THE CONCEPT OF MARTYRDOM IN TWELVER SHĪ'ĪSM: IDEAS AND DEVELOPMENT

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Note on Transliteration and the Scope of this Study

For Romanized Arabic and Persian words, I used the system proposed by Library of Congress.[1] For the sake of consistency, I transliterated Persian words similar to Arabic words. There are some exceptions in the case of those proper names and religious terms with widely accepted English spellings (such as Qur'an, Muhammad, Jihad, Khomeini, Khamenei, Ayatollah, Shariati).

As for the scope of this dissertation, the discussion of martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm` is mostly limited to the case of Iran as the largest Shī'ite nation and one with a highly developed state doctrine of martyrdom. Also, the phenomenon of martyrdom in Shī'īsm in modern times is no doubt multi-factorial. Iranian nationalism, for instance, plays a large role in Iran, the largest Shiite nation, as it does in many other modern ideologies of sacrifice/martyrdom. This study, however, concentrates on the very important religious factor. The dissertation is, moreover, a study of ideas/theology, and not of popular conceptions, which would require field research; the ideas discussed no doubt have influence, especially since they are spread by much propaganda. Finally, the current work concentrates on ideas or doctrine about martyrdom developed in the "mainstream" Shī'ī tradition controlled by the clerics, since this is the predominant thought in Shī'īsm today.

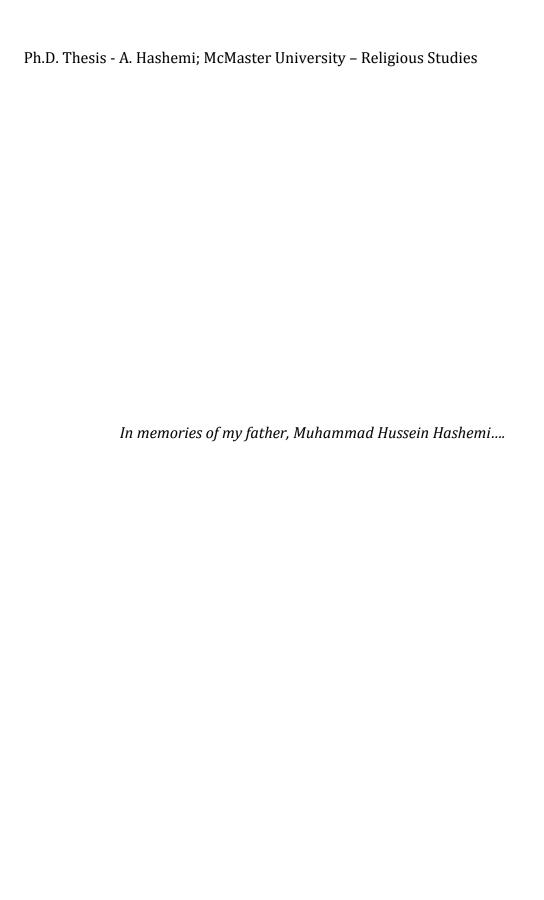[1] https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/arabic.pdf

In memories of my father, Muhammad Hussein Hashemi….

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INTRODUCTION

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Death, by all means, is not something one would desire under normal circumstances. Yet, it can be seen as a way (probably the last resort) to escape from the harsh and unbearable realities of life. Those unbearable pressures due to severe stress, anxiety, public scandal, poverty, illness, and so on, would lead a person struggling with them to end his or her life and all miseries by committing suicide. This inclination towards death comes out of despair and would be out of the question for anyone living a happy or bearable life. Choosing to die can receive a heroic response when a compelling political, humanitarian, social, ethical, or national related cause becomes the motive for taking one's life, actively or passively. These noble motives provide a meaning to the act of ending one's life by virtue of making it relatable to a sympathetic audience; hence, we may call them virtuous suicides. These deaths occur to prove a point or to make a difference in the world of the living.

There remains a relatively new kind of death, called martyrdom, which evolved with the development of the Abrahamic traditions, the idea of the existence of one supreme God, and the concept of the afterlife. In other words, while acts of heroism in wars (noble death), and courageously being killed for one's peoples, soil and country had long been known and recognized among people of ancient times, attributing a celestial value for the violent death proved to be a new and important development in the history of Israelites' religion just before the turn of the Common

Era. Although in the idea of noble death among the Greco-Roman pagans we see traces of dying for gods in the form of the practice of *devotio*, as Jan Willem Van Henten observed, the fallen heroes actually did not expect anything in return from the gods other than the victory of their people through transferring the wrath of gods to their enemy.[1] What martyrdom added to the topic was the other-worldly expectations arising from a virtuous suicide when the primary motive for taking one's life had to do with God, or more specifically, with Christ in the case of Christian martyrdom. So, it is fair to claim that the idea of martyrdom, as we understand it today, is a relatively new concept compared to the long history of religion on earth. It begins in a certain period roughly around the end of the Second Temple era.

The most common and simplest definition of martyrdom could be 'dying for God.' The modern concept of martyrdom, or the journalistic way of understanding this issue, however, makes martyrdom synonymous to "the act of dying for a religious commitment." [2] In other words, martyrdom in today's popular understanding, particularly in the case of martyrdom in the Muslim world, has to do with the willingness to kill and the intention to be killed for a religious conviction. The expression of martyrdom in terms of religious commitments puts 'martyrdom' in the same category as all other (virtuous) suicides, which does not help us understand this

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[1] Jan Willem Van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees*, vol. 57 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 147.; Friedrich Avemarie and Jan Willem Van Henten, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002), 19.

[2] Candida R Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 3.

phenomenon accurately. As Paul Middleton has stated, unlike suicide in any of its forms, martyrdom, in its original sense, is not anything close to "unfortunate necessity" or "an act of self destruction," but rather, for martyrs, choosing death actually means "rushing towards life."[3] Therefore, martyrdom in this sense, is almost completely different from the simple act of suicide.

Scholars have tried to define martyrdom with special attention to its Greek origin (being witness) so as to differentiate martyrdom from other forms of suicide. The definitions, however, vary based on scholars' views on the origin of the concept of martyrdom and whether martyrdom can be traced to the pre-Christian era as well. Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, for example, argue for the existence of martyrdom before the Jewish and Christian terminologies of martyrdom appeared and define it almost without direct reference to God and a particular religious tradition to expand the notion of martyrdom. For them, a martyr in an "extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with a demand of the (usually pagan) authorities."[4] Arthur Droge and James Tabor also put together five criteria for any act to be counted as martyrdom. First, there should be situations of persecution. Second, the necessity of martyrs' noble and heroic choice of death. Third, martyrs' eagerness to die, even to the point of killing themselves. Fourth, the act of martyrdom

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[3] Paul Middleton, "Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defence," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 64, no. 2 (2013).

[4] Avemarie and Van Henten, 3.

resulting in vicarious benefits. Fifth, and the most important factor in their view, the expectation of after-death reward and vindication.[5]

Brad Gregory, in *Salvation at Stake,* comes with some prerequisites for any act to be considered significant religious martyrdom, emphasizing the need for survivors who believe in the virtue of the person who has been violently killed as a martyr. In other words, martyrdom is not an objective issue; it should be witnessed and believed by others. Gregory also argues that 'the notion of martyrdom' needs to be cultivated in the society. Moreover, there must be people willing to punish what they regard as heterodoxy by death, and, on the other hand, there "must be people willing to die for their religious convictions."[6] David Cook takes a similar stance and sees martyrdom a result of a clash between two opposing belief systems. For him, this clash is "constructed in the minds of the martyr, the enemy, the audience and the writer of the historical-hagiographical narrative."[7]

Other scholars have tried to connect the origin and definition of martyrdom to either Judaism or Christianity. The argument for the role of the Jewish tradition in martyrdom is that although martyrdom became widespread and relevant in the Christian world during the first couple of centuries through "persecution, suffering

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[5] Arthur J Droge and James D Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Harpercollins, 1992), 75.

[6] Brad Stephan Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 26.

[7] David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

and death" of the early Christians, the roots of the concept go back to the Jewish proto-martyrs described in the books of Daniel and Maccabees.[8] In other words, scholars like William Frend have argued that Christian martyrdom was actually inspired by Jewish traditions a couple of centuries before the common era.[9] On the contrary, Glen Bowersock, in his *Martyrdom and Rome*, argues that Christian writings on martyrdom introduced the idea in Judaism as the stories of slain Jews were written after the accounts of Christian martyrs.[10] Basically, Bowersock's thesis is that Christian martyrdom was something entirely new and had no antecedents. Daniel Boyarin takes the middle ground, arguing that one cannot make a case for whether martyrdom originated in Christianity or Judaism as the Christian and Jewish traditions in the first couple of centuries were not "two separate entities" to make us think of "one (and not the other-either-one) as the point of origin of a given practice."[11] He then proposes his definition and considers martyrdom "as a 'discourse,' as a practice of dying for God and of talking about it, a discourse that changes and develops over time and undergoes particularly interesting transformations among rabbinic Jews and other Jews, including Christians, between the second and the fourth centuries."[12]

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[8] Mark Brettler, "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?," in *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (American Academy of Religion, 2002), 3.

[9] William WHC Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 65.

[10] Glen Warren Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.

[11] Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 93.

[12] Ibid., 94.

