

Shi'i Ideology, Iranian Secular Nationalism and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

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Abstract

In the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the ensuing Iraqi invasion of the southern province of Khuzestan, one of the most important initiations of Islamic institutions of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was the creation of the *Sepâh-e Pâsdârân-e Enqelâb-e Eslâmî* (The Islamic Revolutionary Guard) or SPEE (Rafiqdust 1382/2004:173-4). This revolutionary organisation was Khomeini's answer to the regular standing Iranian army, trained and disciplined under the tight control of the deposed monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to thwart any effort to destroy the much fought for Revolution and a possible coup d'état (Menashri 1999:218-219; Katzman 1993). The Ayatollah ordered its creation in the first week of his victory in February 1979 (Rafiqdust 1383/2004:174). 'Whoever is armed,' stated the call, 'can join the *Sepâh*' (Rafiqdust 1383/2004:184). The call was put out to start recruiting those who had taken up arms against the Pahlavi regime during the Revolution. *Basij-e Enqelâb-e Eslâmî* (Islamic Revolution's Mobilisation Force) or *Basij* was the organisation born out of SPEE, which was filled with devout, motivated, and faithful Shi'i militants (Globalsecurity.org 2004)). By default, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) solidified the Islamic Revolution, and *Basij*, as a key military body of the new regime, played a major role in this process. This study discusses how the Islamic government of Iran successfully promoted long-learned religious traditions, in this case, the Karbala paradigm and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in 680 AD to rally support and receive unconditional loyalty of the *Basiji* (a *Basij* member) during the Iran-Iraq War. It examines the following two points: first, the idea of self-sacrifice as part of a religious belief, powerfully energised by the use of Shi'i ideology and history; second, the discussion of the amalgamation of secular and religious nationalism, which Ernest

Gellner describes as 'a principle which holds the political and national unit' together (Gellner 1983:1). Secular or modern nationalism was imbued with religious symbols, playing a key role in the fight against Iraq.

This study discusses and shows the intricacies of the Shi'i belief of fighting a mighty power as an underdog, which has a long precedence in Shi'i history. These can be traced in the series of battles and struggles against the Umayyad dynasty that started a year after the killing of Imam Hussein (680 AD) by the newly formed Shi'i groups (Moussavi 2004:98). Another struggle led to the Abbasid Revolution (749-50) and the eventual establishment of the Abbasid dynasty for the next few centuries, which contained 'important Shi'i elements' (Cole and Keddie 1986:5). A close examination of the wills of the would-be-martyrs reveals that there was no money offered to those who voluntarily fought, nor did there exist any form of direct compensation for dying. Rather, there was a spiritual redemption in the guaranteed entry into paradise for the martyrs and a social compensation in a higher social status for their survivors. In addition, the examination of a limited number of recorded conversations and interviews with captured *Basîji* prisoners of war in Iraq seems to show an ideology composed of a mixture of religious and secular nationalist elements (Brown 1990). The challenging task in attaining such a goal, aside from the limitation of sources, is the inherent difficulty in defining nationalism as a concept, which Eric Hobsbawm (1995:71) has characterised as 'complex' and 'opaque'.

Pahlavi-triggered secular nationalism, which climaxed during the elaborate and costly 2,500-year Iranian monarchical celebrations in the 1970s, was enough to rally the secular Iranians behind the Ayatollah to fight Iraq. It is here that religion overlapped with secular nationalism making the required formula to convince the more secular *Basîji* members to fight the enemy. In the eyes of the Iranian clerical establishment and the secular Iranians and the Iranian youth, they were all fighting for Iran's territorial integrity based on the principle of right fighting and defeating wrong. In other words, one cannot give exclusive credit to either secular or religious elements in Iranian nationalism but one has to describe Iranian nationalism as containing both.

