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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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GENERAL CONCLUSION

This book examined how modern Persian war poets relied on classical mystical motifs and religious events to legitimize the war against Iraq and to encourage Iranians to fight the enemy. It illustrates how Iran's literary tradition has been used extensively in the politics of the twentieth century to inflame a sense of self-sacrifice in the public. In this book, I explored how war poets and leaders of the Islamic Republic used mystical and religious poetry to motivate Iranians to lay down their lives. Most Iranians have extensive knowledge of classical literary traditions and Shiite religious history. Their familiarity with the life of known mystics and religious figures prepared the way for a new interpretation of mystical motifs and religious metaphors. They came to believe the new message, propagated by the leaders of the Islamic Republic, defining the front-line as a shortcut to spiritual perfection and eternal salvation. Some soldiers came to believe that death on the battlefield was a way to unite themselves with the Beloved. For other soldiers the war transformed into a fight between Shiites and the Sunni authorities. Shi'a Iranians were encouraged to see Saddam's army of Sunni Iraqis as responsible for the death of the prophet Mohammad's grandson, Hosein. Thus Iranian soldiers, in their minds, fought to avenge the blood of their holy imam.

The war poems were published to celebrate martyrdom and self-sacrifice. They were recited in a variety of public gatherings, such as the poetry of Sacred Defense. Local radio stations and broadcasting networks broadcast the poems to activate the collective memory of Iranians. Soon after the beginning of the war the institutions and organizations that supported the Islamic Republic began to propagate its principles by holding conferences, exhibiting photos of war trenches, martyrs, and holding exhibitions at street corners. War poems were published and distributed in book stores as well as through newly founded organizations which propagated committed and revolutionary literature. Many newspapers had columns written about the war, along with martyrdom narrations and poetry. In addition to universities and schools, where religious practices were fostered, a

large number of organizations supporting the Islamic Republic offered cultural and religious programs to disseminate notions that supported the war.

Culturally, many Iranians are interested in medieval mystical tenets as a means to develop their moral and ethical values. They keep this tradition alive when they recite literary works by poets such as Rumi or Hafez, venerating them as holy figures. Concerning the role of mysticism among Iranians, Ridgeon quotes the Iranian scholar Sa‘id Nafisi who asserts, “This [mystic] wisdom has settled so deeply in the peoples of these two countries [Iran and India], that they themselves do not know to what extent they are Sufis.”⁵⁹⁰

It is taken for granted the Iranians have been inspired by mystic sentiments for centuries. During the war mystical motifs were introduced into a military context, and made the soldier recall these motifs in wartime. He believed that he was a mystic walking the path of spiritual growth. Spiritual elevation, achievable through self-mortification and self-denial, was fundamentally changed. For Iranian soldiers, such ascetic principles could be achieved on the front line when they bid farewell to life. Iranian soldiers based their physical and spiritual lives on these principles, allowing the war to be interpreted as a spiritual endeavor. Thus, soldiers identified themselves with the medieval mystic Hallāj who sacrificed his life to experience self-annihilation.

As I demonstrated in this book, classical literary and religious traditions have been in the foreground in Persian culture, forming an indispensable aspect of being Iranian. It was not farfetched for the Iranian government to utilize cultural and literary motifs in a modern war setting, persuading young and old to hasten to the front line and give meaning to their lives. Even dying became a goal.

While poetry is everywhere in Iran, Shi‘a religious stories are ingrained in the minds of Iranians from early childhood. They are intimately familiar with the one-sided battle between imam Hosein and Ebn al-Ziyād, Yazid’s commander. Since the Safavid dynasty, Iranians have commemorated the death of Hosein and his companions in *rowza-khāni* gatherings. Certain elements of the story of Karbalā are emphasized. Iranians hear every year during the annual celebration how Hosein was killed, his family taken prisoner

⁵⁹⁰ L. Ridgeon, *Sufi Castigator: Kasravi and the Iranian Mystical Tradition*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2006, p.14.

and humiliated. During the war, Iranian clerics offered a new interpretation in their sermons recounting the events of Karbalā. They compared the war between predominantly Shiite Iran and Sunni-governed Iraq, to the fight between imam Hosein and his companions with the soldiers of Yazid. During the sermons and commemoration of Hosein's death in passion plays, Shi'a Muslims can show their sympathy by weeping loudly, beating their head and chest and cursing the executioner of Hosein. When Shi'a Iranians drink water, they may say: "O Hosein the martyr!" (*yā Hosein-e shahid*), to remember how the imam and his family were denied water from the Euphrates. In this regard, Iranians were receptive to the message that the war was analogous to the battle of Karbalā. The Iranian government invoked these types of religious feelings in Iranians, adapting these religious memories and events to new situations. It was in this context that Iranians became ready to show their faithfulness to imam Hosein. It was due to this strong emotional bond that Iranians were ready to fight Sunni Iraq and avenge their holy imam, marching towards Hosein's shrine in Karbalā.