Putting aside the Christian versus Jewish debate on the origin of martyrdom, some scholars root for the Greco-Roman tradition of the noble-death, which made death "fashionable,"[13] as the basis for the development of martyrdom in Abrahamic religions.[14] Finally, Judith Perkins postulates a different view. She neither pays attention to the comparison of the martyrdom-like examples in different traditions nor seeks the roots of martyrdom in persecutions, sense of heroism (in noble death), or keeping the law (in the Jewish cases like the Maccabees) but values the cultural and social significance of suffering, particularly among Christians, that created the phenomenon of martyrdom.[15]

To sum up, as Paul Middleton argues in *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, none of the positions mentioned above draw a perfect picture of the nature and origin of martyrdom.[16] However, they all talk about different pieces of a puzzle that eventually shaped martyrdom as we understand it today. There are many factors essential in the formation of the concept of martyrdom. Or, we might say that martyrdom is an umbrella term for a recurring concept in history with different

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[13] Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (London: A&C Black, 2006), 116.

[14] See for example: Droge and Tabor.; David Seeley, *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul's Concept of Salvation*, vol. 28, Journal for the Study of the New Testament (Sheffield: A&C Black, 1990).; Shmuel Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs in the Pagan and Christian Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 35.

[15] Judith Perkins, "The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and Early Christian Martyrdom," *Arethusa* 18, no. 2 (1985).

[16] Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, 123.

forms and factors. We might be able to discern a nonlinear pattern, however vague in some ways, in the development of martyrdom since choosing death for reasons related to God, either actively or passively (that is what scholars have called voluntary or radical martyrdom versus passive or secondary martyrdom), became noticeable among the ancient religious societies.[17] This is what I am going to demonstrate in my dissertation, though my focus will be on martyrdom in Islam and, in particular, the Twelver Shī'īsm's ever-changing concept of martyrdom and its evolving meaning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

The primary question in this study concerns the nature of the act of martyrdom (factors involved in the formation of the concept), its theological implications, and its connection to other tenets of religion. Martyrdom, in its later development, has a lot to do with apocalyptic eschatology; hence, particular attention is also needed to interpret martyrdom from this vantage point. As far as martyrdom in Islam is concerned, I will try to answer this question: how has the understanding of martyrdom changed in the transition from pre-modern to modern periods? Can we discern a meaningful development in the understanding of martyrdom throughout Islamic history? I will also try to distinguish martyrdom as a goal in itself (the noblest way to meet God, something tied to redemption), and martyrdom as a means to reach

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[17] See Geoffrey Ernest Maurice De Ste Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 153.

a goal (one way, among others, to please God). Moreover, in discussing martyrdom in Twelver Shīʻīsm one needs to distinguish martyrdom in its sectarian sense. Here, I will address the question of what gives martyrdom a specifically Shīʻī nature. With the concept of the Imamate being one of the pillars in Twelver Shīʻīsm, a related question will be how and in what ways has martyrdom been defined and articulated in relation to Imamate and messianism in Shīʻī texts and traditions?

In addition to looking at the Qurʼan, I will also examine the relevant modern and pre-modern major texts of ḥadīth, law, martyrologies, and history in Twelver Shīʻīsm. In particular, I will focus on important events in Shīʻa history, with emphasis on the claims of righteous revolts and martyrdom to provide an in-depth understanding of martyrdom. These include incidents of martyrdom during the time of the Prophet and the Imams, most notably the battle of Karbalā and the martyrdom of Ḥusayn in 680, and other early Shīʻa uprisings and martyrdoms, as well as accounts of martyrdom in later periods. In Shīʻa legal and ḥadīth works, I will primarily examine sections of *Kitāb al-jihad* (Book of Jihad), which contain most of the discussions on martyrdom. While many scholars put jihad and martyrdom in the same category, I will separate them in my discussion, focusing mostly on the act of dying for God. Therefore, other than some passing references, I will not explore the legal, theological, and historical discussions of jihad.

In this study, I will also discuss and evaluate how the concept of martyrdom has been reflected in Islamic (Shīʻī) texts and narrations in the pre-modern (the

formative centuries of Twelver Shīʻīsm) compared to scholastic, popular, and state-sanctioned opinions in the modern period (with particular attention to its development in contemporary Iran as the leading Shīʻa country). Since, as I will mention in the next section, most studies on martyrdom in Islam have focussed on the concept of martyrdom in Sunni Islam, I will avoid this discussion with the exception of chapter two where I will review the early understanding of martyrdom from Sunni sources. So, in this dissertation, my main attention will be on a particular branch of Islam, that is Twelver Shīʻīsm. For the sake of brevity, I will not discuss martyrdom in other branches of Shīʻīsm, and in Sufism, as well as the Kharijites' practice of martyrdom, as they are not relevant to my discussion of martyrdom in the recent decades.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON MARTYRDOM IN ISLAM

The concept of martyrdom has often been examined in the form of case studies, and in Twelver Shīʻīsm, it is the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, the third Imām, that dominates the discussion of martyrdom. Most of the studies on martyrdom in Shīʻīsm discuss the redemptive effects of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, and also, its social and political consequences.[18] Other works were conducted in an anthropological and specifically ethnographic context focusing on symbols and rituals related to commemorating

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[18] Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague: Walter de Gruyter, 1978).; Wilferd; Jean Calmard; Peter Chelkowski Madelung, "Hosayn B. 'Ali," in *Encyclopaedia lranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge, 2004).; Edith Szanto, "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013).

Ḥusayn and the other Imams' martyrdom.[19] There are also general works that broadly

compare and contrast the classical and modern understanding of martyrdom in Islam

by looking at both Sunni and Shī'ī traditions.[20] Yet, there are several other works

which mostly focus on jihad and martyrdom in the modern period, particularly

suicide bombings inspired by jihadist ideologies. They specifically deal with political

and/or legal issues related to jihad and suicide bombing, particularly in the Sunni

world.[21] There are also some encyclopedia entries on martyrdom, which provide a

good overview of the meaning of martyrdom in the Qur'an and ḥadīth literature.[22]

Of all the works mentioned above, David Cook's book, *Martyrdom in Islam*, is

the most comprehensive study of martyrdom in general which covers materials from

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[19] Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle University of Washington Press, 2004).; James A Bill and John Alden Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims: Prayer, Passion, and Politics* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[20] Cook.; Meir Hatina, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[21] Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).;Bernard K. Freamon, "Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History," *Fordham International Law Journal* 27, no. 1 (2003).; Manochehr Dorraj, "Symbolic and Utilitarian Political Value of a Tradition: Martyrdom in the Iranian Political Culture," *The Review of politics* 59, no. 3 (1997).; Juan Ricardo Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).; Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).; Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).; Ami Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004).; Mohammed M Hafez, *Manufacturing Human Bombs: The Making of Palestinian Suicide Bombers* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006).; *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007).; Massimo Campanini, "The Party of God (Hizbullāh): Islamic Opposition and Martyrdom in Contemporary Imamite Shiism," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 27, no. 1 (2006).; Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2008).; Meir Hatina and Meir Litvak, *Martyrdom and Sacrifice in Islam: Theological, Political and Social Contexts* (London: IB Tauris, 2017).

[22] Wim Raven, "Martyrs," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2003).; Etan KohIberg, "Shahīd," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. T. Bianquis P. Bearman, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

Sunni, Sufi and Shī'ite Islam with a very short introductory comparative review of the phenomenon of martyrdom in the world religions. His argument, with which I also agree in my dissertation, is that martyrdom in the formative period of Islam was not an essential theme, rather it was primarily a by-product of jihad in the path of Allāh against the enemies of Islam. I will discuss this concept in more details in chapter two. He then goes on to distinguish different categories of martyrdom and (general and specific) rewards associated to it as delineated in the post-Qur'anic *ḥadīth* literature; these include active martyrdom on the battlefield as well as different sorts of passive or non-violent martyrdoms, or even the case of martyrs of love (a sincere lover who dies while chasing their love). Cook, moreover, speaks about sectarian martyrdom and how Shī'īsm developed its own understanding of martyrdom around the idea of persecution at the hands of dominant Sunnis particularly in the first three centuries, quite similar to the early Christian martyrdom. He wraps up his discussion by turning to martyrdom in the contemporary context in which he pays attention to new jihadist ideologies that emerged in the Twentieth century and their use of martyrdom for their purpose, particularly in the form of suicide attack.

Meir Hatina's book, *Martyrdom in Modern Islam*, can be seen as a sequel and an updated version of Cook's *Martyrdom in Islam*. Hatina also begins his book with a short comparative study of martyrdom in the three Abrahamic religions before turning into contemporary Islam. His discussion of martyrdom in the modern period as a result of the rise of political Islam, benefited from his careful and meticulous

analysis of the classic martyrdom literature. This was similar to what Cook did in his book. Hatina's main argument is that martyrdom cannot be summarized in the mere act of sacrifice for a religiously motivated cause, rather it is a discursive phenomenon coming from a mixture of cultural, political and historical narratives; in his words, "the martyr has no existence without memorialization, commemoration, and narration."[23] In his last two chapters, as is common in the studies of martyrdom in the contemporary period, Hatina approaches martyrdom in the form of suicide attack by providing a comprehensive literature review of the subject among Muslim scholars. Hatina also observes the importance of Ayatollah Khomeini's pan-Islamism and his emphasis on sacrifice for Islam as a driving force behind the rise of suicide attacks by the Shīʻites in Lebanon in early 1980s; a practice which eventually "penetrated the Sunni discourse," and made active martyrdom an essential part of Sunni extremists such as al-Qaeda and Hamas in Palestine.[24]

Since many studies on martyrdom are connected to the issue of jihad, I finish the literature review with Asma Afsaruddin's *Striving in the Path of God: jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, which, like Cook and Hatina's books, as well as this dissertation, tends to provide a holistic history of ideas related to jihad and martyrdom (though mostly the former). Her approach is to juxtapose the two ends of the concept of jihad which she summarizes in two key words of *qitāl* (fighting)

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[23] Hatina, 7.