This is in line with what John Hutchinson (2005) argues modifying the modernist view of nationalism as a by-product of modernisation. The claim that national identity has been constructed by the instrumentalisation of invented national symbols and traditions is flawed according to Hutchinson (2005:2). Instead, the creation of nations occurred by each nation's

'protracted experiences' happening long before the modern era. Furthermore, the 'ethno-historical memories' of the pre-modern era that Hutchinson believes contribute considerably to the formation of the modern state by mobilising 'mass political campaigns' is also valid for Iran in the 1980s (Hutchinson 2005: 2-3). It is through events such as the Iran-Iraq War that one can trace the Iranian clerical establishment use of Shi'i history from Karbala to entice the population in Iran. The Shi'i struggles for the past 1,400 years have deeply shaped Iranian culture since 1501, when the Safavid Persians decided to convert their subjects to Shi'ism from Sunni Islam. As Anthony Smith rightly points out, this is what created a new 'Persian identity [...] coextensive with Shi'ism' (2001:113-14).

Iranian ethnic identity was reinforced long before the modern era. According to Hutchinson (2005:18), it was during Islam's early expansion period that an evolution of a set of ethnosymbolic elements transformed the Iranian population starting from the ninth century, manifested by Persian literary revival, and eventually culminating in the conversion of Iranians to Shi'ism in 1501. It was a long and deep transformation that provided the Iranians the necessary ideas and identities to fight. Hence, in the case of Iran, both religion and secular symbols were used to successfully reiterate Iranian nationalism. One form of these ethnosymbols was, and still is, *rowzeh* or sermons of Shi'i clerics in the month of *Muharram*, the month in which Imam Hussein and his followers were slaughtered in the deserts of Karbala. Another is *ta'ziyeh*, or re-enactments of such stories. *Ta'ziyeh*, just like *rowzeh*, puts the minds and emotions of all involved in a state of near trance. These ceremonies existed even before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, since they had been promoted from 1501 (Chelkowski 1985:18-30). Starting with the Safavid, and continuing during the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, the Iranians have mourned and commemorated Hussein's martyrdom by organising processions, which at some point included *ta'ziyeh*. In modern times, the month of *Muharram*, and the rituals connected with it, provided a window of opportunity for most political activists to voice their grievances when they could not assemble because the Shah had outlawed any political meeting or rally that was not sanctioned by the government. Hence, one can appreciate the politicisation of such religious festivals and symbols due to the existence of secular and political restrictions.

The study of the *Basiji*, with its model of Karbala and Imam Hussein and how this was effectively integrated into war plans of Iran has been very limited. Most articles and studies have been done from the Western military perspective (Cordesman 1987; Karsh 1987:3-72). One general study on the use of religious doctrines and stories in war is that of Saskia Gieling (1999).

The author discusses a variety of reasons why Iran stayed in the eight year war with Iraq. She emphasises the role of the Shi'i clerics and their usage of Shi'i traditional stories to enable young Iranians to fight a seemingly unending war which eventually led to high casualty rates.

One can argue that whereas the SPEE was designed for the more zealous and adventurous mature male adults who were required to be eighteen and over, the *Basij* was designed to train a group of young Iranians who would be amenable and receptive to age-old Shi'i stories of its glorious past. Since the *Basij*s were part of a more irregular force in comparison with the highly regimented SPEE members, their age groups varied with the majority being under the age of eighteen. Khomeini intended to use the *Basij* to form the SPEE as a bulwark against the regular national army. The SPEE member, *pâsdâr* (singular for *pâsdârân*) was a quasi surrogate mother of the *Basiji*. With the simultaneous training of the SPEE members, the *Basij* were trained in military tactics, intelligence gathering, and community moral policing. They were also taught about the benefits of martyrdom (*shahâdat*). Religious as well as secular military training went side by side in local mosques in every Iranian city and village and the Ayatollah's idea for a 'twenty million-man army' seemed to be gaining momentum (Kamrava 2000:82-85).

Prelude to Martyrdom

Before explaining the different aspects of *shahâdat* as a distinct ideology within Iranian Shi'ism, it is necessary to briefly discuss its origins in order, maybe, to fully appreciate its context.

At the time of the Prophet Muhammad's death (632 AD), the issue of succession was not easily resolved amongst the Muslims. In Shi'i belief, it is accepted that before the Prophet's death on his way back from Mecca, his caravan stopped at the oasis of Khumm (16 March 632), where he raised Ali ibn Abi Talib's hand (his cousin and son-in-law) and stated 'whomsoever I am the authority over, Ali is also the authority over' (Halm 1997:3).

