elects the martyrs in Primordial time, making them special persons with a special relationship to the Creator. Although the poet presumably believes that there can be no change in God’s decision, he complains and asks why he was given an unfavorable portion, meaning, why he survived when his companions were martyred.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have explained how the concept of martyrdom, a pivotal element in Shiite Islam, was used in the war poetry to motivate the sense of self-sacrifice in the Iranian population. To offer a backdrop, I discussed how, during the Revolution the lectures given by ‘Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Morteżā Motahhari presented a new meaning for martyrdom, and the necessity of overthrowing the Pahlavi monarch through direct action. Under their influence, Iranians sacrificed their lives to achieve a higher goal, ‘Ali Shariati popularized the concept of the culture of martyrdom. He refers to imam Hosein’s self-sacrifice at

⁵⁸⁸ ‘A.R. Qazve, *Az nakhlestān tā khiyābān*, p. 37.

⁵⁸⁹ C.E. Bosworth, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2), under *Qisma*.

Karbala presenting it as a model for the youth to emulate. In the 1980s, their literary works re-introduced the concept of active martyrdom, reminding Iranians of its vital role in preserving Shiite Islam, Iranian Shiite culture, and resisting the Western cultural invasion by fighting the Pahlavi regime.

Because martyrdom is supposed to bring joy and happiness in the hereafter, the secular writers who opposed the Pahlavi regime referred to it, as a useful tool to inspire popular protest against the Shāh, and to inspire their followers to sacrifice their lives rather than reveal the secrets of the revolutionary organizations.

During the war, to cultivate a readiness for self-sacrifice, the leaders of the Islamic revolution propagated the concept of striving for martyrdom. In their sermons, they made many references to Hosein's death, to assert that he consciously chose death over life because he wanted to convey a message to the oppressed nations: every individual is responsible for participating in the fight against the tyrant ruler. Imam Hosein's example inspired Iranian soldiers to self-sacrificing behavior to defeat the enemy. They chose the path of martyrdom in hope of being united with God, and becoming the companions of the Master of Martyrs, imam Hosein, in paradise. The war poets used religious motifs to identify death in battle as religious martyrdom. The soldier believes that when he sacrifices his life he will not only contribute to military victory but also will witness the illegitimacy of Saddam Hosein and the righteousness of the leaders of Iran. In addition, he receives heavenly rewards, and may intercede on behalf of his community on the Last Day.