[24] Ibid., 99.

associated with military jihad and martyrdom, and *ṣabr* (patience) which reflects the idea of non-violent jihad. Her main argument is that the growth of the militant aspect of jihad and martyrdom is a product of later development in Islam.

To sum up, other than these sources, there has been a little work done on the issue of martyrdom in either Sunni or Shī'ite Islam (compared to the wealth of scholarship on martyrdom in its biblical sense). More research is needed to better comprehend different aspects of martyrdom and its meanings and motives in Islam, particularly in Twelver Shī'īsm where martyrdom is of great importance. There has been little effort to comprehensively examine the historical development of the concept of martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm from the first Islamic century to the contemporary period. This dissertation will help fill this gap by focusing not only on the martyrdom of Husain in 680 but also by going beyond that to draw a better picture of martyrdom in general and its position and importance in Shī'a theology and among modern Shī'a community, particularly in Iran as the leading Shī'a country. What is missing from Western scholarship of the subject is an attempt to study martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm in connection to and in the light of two pillars of this tradition, Imamate and the idea of al-Mahdī, the eschatological redeemer of Islam. I believe that my study on the concept of martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm, by juxtaposing martyrdom with the concepts of Imamate and *intiẓār* (awaiting the return of al-Mahdī), will be an important contribution to the field.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

In chapter one, which is actually an extended introduction to my study of the concept of martyrdom, I will briefly present my understanding of the development of the concept of martyrdom from its beginning. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will stick with the basic definition of martyrdom, that is, dying for the sake of God. Therefore, I start with the historical/textual inquiry about some factors that gave rise to the idea of willingness to give up one's life for reasons which had to do with God; in other words, I will examine motivations for accepting the religiously-motivated violent deaths that eventually, in the second century CE, became known as martyrdom. I will limit my study of the development of martyrdom in early Judaism and Christianity to four themes which have been touched on by scholars in the field. To be more precise, I will examine a number of biblical and extrabiblical references to the issues of sin and the disobedience to God, fear of God, love of God, and apocalypse in order to demonstrate how the concept of martyrdom gradually evolved among Jews and Christians and later appropriated by Muslims. I chose these themes specifically because they seem to be of most important factors which shaped martyrdom as we know it today.

Moreover, as an introduction to my study of martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm, in particular, three of these factors will reappear in my discussion of martyrdom in later chapters. The issue of committing sin and the willingness to repent as a strong motive for martyrdom which I will deal with in the early Jewish and Christian texts was at the

centre of the Shīʿī *Tawwābūn* rebellion following the martyrdom of Ḥusayn (as I will discuss it in chapter three). It also reappears in my discussion of the martyred Shrine defenders (see chapter four). Similarly, martyrdom out of love of God traditionally has been linked to the martyrdom of Husain by mainstream Twelver Shīʿites. I will touch on it in chapters three and four where I will turn to Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, the eight-year war with Iraq, and the inspirations derived from Husain's martyrdom. Finally, martyrdom's link to the cosmic battle has become an important topic in modern Twelver Shīʿīsm, particularly in Iran after the Islamic revolution and more specifically with the recent civil war in Syria; I will discuss this in more depth in chapter four.

In chapter two, I will deal with the way martyrdom was introduced to Muslims and delineated in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions (focusing on Sunni Islam). As I will discuss, the word which is used in Arabic for martyrdom is '*shahādah*,' and that for martyr is '*shahīd*,' meaning 'witness.' The term was not coined by the Qur'an, and it appears that Islam borrowed it from Christianity. So, I will start with a comparison of martyrdom in Islam and Christianity. I will then closely examine Qur'anic verses which are pertinent to the idea of giving up life for the sake of God and his religion. My argument will be that a full-blown concept of martyrdom in Islam, as we know it today, was theorized later on by extra-Qur'anic traditions reported from the Prophet, and in the case of Shīʿīsm, from the Imams. I will also delineate the changing definitions and understanding of martyrdom in the early centuries of Islamic history

and discuss the vivid descriptions of the rewards associated with martyrdom in Islam according to the ḥadīth literature.

In chapter three, I will then focus on martyrdom in its Shīʿī understanding. I will start the chapter with some historical inquiries on the diverging approaches on martyrdom in Sunni and Shīʿite Islam. This will lead us to the discussion of sectarian martyrdom in Islam. For the purpose of a better understanding of martyrdom among the Shīʿa, I will review and examine the accounts of revolt/death/martyrdom of prominent religious figures in the formative period of Twelver Shīʿīsm. Of course, no study of martyrdom in Islam can be complete without mentioning the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, the third Shīʿī Imām, in 680. I will also explore the significance of Ḥusayn's martyrdom in Twelver Shīʿī thought and its influence on the concept of martyrdom in Shīʿīsm. As I mentioned earlier, by making parallels to my discussion in chapter one, I will touch on the issues of sin, love of God, messianism and awaiting the return of the Hidden Imām at the end of time (*intiẓār*), in my presentation of the Shīʿī understanding of martyrdom. My argument in this chapter concerns the importance of the role of the concept of Imamate and *wilāyah* in defining righteous acts of martyrdom in Twelver Shīʿīsm. To make this more understandable for the non-specialist reader, I will include an appendix at the end of my dissertation to delineate and explain the aspects and significance of the idea of Imamate and *wilāyah* in Twelver Shīʿīsm.

Chapter four is the most important chapter of this dissertation. It contains my original contribution to Shī'ite and Islamic studies and the discussion of martyrdom in modern Shī'īsm. I will deal with the modern understanding of the concept of martyrdom among the mainstream Shī'a in the light of Shī'ī messianism. In the 20th century, with the advent of political Islam and particularly the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, part of the Shī'a broke with the traditional understanding of Imamate and *intiẓār* and the idea of piously waiting for the return of al-Mahdī. They revived the idea of active martyrdom as a weapon of the oppressed. As I will discuss, in the new paradigm, the focus has been on the establishment of a just Islamic order as a means to hasten the return of al-Mahdī and fulfilling the Qur'anic injunction of standing for justice. Hence, martyrdom along the way of modern Shī'a revival has been reimagined. I will aim to shed light on this new development with a focus on the Shī'as of Iran. The Islamic revolution of Iran and the devastating eight-year Iran-Iraq war resulted in a lot of attention being paid to the idea of seeking martyrdom as a sure way of salvation. However, the more recent wave of sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Syria has triggered yet another interesting development in the way martyrdom is understood among the Shī'a. I will finish my discussion with a close attention to the reinforced willingness for martyrdom and the new meaning behind it. To amplify my discussion, I will examine official statements and speeches of the leaders of the Islamic revolutions and the Islamic Republic of Iran (particularly Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, the former and current supreme leaders of Iran) with regards to martyrdom to draw a better picture of the new developments on the subject.

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CHAPTER 1: THE MAKING OF MARTYRDOM IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

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"God has purchased the persons and possessions of the believers in return for the Garden––they fight in God's way: they kill and are killed––this is a true promise given by him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an" (Qur'an, 9:111).

INTRODUCTION

"Even if for the present I would avoid the punishment of mortals," Eleazar confidently declares, "yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age; and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws."[25] A couple of centuries later, Rabbi Akiva also proudly makes this clear to his disciples just before his last breath: "Throughout my life I have

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[25] 2 Maccabees 6:26-29 (All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV).

been troubled about this verse, [*And thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul*...] and with all thy soul which means: Even if he take thy life. For said I, 'When will it be in my power to fulfil it?' But now that the opportunity is mine, shall I not fulfil it?"[26] Also, just a few years later his contemporary, Polycarp, fearlessly faces burning in fire and replies to his executioner: "Eighty and six years have I served him [Christ], and he has done me no wrong. How then can I now blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"[27] Next, fast forward to 680, and it is Ḥusayn who stands tall and raises his voice against a hostile army, saying, "Do you not see how right is not acted upon and falsehood is not prevented? Then let the believer desire the meeting with God, for I see death as being nothing other than happiness while life with the oppressors as the most undesirable."[28] Facing death to avoid the transgression of God's law, hoping for the otherworldly reward, loving God to the end, imitating 'the Lord' in his suffering, or fulfilling God's command to glorify his name all acted in one way or another as motivations for these exemplary believers and their like-minded contemporaries to shed their blood. By doing so, they set the bar to follow for generations to come in their respective traditions when the opportunity comes to give up their lives for God and to embrace 'martyrdom.'

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[26] *The Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakot*, ed. A. Cohen (London: Cambridge: University Press, 1921), 407.

[27] *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9:3. See the text in: *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Maxwell Staniforth, The Penguin Classics, L197 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 158-59.

[28] Abul-Qāsim ibn 'Asākir, *Tarjamat Al-Imām Al-Ḥusayn* (Qum: Majma' al-Thaqāfat al-Islāmīyyah, 1993), 314. <http://shiaweb.org/books/al-imām_al-hussain/pa68.html> (last visit on 1/26/215)

The concept of dying for God appeared around the end of the Second Temple period. What made that period fertile for the development of the concept? I think we do not need to look for any particular reason other than the troubled relationship between God and his people: sin and disobedience to his covenants, which (allegedly) resulted in the Hebrews' punishment by exile and death and destruction at the hands of foreign nations. And so, I start this chapter with a discussion on sin as the first motivation for accepting death (a sort of punishment) among the ancient Israelites, before examining other main motives.

This is not an exhaustive examination of the concept of martyrdom with its different aspects within the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Rather, in this chapter, I will investigate some factors (relevant to my discussion in this dissertation) that helped the development of what by the second century CE became known as martyrdom. In my argument, these factors (sin and repentance, fear of God, love of God, and an apocalyptic aspect) are among the important themes in the study of martyrdom. Finally, since, in my other chapters I will extensively examine the concept of martyrdom in Islam (particularly in Shīʿīsm), in the current section my focus will be on early Judaism and early Christianity, primarily through surveying biblical and extra-biblical resources relevant to my discussion.