Despite the vagueness of the original Arabic, it left no room for doubt amongst later observant Shi'i populations across the globe (Halm 1997). Nonetheless, Ali was passed over by the *shura* (a council of elders and companions of the Prophet that were with him from the beginning, in the *hijra* (migration) from Mecca to Medina). Instead, the life-long companion of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, was voted-in as the new successor of the Prophet with the title of *khalifa* (632-634). After the death of Abu Bakr two subsequent *khulafa* (plural for *khalifa*), Umar (634-644) and Uthman (644-656) were chosen to lead the Muslims. Ali was only chosen after a group of Muslims,

disillusioned by Uthman's governance, murdered him (Wellhausen 1963:50-2). The new *khalifa*, Ali (656-661), was subsequently forced to move to the city of Kufa in Iraq since he was generally not recognised as the true successor given the circumstances surrounding his predecessor's demise (Halm 1997:5). Ali's succession to *khalifa* was also challenged by the governor of Syria, Mu'awiya, who was a member of Uthman's clan, the Umayyad. A series of wars, the Siffin (657-659) being the most important, followed with obscure results (Wellhausen 1963:56-7). Mu'awiya, ignoring the new *khalifa* Ali, declared himself as the new *khalifa* in Jerusalem in the summer of 660; Ali was eventually murdered in January 661. Shi'i Muslims revere Ali as the first 'Imam'. This was the beginning of a schism between Muslims who became followers of Ali and what he stood for, which in the eyes of the devout Shi'i was the rightful designee of the *khalifa* against the usurping Umayyad powerhouse. It should be noted that the word Shi'i in Arabic literally means 'party' and since the followers of Ali were called *Shiat Ali* (Ali's Party) the name continued to be used. Ali's murder, especially because of his status as the Prophet's close family, placed him at the head of the twelve imams and gave birth to a religio-political and philosophical ideology that stressed the triumph of justice over injustice in Twelver Shi'ism. This became the motto of the Islamic Republic of Iran during its war with Iraq.

Ali's eldest son Hassan decided not to get involved in Islam's political realm. According to Heinz Halm, Hassan abdicated and eventually accepted Mu'awiya's rule after his forces marched into Iraq. He was subsequently given the tax collection proceedings of an Iranian province and later retired (Halm 1997:7-8). Ali's second son, Hussein, was enticed by the Shi'i of Kufa to move from Medina to Kufa after hearing about the Iraqi Shi'i's desire to revolt against the Umayyad regime. Before his death in the spring of 680, Mu'awiya designated his son Yazid to succeed him, which established the Umayyad as the first Islamic dynasty in history. The dynasty, with its centre in Damascus, lasted until 750 when it was overthrown and replaced by the Abbasids (750-1235).

While Hussein, his family, and a group of supporters, totalling no more than fifty, were en-route to Iraq from Arabia, Yazid's army murdered the revolting Shi'i in Kufa. Meanwhile, a division of Yazid's forces blocked Hussein's enclave approaching the Euphrates and after cutting them off from the river's water, and their eventual face-to-face battle in the summer of 680, Hussein along with all of his family (except his youngest son and sister) were killed and buried at the site of the skirmishes in today's city of Karbala in Iraq.

Iranian Ideas of Karbala

In the second half of the twentieth century, Ayatollah Khomeini used the martyrdom of Hussein and his family in the deserts of Karbala to strengthen the aforementioned philosophy of the ongoing battle between justice and injustice during the Iran-Iraq conflict. The Prophet's grandson was deemed even more of a *shahid* or martyr than his father Ali. Hence he is called *al sayyed al shohada* (the Lord of all martyrs). Observant Shi'i consider him the ultimate *madhlum* (oppressed) because he did not instigate a fight, but was instead answering the call of his father's supporters. Hussein's story was used to portray self-sacrifice and bravery, and his fateful story was the ultimate tool for rallying men of all ages to fight for the integrity of Iran, Shi'ism, and purportedly Islam as a whole during the Iran-Iraq War.