Another way of encouraging Iranians onto the battlefield was to compare the battle to mystical elevation, encountering the Beloved. Their familiarity with mystical poetry and concepts provided the opportunity for soldiers to compare their struggles to initiation into the spiritual path of perfection, and even equating their battles to ascension into heaven, modeled on the prophet Mohammad's journey to the Throne of God.

Employing mystical and religious motifs was not unique to the war poetry. These motifs were used during both the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), and the Islamic Revolution of 1979. What characterizes the war poetry is that by using the motifs and metaphors, during the war, the soldiers were encouraged to lay-down their lives. Although during the above mentioned revolutions death for a higher cause was praised, it did not mean that the revolutionaries were duty bound to choose death over life. In the years of the war, a soldier who survived believed that he did not perform his duty.

Casting a glance at Iran's history, there are several anti-mystic writers who were not interested in pursuing the mystical path of spiritual elevation. The most prominent writer on this account is Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946). His works inspired 'Ali Shariati who criticized Islamic mysticism, saying that it leads society to quietism and remaining indifferent

towards social injustice. Following the mystic path of salvation did not meet the need for active participation in demonstrations against the Pahlavi regime. According to Shariati, a more fitting alternative was elaborating on the concept of martyrdom and the death of imam Hosein: an active model, which he introduced to motivate Iranians to protest against the Pahlavi monarch.

In this study, several complimentary themes were studied. Firstly, the Shi'a religious appeal for establishing a Shiite state, implying that a Sunni state is illegitimate. There is a responsibility on the shoulders of the Shi'a to overthrow Sunni authorities. The Shiites of Iran viewed the battle of Karbalā and imam Hosein's death as an example, believing that the imam fought against the Sunnite Yazid because he did not respect the *shari'a*. This idea is propagated by the Islamic Republic of Iran to stress the superiority of Iranians as a representative of Shiite Islam over Iraqis as the archetype of Sunni Islam. Throughout the war, Iranian regime asserted that Iran not only wanted to preserve the 'truth of Islam' but also to free the holy sites of the Shiites and establish just authority. Surprisingly, during this period, references to the Shiites of Iraq were meagre.

Secondly, to implement the ideals of the leaders of the Islamic Republic, such as the spread of the Islamic Revolution to the world, the Iranians are responsible for supporting and freeing the Muslims of the world from tyrannies imposed upon them. They believed that because Iraq consisted of a Shi'a majority with Sunni rulers, it was the best place to begin. In this regard, Iranian soldiers altruistically laid down their lives to free the Shiite Muslims of Iraq. The propaganda machine led the former to believe that they should assist Palestinians defeat the 'Zionist' regime governing the al-Aqsā mosque in Jerusalem. Another ideal was introducing Ayatollah Khomeini, or his successor, as the leader of the Muslims of the world (*vali-ye faqih-e moslemin-e jahān*). To achieve this goal it was necessary to inspire the Iranians to actively participate in the fight. Ayatollah Khomeini stated that Iran had a twenty million army (*artesh-e bist milyuni*), indicating that all Iranians are ready to fight for Islam. Leadership of the Muslim world would be possible once they had occupied Iraq, and then Jerusalem.

Thirdly, this study discusses how Iranian government formulated ideals that were applicable to both Shiite and Sunni Muslims. The government emphasized its wish to

establish a Muslim state in Jerusalem and to liberate al-Aqsā mosque, indicating that it is the right of Muslims to rule over the Islamic holy sites. In political conflicts, the Islamic states made references to al-Aqsā mosque to motivate the Muslims (Shi'a and Sunni) to fight against the prospective enemy that is never named.

Fourthly, the universal concept of martyrdom and the martyrs' divine reward were a powerful concept that influenced Iranians to fight effectively on the battlefield. Comparable to the mystical concept of self-annihilation, the soldier assumed martyrdom as a mystical stage that unites him with the Beloved. The major difference between the aforementioned concepts is the way that individuals offer their most precious belonging: life. The similarity between martyrdom and spiritual self-annihilation are as follows: both the soldier and the mystic leave their families and their belongings in order to initiate into the path. The soldier breaks his ties with worldly interests, begins his journey to the battlefield where he endures hardship and fights against the enemy. If he dies as a martyr, he will receive divine rewards. The mystic, in his turn, leaves his interests behind and traverses through the path of spiritual perfection. He mortifies his body to purify his soul and strives to fight against the temptations of the Satan, namely the enemy. After his death, he becomes one with the Beloved. The correspondence between the concepts of martyrdom and self-annihilation, leads the soldier to believe that his death is a stage of spiritual elevation, and a short cut to the eternal union with the Beloved.

Iran's historical upheavals show that Iran's literary past has been used for various purposes. To praise a beloved or a patron, to illustrate mystical states and to show one's longing for spiritual perfection and self-annihilation into the Beloved. These literary themes are employed to compare the fight against an actual enemy to the fight against the enemy of the soul, and to equate martyrdom to annihilation into the Beloved. The discussion remains open whether Iran's literary past will be used in future to inspire public support of prospective revolutionaries.