MARTYRDOM: SIN AND REPENTANCE

Ever since the fall of Judah in 586 BCE and the Israelites' exile to Babylon, it was clear to them that something was wrong in their relationship with the God of Israel.

Perhaps for them, either the God of Israel (Yahweh) was weaker than other deities such as Baal and Asherah,[29] and, consequently, incapable of protecting the Israelites from the calamities facing them[30] (there is evidence showing that some Hebrews believed this),[31] or the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem were part of God's plan in the form of punishment or retribution for the wrongdoings of his people as it is suggested in some Biblical texts. Apparently, 2 Kings 17: 6-23 points to the second scenario:

> In the ninth year of *Hoshea* the king of Assyria captured Samaria; he carried the Israelites away to Assyria. He placed them in *Halah*, on the *Habor*, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. This occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They had worshiped other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had introduced.... Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets." They would not listen but were stubborn, as their ancestors had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made

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[29] Asherah "in Old Babylonian texts, was a West Semitic goddess, worshiped in Syria in the second millennium BCE and still widely attested in southern Arabia in the mid-first millennium BCE and later." See: Edward LipiŃski, in *Encyclopedia of religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005), Volume 1: 589-91. Baal was "a popular deity in Syro-Palestinian or "Canaanite" religious traditions as a god of storms and fertility. Associated with kingship and oaths, his name appears as a divine witness to international treaties and as a common element in theophoric names. Baal was venerated in West Semitic religious traditions as a powerful god and patron of humanity for over two thousand years." See , Volume 2: 723-24.

[30] Kenneth Price, "Trends of the Portrayal of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible," *Best Integrated Writing* 1, no. 1 (2014).

[31] The book of Isaiah tends to present Yahweh as the superior deity capable of everything (also omnipotent and omniscient), perhaps in response to those who believed otherwise: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention'" (Isaiah 46:9-10).

> with their ancestors, and the warnings that he gave them….The people of Israel continued in all the sins that Jeroboam committed; they did not depart from them until the Lord removed Israel out of his sight, as he had foretold through all his servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day.[32]

For the writer(s), understanding the exile as God's punishment came after a series of prophets issued warnings to their people in the hope of repairing the troubled relationship between God and Israel. The text here does not suggest a clear prophecy of the coming of the exile and destruction due to sin. Nevertheless, having confessed the negation of the Mosaic covenant, perhaps for some Israelites it was already obvious that in order to win back God's trust, they had to pay the highest price: their lives. After all, dying for the sake of repentance was not unprecedented among the Hebrews, so, according to earlier texts, it was not totally out of the picture for them. Already, in the incident of the golden calf, Moses had commanded the sons of Levi to kill the calf worshippers as the only way for them to please God by removal of the sin. The point here is that the calf worshipers had to be killed by their unsinful comrades, and they had to accept this kind of death willingly as a sign of regret for their very wrong behavior after all those efforts that God had made to secure their freedom from Pharaoh's unjust rule:[33]

> Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.' The sons of Levi did as Moses

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[32] All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

[33] Their willingness is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, yet we do not see any act of resistance against the Moses's order for the killing of the sinners. Hence, it is safe to conclude that the calf worshippers submitted themselves willingly to the collective execution.

> commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, 'Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day' (Exodus 32).

This was perhaps among the first biblical stories of self-killing/submission to violent death that had to do with God (though not in a praiseworthy fashion).[34] In a later text, prophet Micah emphasizes the superiority of human sacrifice. He puts extraordinary value on such sacrifice and makes it a real sign of sincerity in seeking forgiveness for one's sins. We should note here, however, that such an atoning aspect of human sacrifice was not common among other people in the ancient Near East:[35]

> With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:6-7)

For Micah, "thousands of rams offered on the altar," Joyce Salisbury notes, "would surely spill enough blood to bring blessings, but sometimes even this much blood did not seem valuable enough. If life is valued, why not spill human blood as the most valuable sacrifice?" [36] Here, as was the case in the golden calf incident, though in an entirely different context, sacrificing a human was needed for the forgiveness of

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[34] The Qur'an briefly refers to the story in a passing note in its own way: "Moses said to his people, 'my people, you have wronged yourselves by worshipping the calf, so repent to your maker and kill [the guilty among] you. That is the best you can do in the eyes of your maker.' He accepted your repentance: He is the ever relenting and the most merciful" (2:54).

[35] Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "Ritual Killing and Sacrifice in the Ancient near East," in *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Karin Finsterbusch, Armin Lange, and Diethard Römheld (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub, 2007), 32.

[36] Joyce E Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 81.

another. In Exodus 32, those responsible for the calf worshiping (the actual sinners) had to die for the salvation of the whole community while in Micah 6, apparently innocent firstborns would pay the price for their fathers' sins by succumbing to their own sacrifice for God. Even though in later biblical texts (e.g., Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; 32:35) the human sacrifice is treated as wrong action, my argument here is that at least at some point, among the ancient Israelites, we see a connection between human sacrifice for God and the anticipation of forgiveness or salvation.[37]

In both Exodus 32 and Micah 6, the very act of "dying for God" because of sin and transgression of the Law does not carry an inspirational status; rather, more than anything else, it is a sort of harsh punishment to cleanse regretful souls of the sin of infidelity. Nevertheless, dying for repentance perhaps gained a more heroic and inspirational meaning in the Jewish scriptures with the story of Jonah, and particularly later with the accounts of the Maccabean revolt (167 to 160 BCE). It is also worth noting that unlike Exodus 32 and Micah 6, in the stories of Jonah and, more clearly, Maccabees, the victims do not appear merely as passive agents but rather are actively involved in the path towards their (possible) death for God's sake. There, we witness a concept not much dissimilar to what later in the early Common Era became

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[37] There is a scholarly speculation whether the human sacrifice that is prohibited in Jeremiah was made for YHWH or other deities such as Baal. For more discussion see: Armin Lange, ""They Burn Their Sons and Daughters. That Was No Command of Mine" (Jer 7:31). Child Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible and in the Deuteronomistic Jeremiah Redaction," in *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Karin Finsterbusch, Armin Lange, and Diethard Römheld (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub, 2007), 111-14.

understood as 'martyrdom,' in these cases as a remedy for sin and disobedience of God, as follows.

I start with my rather unorthodox reading of the Book of Jonah, which in my understanding, has some themes found in the concept of martyrdom. The Book of Jonah (1:1-17) tells us how he takes the blame for the storm knowing that indeed his disobedience against God put the sailors in danger: "for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you" (1:12). Because of that confession, Jonah urges the sailors to throw him into the sea as the only possible way to cease the storm created by the wrath of God.[38] Here, his near drowning (death) experience has three aspects that we find in martyrdom traditions: first, it comes due to his own sin as a sort of punishment and retribution; second, the very act of throwing himself into the sea and the willingness to give up his life has a very crucial consequence for the others, as it spares the sailors' lives by saving them from death and destruction in the sea; and finally, God miraculously saves Jonah himself by sending a large fish for his rescue (1:17), so, against the odds of the nature, his heroic action leads to his salvation as well.

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[38] The Qur'an narrates the story a little different than the Bible, in the former, Jonah does not confess his guilt in the first place: "Jonah too was one of the messengers. He fled to the overloaded ship. They cast lots, he suffered defeat, and a great fish swallowed him, for he had committed blameworthy acts. If he had not been one of those who glorified God, he would have stayed in its belly until the day when all are raised up, but we cast him out, sick, on to a barren shore, and made a gourd tree grow above him. We sent him to a hundred thousand people or more. They believed, so we let them live out their lives" (37: 139-148).

Similarly, 2 Maccabees tends to justify some pitiful instances of death based on sin.[39] The story of the Maccabean revolt sees violent death the consequence of sinful acts and at the same time points to its redemptive nature. The authors first try to justify the calamities facing the Hebrews arguing that this, in fact, is a sign of God's mercy towards his people, though sin is a factor to be blamed for bringing disasters upon the people. Pointing to God's mercy, despite his seemingly merciless punishment of the Israelites, is very important as it paved the way for the redemptive understanding of martyrdom. Here is the authors' rationale that the way God punishes his people comes out of his mercy toward them:

> In fact, it is a sign of great kindness not to let the impious alone for long, but to punish them immediately. For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but he does not deal in this way with us, in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Although he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people (2 Maccabees 6:13-16). [40]

The text goes on to describe the account of the Maccabean wars of independence. In those passages, the authors focus on the direct relation between sin and divine punishment. In one instance, they highlight a rather shocking discovery of Judas Maccabeus that his fallen soldiers (or martyrs as we may call them in retrospect) in a battle had idol amulets with them. Not surprisingly, Judas's understanding is that his

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[39] For reading more on this point see: Moss, 42.; *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 79.

[40] For texts of Maccabees I relied on the English translation by Michael D Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1612.

soldiers died for a reason, that is, their unfaithfulness to the God of Israel, by holding

on to idol-like objects during the battle. Considering that the Maccabean revolt

actually broke out against the Hellenization policy of Antiochus Epiphanes which

forced Israelites to worship Greek gods, Judas had a compelling reason to relate his

soldiers' fall to their sinful behaviour:

> On the next day, as had now become necessary, Judas and his men went to take
> up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kindred in
> the sepulchres of their ancestors. Then under the tunic of each one of the dead
> they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews
> to wear. And it became clear to all that this was the reason these men had
> fallen. So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous judge, who reveals
> the things that are hidden; and they turned to supplication, praying that the
> sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas
> exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with
> their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had
> fallen (12:39-42).