Women were accordingly encouraged to send their sons along the path of martyrdom just as Zaynab, Hussein's sister had done. According to Khomeini (2005), only the best leave 'this world through martyrdom' and that is why Zaynab described martyrdom as a 'beautiful' experience after the Battle of Karbala was fought and lost (Shirazi 2005:94-5). The Arabic slogan *kull yaumin ashura wa kull arden karbala* (everyday is *Ashura* and every land is Karbala) was the most popular writing on the headbands of the young *Basiji* forces during the War. From the start of the mass conversion of Iranians into Shi'ism in the sixteenth century, *Ashura* has continuously been an official day of mourning, which is commemorated by a series of passion plays, self-flagellation, and tremendous chest beatings. However, this day has wrongly been dubbed as a day of festivity in the Western media (BBC News 2006). *Ashura* and all its symbols are connected with the Battle of Karbala (680 AD) and were used quite early in Islamic history during the Abbasid Revolution (750 AD) when Abu Muslim, the leader of the early revolutionary Abbasids in Khurasan, 'made use of popular sentiments against the Umayyad rulers by appealing to popular support for the family of the Prophet' (Aghaie 2004:10). This tradition, Aghaie asserts, has been part of Iranian history, since Twelver Shi'ism became the state religion during the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722). And since it was successfully integrated into Iranians' socio-religious fabric through the Qajar era (1794-1925) (Aghaie 2004:12-4) it was used as a tool of legitimization of the rulers. It appears that this is the basis for the 'sense of solidarity', according to Anthony Smith (2001:114), that founded the distinctiveness of the ethnic Persians, which culminated later in the Iranian constitutional movement with the Shi'i clerics playing a pivotal role in mobilising public support for a constitution.

According to Khomeini's interpretation of Iraq and the war, Saddam Hussein played the role of Yazid and the Umayyad oppressors while the Iranian public was cast as the helpless Imam Hussein and his supporters. Karbala's uneven fighting ground made the historical metaphor even more appropriate in the eyes of the Ayatollah. The claim originated from Iran's Revolution, an event unparalleled in its history, which isolated it from the world community. By comparison, Iraq was intact politically, militarily much more powerful, and, most importantly, not opposed by the United States.

The War

The roots of the 'longest war,' as Dilip Hiro (1989) has identified the eight-year long conflict, are many which cannot be discussed at length here. Different reasons such as 'ethnic or racial hate[,] Shi'i unrest in Iraq', and, finally, a quest for more territory are usually mentioned as reasons for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, most of which Samir al-Khalil dismisses altogether (al-Khalil 1990:262). Al-Khalil believes Saddam Hussein invaded Iran only to serve his ego, and as every other political action in Iraq in his era under the tight control of the Ba'ath Party was conducted, one is left to ponder such insertion. To add to al-Khalil's argument, one should note that Saddam Hussein might have seen 1980 an opportune moment to assert his power in the region, since the new Islamic Republic was busy with its military purges, killing a number of its highly trained military commanders. One should also take into consideration Baqer Moin's assertion that the combination of greed, and fear of an Islamic state in a majority Shi'i country bordering Iraq could have been reasons for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran along with Saudi Arabia and the United States' support (Moin 1999:236). For the Ayatollah, full fruition of the Islamic Revolution in Iran meant the chance to export the same type of revolution to Iraq which would have meant an end to the Palestinian suffering (Moin 1999:265). Khomeini (2000) always expressed his desire for a day where Iraq would enjoy a majority Shi'i government, which in his mind would have been the only way to 'liberate Jerusalem' (Khomeini 2000:212). In other words, the combination of the two Shi'i majority population of Iran and Iraq would have created a big enough force to be able to drive the Israeli military out of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

Ayatollah Khomeini's constant call for an Islamic Revolution in other Muslim nations, coupled with the summary execution of those high-ranking Iranian military personnel who were trained and educated in American military bases after the toppling of the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953, emboldened Saddam Hussein to invade Iran and destroy Khomeini's newly-won revolution (Kinzer 2003; Peretz

1994:457-9). According to newly-declassified United States secret documents, which George Washington University made public on its *National Security Archive*, Saddam's plans and wishes were supported by the United States and its allies in the Middle East (Dobbs 2002:A01).