The passage, moreover, seems to support the idea that those righteous believers free

of sinful acts (most importantly idolatry) would probably prefer escaping untimely

death in war since it is, at least loosely, associated with wrongdoing. So, in this context,

despite having a sort of good intention in the defence of the Law, death on the

battlefield is still not something that one can be proud of; rather, it is a sign of

weakness in faith. In other words, the author makes it clear that although the fallen

soldiers were fighting in heroic fashion to avoid transgression of God's Law, they still

had to pay a painful and unfortunate price for their wrongdoing through facing death

in battle. Therefore, here even dying for the sake of a God-related cause is understood

as punishment and a means of purification of sinful souls.

In the early Common Era, when the concept of martyrdom and its terminology become known to Jews and Christians, we see similar and more explicit references to the purificatory role of dying for God.[41] A notable case in Rabbinic Judaism is the second century Rabbi Eliezer, who is arrested by Romans for the charge of heresy; though he tricks the authorities by using ambiguous language to avoid death/martyrdom. Yet in his understanding, he should have committed sinful acts that made him deserve the arrest. Rabbi Eliezer's rationale stems from his trust to God's judgment, and because he does not see the possibility of injustice from God's part, he searches his mind to find the fault in his own past behaviour. In Tosefta Hullin 2:242, we learn that Eliezer once had been attracted to sayings of a Christian and that little deviation from the path of the Rabbinic Judaism was the reason for his suffering and arrest.[42]

Similarly, Eliezer's contemporaries, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion and his family, readily accept their fate and martyrdom as a sort of punishment from God that they deserve.[43] According to tradition, Rabbi Hanina's martyrdom was justified because he pronounced the divine name according to its proper spelling which is prohibited (a

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[41] Fast forward to the Islamic period, we see a great example of martyrdom being interpreted as repentance in the story of the revolt of the Penitents, a group of Shīʻite Muslims who become regretful for having failed to support Ḥusayn ibn ʻAlī (the Prophet Muhammad's grandson) following his martyrdom in 680 CE. More to come here in the third chapter. For historical reference see Abū Muhammad Aḥmad B. Aʻtham al Kūfī, *Kitāb Al-Futūḥ*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwā', 1991), 203-06.

[42] Boyarin, 27.

[43] Avemarie and Van Henten, 157.

very trivial reason). His wife's execution also was weirdly justified because she failed

to prevent her husband from pronouncing the exact spelling of the name.[44] Another

example is discussed in the tractate *Neziqin*, which explains the martyrdom of two

famous rabbis, R. Simeon and R. Ishmael. According to tradition, they have a

discussion before their execution by Romans over why they should suffer martyrdom

and untimely death, and again here it turns out that a minor sin should be blamed for

their suffering:

> When R. Ishmael and R. Simeon were being led out for execution, R. Simeon
> said to R. Ishmael:[45] "My master…, my heart aches… because I do not know
> why I am to be executed." R. Ishmael replied to R. Simeon." Perhaps a man once
> came to you for judgment or for consultation and you kept him waiting while
> you drank something or took off your sandal or folded your *tallit*, and did not
> the Torah say if you do oppress them, (I will head their outcry) (Exod. 22:22),
> whether it be for severe oppression or minor oppression…" He answered him:
> "You have comforted me, my master."[46]

Daniel Boyarin notes that many other Jews as well as Christens saw atonement

as a reason for martyrdom and persecutions. Boyarin argues that they simply could

not "stand the thought of a God who punishes without cause."[47] In other words, in this

line of thinking, martyrdom is seen more like a loss than a blessing everyone yearns

to possess, so people with this mindset were looking for a cause for having to suffer

the loss of life, which turns out to be sin (minor or major) they had committed.

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[44] Ra'anan S Boustan, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism*, vol. 112, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 67-68.

[45] In another source it is actually R. Ishmael who is baffled by their fate and ask the question from R. Simeon. See: , 112, 74-75.

[46] Ibid., 112, 64.

[47] Boyarin, 52.

Nevertheless, even in this situation, dying for atonement still could be seen in a positive way in the sense that, at the end of the day, it is something which is coming from God for a good reason; it is not a random and unjust sort of punishment at the hands of tyrants, rather there is a clear justification for the suffering from God's point of view.

However, in *Neziqin* Rabi Akiva's comment on the martyrdom of R. Ishmael and R. Simeon reveals another, and a slightly different, rationale behind the martyrdom of the rabbis and the sufferings of people. The statement of R. Akiva to his students regarding the death (martyrdom) of R. Ishmael and R. Simeon is that, in fact, they were exemplary Jews, and God had to remove them from this world through martyrdom to protect them from his wrath toward the sinful generation. R. Akiva then warns them: "Prepare yourselves for retribution…, for if good had been destined to come in our generation the first to receive it would have been R. Simeon and R. Ishmael. But now it is revealed before him who spoke and the world came into being (i.e., God) that a great cataclysm is destined to come in our generation…; he (therefore) took these from among us."[48] In other words, in this narration, martyrdom for pious people is not due to any (notable) wrongdoing on their part; rather it is a mercy for them (for God separates them from the culpable ones) and, at the same time, a serious warning to sinful souls that God's retribution is imminent.

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[48] Boustan, 112, 64.

In the Maccabees, the violent death of seemingly innocent Jews for the atonement of their sinful people is at the centre of the narration.[49] So, the second and fourth books go beyond simply articulating martyrdom-like death as punishment for one's wrongdoings (as I discussed in the case of the fallen soldiers). During the early stages of the Maccabees movement, a respectful Jewish elder named Eleazar, among others, dies violently after refusing to eat pork in accordance with the Mosaic dietary laws. While he readies himself to be burned alive, 4 Maccabees 6:27-29 narrates, Eleazar lifts up his eyes to God and says:

> You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments for the sake of the law. Be merciful to your people, and let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs.

In this passage, the victim (call him a martyr) makes a meaningful impact on the fate of his people in the sense that by shedding his own blood, he spares the lives of his people and becomes a means for their purification and salvation in this world (similar to what Jonah did for saving the sailors' lives, though, unlike Jonah, Eleazar appears to be blameless). Therefore, if we (with our contemporary definition) see the fallen victims of the Maccabees as martyrs, we can then argue that the authors of 2 and 4 Maccabees speak about two different kinds of martyrs: a sinful martyr who dies in order to be purified (the fallen soldiers), and a righteous martyr that is killed as atonement for the sins of others (Eleazar). The latter is also seen in the dramatic story

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[49] Even though the term martyr was not commonly used at the time the books of Maccabees were written, in retrospect, I think it is fair to name heroes of the books as martyrs.

of a mother and her seven sons who refuse to eat pork in accordance with the Mosaic Law.[50] According to the texts, it is evident that the seven sons are righteous law-abiding Jews. In 2 Maccabees 7:18, we read the sixth son's speech prior his martyrdom: "After him [the fifth son] they brought forward the sixth [son]. And when he was about to die, he said, 'Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God'." However, we should understand 'our sins against our own God' as being referred to the sins of their fellow Hebrews, and not themselves since they are remembered there as God-fearing and practicing Jews.

Martyrdom and atonement go hand in hand, and their relation gets a much more theological importance in the Christian thought insofar as the passion of Christ makes the foundation of Christianity.[51] As Frances Young observes regarding the ancient Church, "it is highly probable that the tradition that a martyr's death could expiate sin was in fact the earliest means of understanding the death of Christ."[52] In other words, the sacrificial understanding of the death of Jesus (and to some extent, other Christian martyrs) and its atoning effect, was perhaps the earliest and most

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[50] The full account of the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons can be found in 2 Maccabees 7, and 4 Maccabees 8-18.

[51] Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, 76.

This might be a reason why the books of Maccabees are included in the Catholic approved bible despite their absence in the Hebrew Bible.

[52] Frances Margaret Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (London: SPCK, 1975), 56.

relatable scenario for early followers of Jesus who already were familiar with the tale of the Maccabean martyrs [53].

The second century Ignatius of Antioch and his contemporary Polycarp were two influential early Christian martyrs that further developed the understanding of martyrdom in terms of having sacrificial and atoning meaning. [54] Ignatius, for example, yearns for martyrdom in his letter to the Romans as a way to imitate Jesus in his passion and urges his fellow Christians not to intervene in his trial in order to save him from the death sentence and to be sacrificed for Christ. According to this letter, Ignatius sees himself as inferior to the apostles, and he seeks purification and elevation in rank by his martyrdom since, as one scholar suggests, "only through martyrdom can he become as they [the apostles] were."[55] In the letter to Romans Ignatius writes:

> I write to all the churches and certify to all that I die willingly for God provided you do not hinder me. I exhort you: do not become an inopportune kindness for me; let me be the food of wild beasts through whom it is possible to attain to God: I am the wheat of God, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread, instead, entice the wild beasts that they may become my tomb and leave behind no part of my body that when I fall asleep, I may burden no one. Then I shall truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ when the world will not even see my body. Pray Christ for me that by these means I may be found a sacrifice of God. I do not command you as Peter and Paul: they (were) apostles, I (am) a condemned man, they were free, I (am) still a slave:

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[53] Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, 79.

[54] *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, 84.

[55] William R Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch a Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, vol. 81, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 177.

> but if I suffer, I shall become a freedman of Jesus Christ, and I shall arise free in him, and now I am learning, as one bound, to desire nothing.[56]

So, for Ignatius, his sacrificial martyrdom is something of a blessing; it is a ladder to transcend himself to a point of perfection by joining Christ. He simply sees living in this world as pointless and a burden to others, and seeks salvation by not only accepting being killed by wild animals, but also rushing to such martyrdom, and he begs the churches not to interfere with it. Ignatius considers himself 'a condemned man' and sees his violent death as a purification, something that makes him worthy of being a Christ's true disciple, like Peter and Paul. Polycarp uses the same sacrificial language as his contemporary, Ignatius, in his speech just moments before his execution:

> *O Lord, omnipotent God* and Father of your beloved and blessed child Christ Jesus, through whom we have received our knowledge of you, the God of the angels, the powers, and of all creation, and of all the family of the good who live in your sight: I bless you because you have thought me worthy of this day and this hour, to have a share among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, *for the resurrection unto* eternal *life* of both the soul and the body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day among them before your face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you, the God of truth who cannot deceive, have prepared, revealed, and fulfilled beforehand. Hence I praise you, I bless you, and I glorify you above all things, through that eternal and celestial high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved child, through whom is glory to you with him and the Holy Spirit now and for all ages to come. Amen.[57]

One striking difference between the Christian and pre-Christian ideas of dying for God and its expiatory effects is that, as shown in the case of Ignatius and Polycarp,

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[56] Ibid., 81, 175.

[57] Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 15.

Christian martyrs seemingly had no connection to the atonement of their sinful community. In that early understanding of Christian martyrdom, the martyrs would merely become eligible to be accepted by God. So, martyrdom was a means for self-purification and nothing else. Hence, some scholars rule out the atoning significance of martyrdom, except in the case of Christ. Thomas Wespetal argues that "martyrs died for the message of Christ as sin-bearer – [and therefore,] the idea that they were bearing the sins of others contradicts the message they died for." [58] Candida Moss tends to back this view by highlighting the relative dearth of direct evidence in early Christianity for expanding the atoning effect of Christ's death to Christian martyrs:

> In particular, we should note the difference between the use of sacrificial language in the passions and its use in other scriptural and early Christian contexts. In those few instances in the martyr acts when sacrificial language is employed, there is almost no mention of its expiatory or purificatory function. Sin, sinfulness, and the abatement of sin are almost never mentioned as explanations for the death of the Christian. Unlike 2 and 4 Maccabees, there is little sense that individual Christians die to atone for the accumulated sin or guilt of the people. There is simply no mention of collective sin as the cause of their deaths. This is a striking departure from the idea that the language of sacrifice in 2 and 4 Maccabees influenced Christian martyrdom.[59]

Nevertheless, extending the expiatory effect to martyrdom was not totally absent in the early Church. Origen in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* remembers martyrs (specifically by mentioning the martyrs of the Maccabees as his examples)

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[58] Thomas Wespetal, "Martyrdom and the Furtherance of God's Plan," in *Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom*, ed. Christof Sauer and Richard Howell (Johannesburg: AcadSA Publishing, 2010), 244.

[59] Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, 87.

through the atoning lens, seeing martyrdom as a second baptism with an atoning

effect:

> Let us remember also the sins that we have committed, and that except by baptism it is not possible to obtain remission of sins. But according to the laws of the Gospel one cannot be baptized twice in water and the spirit for the remission of sins. We are given, however, the baptism of martyrdom…. Note also that the baptism of martyrdom, as received by our Savior, atones for the world; so too when we receive it, it serves to atone for many. Just as they who assisted at the altar according to the law of Moses seemed to procure for the Jews remission for sins by the blood of goats and oxen, so the souls of believers that are beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, do not assist in vain at the alter of heaven, but procure for them that pray the remission of sins.[60]

This atoning understanding of martyrdom that sees a Christ-like power in the

martyr's blood in wiping out sins survived in the Catholic tradition, and in late

antiquity, it turned into a yearning for intercession through invoking and revering

martyrs.[61]

One more thing to note with regard to the relationship between martyrdom

and sin in the Judeo-Christian scriptures is the issue of the wrath of God. Similar to

the story of Jonah, the author of 2 Maccabees makes a clear theological claim that

dying for the sake of God in its punishment/purification form, in effect, placates the

wrath of God. Having told the accounts of righteous men and women who fell victim

of injustice while trying to keep their covenant with God intact, the author seems to

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[60] Origen, *Prayer: Exhortation to Martyrdom*, trans. John Joseph O'Meara (New York: Newman Press, 1954), 171.

[61] The discussion of martyrdom and intercession in the antiquity and medieval Christian world is not in the scope of this dissertation. For more discussion on martyrdom and intercession in early and medieval Christianity see: Gregory, 283.

argue that the victories of Judas Maccabeus, in fact, came directly as a result of the

slain Jews' blood:

> Meanwhile Judas, who was also called Maccabeus, and his companions secretly entered the villages and summoned their kindred and enlisted those who had continued in the Jewish faith, and so they gathered about six thousand. They implored the Lord to look upon the people who were oppressed by all; and to have pity on the temple that had been profaned by the godless; to have mercy on the city that was being destroyed and about to be leveled to the ground; to hearken to the blood that cried out to him; to remember also the lawless destruction of the innocent babies and the blasphemies committed against his name; and to show his hatred of evil. As soon as Maccabeus got his army organized, the Gentiles could not withstand him, for the wrath of the Lord had turned to mercy. Coming without warning, he would set fire to towns and villages. He captured strategic positions and put to flight not a few of the enemy. (8:1-6).

Such texts actually could be read as an invitation for the faithful to give martyrdom

serious thought. They try to convince the reader that by shedding their blood for God

he will deliver their people. Hence, their blood is actually a vindication in nature, and

so it is not shed in vain.[62] Therefore, in this sense, martyrdom has a miraculous power

as well; that is, it brings God's mercy and full support for his people. In other words,

when enough blood is shed, God will forgive his people's unfaithfulness to the

covenant, reinforce his commitment to save the people, and bring back glory and

victory to them.

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[62] Stephen Anthony Cummins, *Paul and the Crucified Christ in Antioch: Maccabean Martyrdom and Galatians 1 and 2*, vol. 114, Society for New Testament Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 75.

In the Jewish context, martyrdom as a cause of forgiveness, however, was at the opposite of the concept of collective accountability which the Bible introduces in Exodus 34:6-7.[63] Apparently, collective accountability is depicted there as a sign of God's mercy because he spreads out punishment through generations instead of solely punishing the wrongdoer in full measure. Nevertheless, later generations would see themselves as victims of their ancestors' sins. In response, the wisdom books of the Bible generally do not see the collective punishment as a mercy from God but they use it as something pedagogical to warn potential parents that their misbehaviour may have very negative effects on their children as well.[64] In the same way, martyrdom, as depicted in the books of Maccabees and discussed above, opens the door for the concept of collective forgiveness/redemption: God will forgive generations just for one individual's act of martyrdom. The idea of collective redemption, as Joyce E Salisbury argues, was appealing particularly at the peak of the periods of persecution, such as Antiochus' persecution of practicing Hebrews that resulted in the Maccabean revolt.[65] Hence, according to Gershom Scholem, it was

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[63] "The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation'" (Exodus 34:6-7).

[64] Hilary Claire Kapfer, "Collective Accountability among the Sages of Ancient Israel" (Harward University, 2013), 246. (Harvard PhD Dissertation: http://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/11129143)

[65] Joyce E Salisbury, "The Bond of a Common Mind: A Study of Collective Salvation from Cyprian to Augustine," *Journal of Religious History* 13, no. 3 (1985): 247.

always a part of the Jewish tradition.[66] With no state persecution in sight, its rationale would come into question.

MARTYRDOM: FEAR OF GOD

I turn my discussion here to the issue of the fear of God; another factor which helped rationalize the act of dying for God. In the Bible, the necessity (and merit) of being God-fearing cannot be overlooked. The Hebrew Bible (especially its section of wisdom books) [67] is known for its emphasis on the idea of fearing and serving God. [68] Deuteronomy 10:12-13 reads: "So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being." Moreover, Psalms 111:10 states that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever."[69] Similarly the Qur'an centers on the idea of the fear of

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[66] Gershom Scholem, "Messianism: A Never Ending Quest," in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays*, ed. Avraham Shapira (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 110.

[67] Walter Kaiser argues that "the fear of the Lord was the dominating concept and organizing theological principle in wisdom literature. It was the response of faith to the divine word of promise and blessing just as it had functioned in the days of Abraham and Moses." C Kaiser Walter, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 170.

[68] See: Robert H Pfeiffer, "The Fear of God," *Israel Exploration Journal* 5, no. 1 (1955).;Bernard J Bamberger, "Fear and Love of God in the Old Testament," *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1929).; Lindsay Wilson, "The Book of Job and the Fear of God," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1995).

[69] Some other similar verses are: Deuteronomy 5:29; Deuteronomy 6:1-2; Deuteronomy 6:24; Joshua 24:14; 1 Samuel 12:14-15; Proverbs 1:7; 3:7; 8:13; 14:26-27; 16:6; Matthew 10:28; Ecclesiastes 12:13; Job 28:28; Psalms 25:14; 33:8; Luke 1:50; Isaiah 51:7.

God (*taqwallāh, khashyatullah, or khuwfallāh*) as the blueprint for the faithful. As Fazlur Rahman in his study of the themes of the Qur'an argues, 'fear of God' is "perhaps the most important single term in the Qur'an."[70] For instance, Surah 2 verse 41 reads: "Believe in the message I have sent down confirming what you already possess. Do not be the first to disbelieve in it, and do not sell my messages for a small price: I am the one of whom you should be mindful" (2:41).