Khomeini instrumentalised the traditional Shi'i ideology, as he had done so during his opposition to the Shah in the early 1960s, by reminding Iranians of Shi'i history. Khomeini 'appealed to the latent radicalism of Shi'i theology with its emphasis on suffering and martyrdom as elements of the divine plan' (Sachedina 1991:404). By identifying Khomeini as one of the 'three idol breakers' amongst Abraham and Muhammad in a quote at the beginning of his article, Abdulaziz Sachedina (1991) suggests that after centuries of 'quietism', the Shi'is took up the cause on the basis of 'activism' and that is the origin of the *Basiji* ideology (Sachedina 1991:403-4). For the first time in Shi'ism's long history, according to Azar Tabari, the clergy was able to 'directly operate the state without a secular structure either superimposed on it [...] or parallel with it' (Tabari 1983:72). The role of the *ulama* (Islamic clerical scholars) in Iran's modern history is one of multiple perspectives, varying from effective, albeit by default, socio-political leadership (Abrahamian 1979) to pure 'wishful thinking' (Floor 1980). It can safely be argued that since their introduction into Iran by the Safavid dynasty, the Shi'i *ulama* were able to use the burgeoning civil infrastructure to enhance their power by having direct contact with the population (Moussavi 2004:125). Ahmad K. Moussavi even names the Qajar era, a new era for Shi'ism since the *ulama* were on a new quest to popularise all things Shi'i, starting by promoting public mourning of the Prophet's family, Imam Hussein being the most popular, and pilgrimage to the Shi'i imams mausoleums throughout Iran and Iraq. It also appears that the *ulama*'s political involvement before, during, and after the Constitutional Revolution (1906-11), according to Ervand Abrahamian (1979), cannot be denied either. Because the *ulama* enjoyed an uninterrupted and uncensored connection with the masses, they refused to be excluded, and in reality could not have been excluded from the political activities of the Constitutional era (1979:403). Therefore, they had a secure and confident place in society by the 1980s and could still further it by reminding the public about their good deeds done eighty years ago.

Religious Propaganda and Secular Nationalism

During the Iran-Iraq War television broadcasts, radio special programming, Friday sermons, posters and murals on city and village walls, and the constant coffin-processions of the martyrs throughout Iran organised by the government effectively mobilised the masses. One *Basiji* POW in a Ramadi

camp for the Iranian children warriors states this clearly by saying that 'of course there was a campaign to recruit men into the army,' and since Iran was invaded it was a 'normal' desire for him and kids his age to 'defend it' (Brown 1990:89). He goes on to say that the clergy would frequent schools as part of the propaganda machine. This very act together with 'watching military programmes on the television', informing them of the war and its effect on Iranians, made him join the *Basij* to fight (Brown 1990). Defiantly the seventeen-year-old captive concludes his interview by clearly stating that 'no one influenced' him to fight, and that it was purely his decision (Brown 1990). Nevertheless, he fails to realise the overpowering influence of the propaganda campaign.

If the stories of Karbala and Hussein's martyrdom did not have any effect on the minds of secular Iranians in persuading them to fight, secular nationalism as discussed earlier, was used to convince and sway the populace into battle. When Ian Brown asked one of the teenage POWs about the concept of martyrdom, the prisoner stated his secular beliefs (Brown 1990). However, he admitted to the truth about the importance of martyrdom in Shi'ism, but reminded the interviewer that he 'didn't go to war to die for Islam', but rather it was to 'defend Iran' (Brown 1990). The Iranians enjoyed a secular and a religious nationalist ideology that was able to encompass anyone who called himself an Iranian. Efraim Karsh asserts, as 35-40 per cent of the inhabitants of the province of Khuzestan in Iran were ethnically Arab Shi'i, Saddam Hussein hoped that they would welcome an invading Arab army and help in the annexation of this rich province (Karsh 2002:27) – that did not happen (Hiro 1989:41). It appears that secular nationalistic fervour of the Iranian Arabs surpassed their ethnicity. Not only did they not support the Iraqi army in their efforts, Iranian Arabs fought along the SPEE, *Basij*, and the regular army (Brown 1990:43). The ethnically Arab Iranian south rallied behind the government by clinging to their membership of Iranian society. In the words of one captured Arab-Iranian *Basiji*:

It's true that we're Arab and proud of it, but we're not Iraqi and that's what's important. It's not true that we weren't happy with the Imam. In the past we had had some trouble with the Persians, for they can be very arrogant and the Shah encouraged that attitude. So we were glad when Khomeini came back, but then things started to go wrong. We wanted Arabic to be the first language in our schools, and we wanted more of the money the government earned from the oil in the province [Khuzestan]. But they wouldn't agree with our demands, so we demonstrated [...]

but when the war started it was our duty to defend our country. We are Muslims and the Persians are Muslims and for me that's what's important. Anyway, I don't like Saddam. He's a *Baathist* and not a very good Muslim. Iraqis drink beer and whisky but we don't. We're better Arabs and better Muslims than them (Brown 1990:27).

Ideology, Clergy, and *Basij*

One scholar asserts that Karbala was the '[S]ymbol of [J]ustice [V]ersus [T]yranny' in the ideological makeup of the devout Shi'i (Shahidi 2000:47). The Iranian frontline was deemed holy for the *Basiji* and it was no different than Karbala. They believed in its spiritual nature that stood for a place where 'divine goodness fought tyranny' (Shahidi 2000). By reiterating the nature of *Basij*, Khomeini controlled and fuelled their nationalist fervour. The Ayatollah defined this organisation: '[T]he foundation of *Basij* is based on the rules of *fiqh* [the human-based (jurists) understanding and interpretation of *shari'a* or Islamic law] and *jihad*; a *jihad* that is based on a principle of defence and not offence; not based on global expansion [...] the world experts cannot understand this [...]' (Basijnet.com 2004; Peters 1977:5). One teenage *Basiji* POW's statement corresponds with the Shi'i ideology about martyrdom and the role of the Imam Hussein or Imam Ali. He simply said that he was 'not afraid to be martyred for Islam,' and in fact would be proud to be one because that was what the 'Imams' did in the seventh and eighth centuries and it was now a 'duty for the whole Shi'i community' to carry their cause (Brown 1990:86). His confession about fighting the Iraqis continued and he claimed that his responsibility to fight 'is something more than patriotism [...] [he wanted] to die for Islam, not Iran, [just] like Imam Hussein' (Brown 1990). Therefore it was by the effects of this line of reasoning that the Karbala paradigm's reflection can be traced on the minds of the martyrs and POWs when their wills and statements are closely analysed.

There exists one group of Iranians that take responsibility for teaching such doctrine: the clergy. Rasoul Nafisi claims that Khomeini was well aware of the power of *rowzeh*, public sermons, and its effect on the people (Nafisi 1992:172). Nikola Schahgaldian, too, credits the clergy for the 'general management' of Iranian population by 'their passionate preoccupation with ideological/religious indoctrination, conformity, and political repression' (Schahgaldian 1989:33).

The religious educators, the *mujtahedin*, were catapulted to the forefront of the nationalist struggle under the banner of Islam (Shahrough Akhavi 1983). This phenomenon started during the nineteenth century in Iran as a result of 'the increasing penetration of imperialism', of which Great Britain and Russia played the two major roles (Akhavi 1983:205). The Qajar dynasty rulers' poor response to persisting poverty and the royal family's insatiable thirst for luxury that Iran could not afford initiated an overwhelming collection of national concessions to foreign powers that drove the country towards a more impoverished existence. Armed with the Shi'i ideologies of justice fighting injustice, the *mujtahedin* led the clergy and filled what was missing in the Iranian nationalist character. The Iran-Iraq War, which was seen as a Western encroachment played by Saddam Hussein, was no exception. If anything, the *ruhaniyyat*'s position was even stronger since the attacker was seen as a government fully supported by the United States. Khomeini was a strong believer in the role of the clergy and explicitly believed in their power to propagate any doctrine, no matter how severe. He assured that 'those who oppose the mullahs oppose Islam itself, eliminate the mullahs and Islam shall disappear in fifty years. It is only the mullahs who can bring the people into the streets and make them die for Islam – begging to have their blood shed for Islam' (Khomeini 2005).