Biblical and Qur'anic passages related to the fear of God can be put into three distinct categories in which the necessity of fearing God is envisioned: 1) Fear of God's punishment in this world or in the afterlife for disobeying his commands;[71] 2) Fear of the transgression of the Law in order to secure worldly rewards or a promised heavenly life in the afterlife;[72] 3) Awe-inspired fear of God stemming from his greatness, omnipotence and compassion, which are worthy of absolute respect and mindfulness.[73] Willingness to give up one's own life motivated by the fear of God in any of these meanings would be highly reasonable and perhaps even desirable for the faithful.

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[70] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 19. Also see Erik S Ohlander, "Fear of God (Taqwā) in the Qur'ān: Some Notes on Semantic Shift and Thematic Context," *Journal of semitic studies* 50, no. 1 (2005).; Toshihiko Izutsu, "God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964)," *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (234-38.

[71] Talking about punishments for disobeying God's commands. See Ecclesiastes 5:4-7; 7:16-18; 8:11-13; 12:13-14. For the Qur'anic references see 79:37-39

[72] Talking about values, rewards and benefits of fearing God. See Proverbs 10:27; 14:26-27; 15:16; 22:4; Job 11:7-20. For the Qur'anic references see 24:52; 36:11; 79:40-41

[73] Talking about human duties, and moralities of being God's servant. See Proverbs 23:17; Ecclesiastes 3:11-14; 12:13-14. For the Qur'anic references see 2:41; 8:2; 16:51-52; 33:39; 35:28

In Jewish and Christian scriptures, willingness to die for fear of God is articulated best in the books of Daniel and more clearly in 2 and 4 Maccabees. For their authors, the pain of worldly torments by tyrants is no match for God's retribution. Jesus in Matthew 10:28 also warns his disciples by similar logic: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Commenting on these kind of verses, the third century theologian, Origen, in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, highlights the foolishness of fearing evanescent tyrants instead of fearing all-powerful and everlasting God, primarily as defined in the third category of fear described above: "For since God clearly rules over the motion of heaven and what is in it and over what is accomplished on earth and sea by his divine skill - the birth, origins, foods, and growth of all different animals and plants - it is foolish to close our eyes and not look to God… but instead turn our eyes toward the fear of those who will soon die and be handed over to judgment according to their deserts." [74]

A similar God-fearing attitude is praised in the Qur'an in the story of Moses and the Pharaoh's sorcerers. It highlights the benefits and necessities of having the fear of God as opposed to the fear of tyrants:

> [So it was, and] the sorcerers threw themselves down in submission. 'We believe,' they said, 'in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.' Pharaoh said, 'how dare you believe in him before I have given you permission? This must be your master, the man who taught you witchcraft. I shall certainly cut off your alternate hands and feet, then crucify you on the trunks of palm trees. You will

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[74] Rowan A Greer, *Origen* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 43.

know for certain which of us has the fiercer and more lasting punishment.' They said, 'we shall never prefer you to the clear sign that has come to us, nor to him who created us. So decide whatever you will: you can only decide matters of this present life we believe in our Lord, [hoping] he may forgive us our sins and the sorcery that you forced us to practice. God is better and more lasting.' (20:70-73)

The Qur'an also refers to Asiya, wife of the Pharaoh, (without mentioning her name) and praises her as one of the most exemplary women of all time, who endured the Pharaoh's harsh torments but remained faithful to the God of Moses. It does not exactly reveal the account of her martyrdom, rather it shows that she yearned for a distinguished place in heaven in return for enduring and passing by torture:[75] "God has also given examples of believers: Pharaoh's wife, who said, 'Lord, build me a house near you in the Garden. Save me from Pharaoh and his actions; save me from the evildoers'" (66:11).

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[75] According to Tha'labī's Stories of the Prophets (*Qisas al-anbiya'*) Islamic traditions explain the events leading to Asiya's martyrdom with more details: "While Asiya was looking out a window in Pharaoh's palace she saw the handmaiden of Hizqil's wife being tortured and killed. And when the handmaiden died Asiya saw the angels taking her spirit heavenward, for God most high so desired as a result of her high estate and willed the best for her. Then [Asiya's] certitude about God and her conviction increased. While she was in that state, Pharaoh entered and informed her about the handmaiden of Hizqil's wife and told her what he had done to her. So Asiya said to him, "Woe to you, O Pharaoh, for the retribution awaiting you from God most high. He replied, "Perhaps you are afflicted by the [same] demons or madness] that got hold of your companion." She replied, "The demons do not have me in their grip; on the contrary, I have put faith in God my Lord and your Lord, the Lord of the universe." So Pharaoh called for her [Asiya's] mother and said to her, "The demons that possessed the handmaiden have taken your daughter." Then he swore, "You will either taste death or forsake the God of Moses." When her mother was alone with her she asked [Asiya] to comply with Pharaoh's wishes. She refused and said, "You [both] want me to forsake God, no, by God, I will never do that!" So Pharaoh ordered that she be stretched between four stakes and tortured to death." (For the English translation, I relied on: John Renard, *Windows on the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 131.).

In the book of Daniel, violent death (or martyrdom, retrospectively speaking) actually does not happen for Daniel and his three fellow exemplary Jews because of divine intervention that ultimately saves them.[76] However, Daniel sets the stage for a possible future where God would not miraculously intervene to prevent the righteous people from dying in a hostile environment through martyrdom (as in the case of the Maccabees).[77] It shows the reader that Daniel and his friends' courageous disregard of death (expected by fire and hungry lions) is due to both their trust in God that somehow he would rescue them from the danger and misery of their captivity, and also their firm belief that living longer in this world is not worth disobeying God out of the fear of Godless tyrants. Hence, here the willingness to die comes from the fear of God in accordance with its first and second meanings mentioned above, that is, out of the fear of divine punishment or the hope to receive rewards in exchange for the sufferings they endure:

> Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up' (Daniel 3:16-18).[78]

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[76] In this dissertation I call those who have all the requirements of being martyred but somehow they end up remaining alive "living martyrs".

[77] Joyce G Baldwin, *Daniel: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 196. See also: Norman W Porteous, *Daniel: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1965), 55.

[78] Their punishment was due to their refusal to worship a golden statue set up by King Nebuchadnezzar.

The danger of being God-fearing and Law-obedient while facing hostile gentiles is depicted clearly in the books of Maccabees where there are no dramatic deliverances such as those found in Daniel. Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons actually witness death and destruction surrounding them and have no doubt in their tragic fate at the hands of the Antiochus IV. Yet, they remain steadfast and firm in their beliefs in God's law and choose death over transgressing his commandments with the hope that God will finally take revenge for them. It is, in fact, only their sincere commitment to the covenant between YHWH and Israel that makes them courageous enough to suffer and even get killed.[79] In 2 Maccabees 6:30, Eleazar points to his fear of God, or put it this way, his fear of breaking the covenant, which motivated him to endure any kind of torture he would face:

> When he was about to die under the blows, he groaned aloud and said: "It is clear to the Lord in his holy knowledge that, though I might have been saved from death, I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him."

It seems that in the post-Daniel Jewish scriptures the idea of fear of God and avoiding the transgression of the law goes hand in hand with the hope for eschatological rewards in the form of eternal life and vengeance for those that suffered in this way. In a similar way, in a Jewish apocryphal text (Assumption of Moses 9:6-7), Moses foretells a tale of a pious Jew named Taxo during a persecution

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[79] See also Cummins, 114, 74.

period; [80] he asks his sons that "there let us die rather than transgress the commandments of the Lord of Lords, the God of our fathers. For if we do this, and do die, our blood will be avenged before the Lord."[81] In the story of the mother and her seven sons, particularly in the statements of the fourth and the fifth sons again we see the fear of God's mighty punishment of his enemies and the hope of getting resurrected and awarded compel the would-be slain Jews to resist the temptation of blasphemy under the pressure of extreme torture: [82]

> When he [the fourth son] was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!"[83] Next they brought forward the fifth and maltreated him. But he looked at the king, and said, "Because you have authority among mortals, though you also are mortal, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!" (2 Maccabees 7:13-17).

The mother talks to her youngest son with the same eschatological language to boost his self-confidence and endurance in facing torture until death: "Do not fear this

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[80] There is a scholarly debate whether the persecution was during the Antiochan or the Herodian Period. For further reading see: Kenneth Atkinson, "Taxo's Martyrdom and the Role of the Nuntius in the Testament of Moses: Implications for Understanding the Role of Other Intermediary Figures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 3 (2006).

[81] *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), 931.

[82] Shepkaru, 22.

[83] In 4 Maccabees 10:12-15 the author explains the fourth son's rationale in belittling the fear of this worldly torments by tyrants compared to that of God: "When he too had died in a manner worthy of his brothers, they dragged in the fourth, saying, 'as for you, do not give way to the same insanity as your brothers, but obey the king and save yourself.' But he said to them, 'you do not have a fire hot enough [compared to the God's eternal punishment of the unfaithful] to make me play the coward. No—by the blessed death of my brothers, by the eternal destruction of the tyrant, and by the everlasting life of the pious, I will not renounce our noble family ties.'

butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers" (2 Maccabees 7:29).

MARTYRDOM: LOVE OF GOD TO THE VERY END

In this section, I will argue that love of God (and not his fear alone) has been a particularly important factor in enticing the believers to give up their lives in what we may call martyrdom. I should note here that I do not want to put fear and love as two opposites. The ideas of fearing God and loving God were intertwined in the mind of the authors of the Hebrew Bible. In other words, loving God required one not to disobey his commands; a 'lover' of God 'fears' not to violate his law and his trust. In Deuteronomy 10:12-13, as an example, 'love' and 'fear' of God and obeying his commands are treated in the same way:[84] "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?" Implying that fear and love are two sides of the same coin, Abraham is shown in Genesis 22:12 as a God-fearing hero by virtue of attempting to sacrifice Isaac, his son.[85] Yet, at the same time, Abraham is referred to as being God's friend in Isaiah 41:8

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[84] See also Exodus 20:4-6.