Wills and Testaments

Most available and published wills hint at the martyrs' strong belief in the nobility of Imam Hussein's self-sacrifice based on the principles of justice fighting injustice, right defeating wrong. Examining the martyrs' wills it is noteworthy that the *Pâsdârân*'s wills (members of the SPEE) were overwhelmingly (approximately over 95 per cent) religious in tone, reciting Karbala and Imam Hussein at the heart of the text. This is not to say that the majority of them did not mention Iran and its territorial integrity as reasons to fight, but at times and only marginally. However, the *Basîjs*' wills were more balanced (60 per cent religious, 40 per cent secular) in a way that they recited both secular and religious reasons for their fight. Although the wills and the compendiums of the published testaments do not point to the social classes of the martyrs, it can safely be said that there were more martyrs from the provincial cities than the capital, Tehran. To analyse and appreciate their creed of Shi'i leadership, martyrdom, war, honour, country, and paradise, it is necessary to point to some commonalities that these *Basîjis* or *pâsdârân* apparently shared. Just as it is evident in some of the testaments' English translations, the wills in their original language, Persian, also carry the same resolve even more pointedly and almost with a poetic sense which makes the sincere thoughts of the would-be-martyrs quite palpable. In other

words, the wills in their original language are more potent and moving than those that have been translated, despite Nader Nazemi superb job. Both sets of wills, the ones written in Persian, which I examined, and the ones that Nader Nazemi translated, speak very much of the same ideology and they both conform to the same goal: a strong willingness to self-sacrifice for one's belief, modelled on the story of Karbala and Imam Hussein.

A martyr, Ali Asghar Noori (d.1995), pointed to the idea of Islamic leadership and how the Ayatollah came to prepare the ground by leading the Shi is in welcoming the twelfth Imam, Mahdi, from his great occultation (*al-ghayba al-kubra*) since 941 by getting rid of the un-Islamic, Western supported regime in Baghdad and other Islamic lands (Zamanpour 1995:144). He asserted that the same people that disagreed with 'Imam [Khomeini] today, would have disagreed with Imam Hussein too had they lived in his time, and should the Mahdi arrive, they would continue to disagree'. Noori states that if the world would be filled with 'Yazids' it would be unimaginable for persons such as him to turn their backs to the Lord of Martyrs (Imam Hussein) and the Ayatollah (Zamanpour 1995).

Bijan Muhammadian (d.1995), another martyr, claimed in his will that since he could not aid Imam Hussein in Karbala, at least he had a chance to aid his 'child', meaning Khomeini, which he saw as the 'duty' of any righteous Shi'i (Zamanpour 1995:131). He believed in Khomeini's rhetoric that this war was a conflict between the forces of 'truth and falsehood' and since he believed that truth always won, he knew that he was 'victorious' if he were martyred (Zamanpour 1995:132).

In another will, Amir Sanjabi (d.1982) claimed that in fighting the 'atheist' Iraqis, he saw al-Mahdi 'who give[s] him hope and strength' (Sanjabi 1982:112-3) He continued by stating that he wished his body was brought to his hometown and that his mother would be brought to see his 'bullet-riddled body'. He also wanted everyone to congratulate her for raising a son who was worthy of martyrdom. At the end of his will, he asked his wife not to cry for his death, and instead encouraged her to be proud and to be like Imam Hussein's sister, Zaynab, who gave her own sons to martyrdom, and most importantly, not to forget *Ashura* (Sanjabi 1982).

Another martyr, Nasrullah Shahabi (d.1982), proclaimed his readiness for martyrdom and wrote, 'I have preferred the martyr's way which is divine prosperity to the mundane hope' (Shahabi 1982:128-9). This martyr even claimed that the Iraqi soldier was essentially a pawn for the 'imperialists' and a Muslim brother, fooled by the materialistic world (Shahabi 1982). As

stated above, the amazing part of these wills is their stated allegiance to the country and to Islam, or to be more exact, to Shi'ism and Imam Hussein as the right version of Islam, simultaneously. Similarly a *Basiji* POW confessed to the same ideology by stating that what the real Shi'i fought for was solely based on the same ideology of Imams Ali and Hussein and believed that to be the 'duty for the whole Shi'ite community,' and declared Shi'ism to be 'the true faith' (Brown 1990:86). Shahabi (d. 1982) continued in his will addressing his mother:

Mother, I am fighting with all my strength. I have seen summer's sun, the cold wind of autumn, the snow and the rain of winter, the heaviness of war's tools in the Hosseinic encampment, and now I am ready to sacrifice myself for my country. [...] Although you will cry because of my death, you will be majestic forever, and you will take pride in me because I have sacrificed myself for my country and you will say that he fought bravely and was proudly martyred (Shahabi 1982).

The will and testament of Azim Motuli Habibi (d.1997), another SPEE martyr and commander of a *Basij* battalion, can safely be viewed as a reflection and model of the majority of the *Basiji* members' wills that I have examined. He summons it this way:

I ask all members of my family and friends and acquaintances to bless me, and if I have upset you in any way I ask for your forgiveness, and that you never be saddened by my death in the path of God, but be happy. I know how you must feel now that I am not amongst you, and I hope that your sentiments are sincere and for the sake of God, for the one who gave me life has now taken my life, and I have given my life with the utmost sincerity and have returned unto Him. Dear family, know that I chose this path with full knowledge and no one has forced me to enter it, and I only chose it for God and to please him. I ask God to allow me success in this path. My wish from God is that he not take me from this world until I have visited the shrine of Imam Hussein, so that I may enter the shrine on my own, and if death should not allow me the opportunity and the wish of God is that I die, that my spirit be taken there. Now that I am on the way to the war of justice against injustice, I enter into a compact with my God to kill

as many of the enemies of Islam as I can so that the Islamic Revolution may reach its final victory, and should I fail this and deserve martyrdom in the path of God, that I will be martyred. This too will be a path that He has set for me. All people will taste death, so all the better that this death be in the struggle for the path of God. As a Muslim brother I ask my family and all my Muslim brothers and sisters that they obey the Imam, that they support this valuable blessing that God has granted us, and God forbid that they do anything so that God should take this blessing from us. I ask Muslims and the Party of God [Hizbollah] to smash the enemies of Islam, Muslims, and the Imam, in the mouth. I ask the youth and other brothers that if until now they have not succeeded in going to the front, this university for the development of humans, and to separate themselves from this world, a disloyal friend, to move in the direction of God (Nazemi 1997:270-1).

Conclusion

The devout Iranian Shi'i has a very complex method of thinking about religion and politics; the two are embedded in one another. The Iranian clerical establishment was well aware of this reality and the emotional attachment that the Iranians have for Hussein's story.

This study faced two complicated phenomena: *Basij* and nationalism. *Basij* was, and still remains a complex organisation. Its religious and philosophical ideologies mixed with its nationalist fervour could not be easily differentiated. At times it stood for fear and terror in the minds of some Iranians when they acted as moral police and stormed people's homes arbitrarily. Yet they were also seen as heroes when their dead bodies were paraded around before burial. A full study of the *Basiji* has not been carried out as yet, but this study has attempted to serve as an introduction. Nationalism and the difficulty it introduces when mixed with religious beliefs make a seemingly complicated subject all by itself.

Shi'i symbolism and rituals have roots in Iranian culture, and if we were to consider the affect of wars on solidification of beliefs, as Hutchinson argues (2005:10-43, 137), then the Iraqi invasion of Iran solidified these beliefs for some people and the war provided an appropriate setting for these to take a deeper root. No matter how obscure or illogical a thinking about a religious story, it is still present in the Iranian society's consciousness. It seems that from the start of the Iranian conversion to Shi'ism, a sense of 'historical

mission' (Hutchinson 2005:191) existed and it became even more severe when faced with outside threats and wars. The clerical government was aware of this as well as of nationalism as a part of the Iranian socio-political makeup. They used this combination to entice young men to fight and offer themselves as human mine sweepers and fighters in a long war. The modern Iranian flag in one hand and Quran in the other, these fighters believed in their cause, their leader, and the promise that they would ascend to heaven once killed.

Religious individuals had their reasons of fighting, and secular nationalists did as well. The combination of religious and secular nationalisms was perfect and since the Islamic Republic knew of this reality, it capitalised on it to the best of its ability and hence 'the longest war' (Hiro 1989) was fought.

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