[85] "He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me'" (Genesis 22:12).

and 2 Chronicles 20:7.[86] This combination of love and fear stems from the approach of the Bible regarding the father-son relationship between God and Israel with all the emotions inherent to such interaction.[87]

The highlighting of 'love' versus 'fear' and the emphasis on one of them and assigning different spontaneous emotional states to them appear to be a later development in the long process of the writings of the Bible.[88] The Book of Job may give us a clue regarding the new special emphasis on the idea of love of God. The whole book is about Job's sufferings, and the author wants us to speculate about the cause of his sufferings and misfortunes. Job's friends (and his advisors) tend to convince Job that he has no fear of God. "Even when they do not use 'fear of God' terminology," Lindsay Wilson observes, "they nonetheless urge Job to 'fear God' more as the solution to his problems (5:8-9; 8:20; 11:7-20)."[89] Despite Job's friends' insistence that fear of God is the solution to his sufferings, the reader already knows from the outset of the book that Job indeed is a God fearing person (Job 1:1).[90] God himself confirms that Job

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[86] Abraham in the Qur'an is also praised as God's friend, worthy of imitation: "Who could be better in religion than those who direct themselves wholly to God, do good, and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith? God took Abraham as a friend" (4:125).

[87] For further readings see: JW McKay, "Man's Love for God in Deuteronomy and the Father/Teacher--Son/Pupil Relationship," *Vetus Testamentum* (1972).;Dennis J McCarthy, "Notes on the Love of God in Deuteronomy and the Father-Son Relationship between Yahweh and Israel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1965).

[88] See Bamberger, 50.

[89] Wilson, 69.

[90] "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1).

fears him (1:8; 2:3),[91] and at the end, he does not say anything implying that Job has lost his fear of God due to all miseries that faced him; fear of God is not an issue here at all. As Wilson argues here, Job's "'fear of God' did not fully resolve the issues raised in his struggle of faith."[92] So, perhaps, fear of God alone is not actually the determining factor in the relationship between God and humanity; in the case of Job, as we read, "it is neither the reason for his suffering, nor the solution to his struggle of faith."[93]

I think we will not go too far by suggesting that the Book of Job highlights the love of God as a vital virtue. So, perhaps, the book tries to show the reader the importance of the love of God unconditionally right to the end despite witnessing a lack of favourable divine intervention in difficult situations. In a similar way, in 1 Kings, the prophet Elijah is presented as the sole defender of the God of Israel among his people, willingly putting his life at stake for God's sake. His intention or willingness to defend God (even to the point of death) in spite of adversaries, as it seems from the text, does not stem from him being afraid of God, rather it more looks like to be something out of love, a sincere intention to please his God:

> Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'what are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (1 Kings, 19:9-10).

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[91] "The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil'" (Job 1:8; 2:3).

[92] Wilson, 73.

[93] Ibid., 77.

Love of God, in the Rabbinic Judaism distinctively becomes a highly important virtue when it comes to the idea of dying for God. A thirteenth century commentary by Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg (1215-95), for example, on the definition of *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of the Name) highlights the importance of loving God unconditionally: "When a person determines in his mind … to sanctify the Name and devote himself to the sanctification of the Name, nothing done to him - whether stoning, burning, burial alive, or hanging- pains him at all … And know indeed that this is so!"[94] Rabbi Meir's argument is, in fact, coming from his reading of the famous passage Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which reads: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." A similar command also found its way into the Testament of Dan, a pseudepigraphical work probably written in 1 BCE that urges the reader to "love the Lord all your life long."[95]

The distinct characteristics and the importance of the love of God compared to those of the fear of God were also developed in Rabbinic Judaism. *Sifre to Deuteronomy 32* under Deuteronomy 6:4-5 comments that "there is a difference between one who acts out of love and one who acts out of fear. The one who acts out of love gets a

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[94] Michael Fishbane and Michael A Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 52.

[95] Robert Grosseteste and Anthony Gilby, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sons of Jacob* (London: Re-printed for James Frost and Joseph Frost and Isaac Frost from a copy printed at London in 1693 for the Company of Stationers, 1837), 98.

doubled and redoubled reward."[96] Moreover, regarding the phrase "*with all your heart*," *Sifre to Deuteronomy* says that it means "with the whole of the heart that is in you, that your heart should not be divided against the Omnipresent." [97] It explains that the phrase "with all your soul" means that:

> [you are committed to love him] even if he takes your soul. And so Scripture says, 'for your sake we are killed all day long, we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter' (Ps. 44:22). R. Simeon b. Menassia says on the verse: 'And how is it possible for someone to be slaughtered all day long? 'But the holy One, blessed be he, credits it to the righteous as if they were slaughtered every day.'[98]

Sifre to Deuteronomy goes on to make a good example regarding the love of God in the story of the binding of Isaac, highlighting Isaac's willingness to sacrifice himself for the sake of God's will: "And with all your soul: like Isaac, who bound himself on the altar, as it is said, 'and Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son' (Gen. 22:10)".[99] In Genesis 22, however, there is no indication of Isaac's willingness; as Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie argue, "Isaac's willingness is, in fact, one of the most typical traits which ancient Jewish elaborations of Gen. 22 emphasise, deviating from the biblical account, which accords Isaac a rather passive role."[100] Interestingly, the Qur'an does speak of the sincere willingness of

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[96] Jacob Neusner, *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation*, vol. 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 86.

[97] Ibid., 2, 87.

[98] Ibid., 2.

[99] Ibid., 2, 90.

[100] Avemarie and Van Henten, 141-42.

Abraham's son (Ishmael according to Islamic traditions) to be sacrificed at the hands of his father for God's sake:

> [Abraham said:] 'Lord, grant me a righteous son,' so we gave him the good news that he would have a patient son. When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said, 'my son, I have seen myself sacrificing you in a dream. What do you think?' He said, 'father, do as you are commanded and, God willing, you will find me steadfast.' When they had both submitted to God, and he had laid his son down on the side of his face, we called out to him, 'Abraham, you have fulfilled the dream' (Qur'an 37:100-105).

Following the love of God commandment in Deuteronomy 6, some notable Jewish martyrs opted for martyrdom particularly to fulfill that commandment. The second century Jewish martyr, Rabbi Akiva, is famous in approaching his trial and martyrdom (due to his charge of studying and teaching the Torah) with the lens of the love of God, seeing martyrdom as a duty of God's lovers.[101] As quoted at the outset of this chapter, when before the execution his disciples confront him to ask whether that is a necessary price he is going to pay by his death, Rabbi Akiva responds: "Throughout my life I have been troubled about this verse, [And thou shalt love the Lord with all thy soul...] and with all thy soul which means: Even if he take thy life. For said I, when will it be in my power to fulfil it? But now that the opportunity is mine, shall I not fulfil it?"[102] This is unlike the mindset of (proto) martyrs in earlier periods, most notably in the Maccabean period, who became motivated to endure torments and violent death out of their sincere fear of God and his punishment for their wrong

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[101] For more details see: Shepkaru, 76.

[102] The Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakot, 407.

doings. In Akiva's case, it is only the passionate love for God that makes him so determined to embrace martyrdom to the extent that nothing, even one's wealth and life, can weaken that love and determination for martyrdom.[103] Even in a Rabbinic tradition that narrates the account of Akiva's martyrdom, angels appear to be perplexed by the fate of Akiva and look for a cause of his suffering (perhaps sin) as a theodicy; yet, in response, God implies that there is no need for speculating any cause other than the fact that his martyrdom comes as a result of the fulfilment of the love commandment:[104]

> The ministering angels spoke before the holy one, blessed be he, "such Torah, and such a reward? 'From men, by thy hand, O Lord, from men' etc. (Ps, xvii. 14)." He replied to them, "their portion is in this life "(ibid.). A *Bat Kol* [a heavenly voice] issued forth and announced, "happy art thou, [R. Akiva], for thou art destined for the life of the world to come!"[105]

The love of God's commandment in Deuteronomy 6 resurfaces in the Gospels on several occasions showing the importance of living and acting in accordance with the love of God. In Mark 12:28-30 we read: "One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'the first is, 'hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your

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[103] See also: Boyarin, 96.; Avemarie and Van Henten, 152.

[104] For more discussion also see: Ibid., 139.

[105] The Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakot, 407.

strength.'"[106] In the Gospel of John, Jesus gives the love commandment a broader dimension, urging the believers to love others as Jesus loves them. In this Christian paradigm, emulating the way Jesus loves God (the Father) and people implies a commitment to self-sacrifice:[107]

> As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you (John 15:9-14).

Paul, in particular, also makes a connection between love and sacrifice.[108] In Romans 5:8-10, he says: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God." In the Deutero-Pauline Ephesians, we read: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1-2). This idea of the justification of one's own sacrifice on the basis of God's love gives birth to an understanding of martyrdom in Christianity similar to that of the Rabbinic Judaism.

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[106] See also: Matthew 22:34-38; Luke 10:25-28

[107] See: Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, 49.

[108] *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, 50.

Among the Christian martyrs, Ignatius shows a similar mindset, acting as if he were desperate to reach his love through a violent death. He yearns to get martyred through a sacrificial death as soon as possible and in its most dramatic fashion in order to meet God and achieve salvation:

> I know both who I am, and to whom I write. I am a condemned man, ye have been the objects of mercy; I am subject to danger, ye are established in safety. Ye are the persons through whom those pass that are cut off for the sake of God. Ye are initiated into the mysteries of the Gospel with Paul, the holy, the martyred, the deservedly most happy, at whose feet may I be found, when I shall attain to God; who in all his Epistles makes mention of you in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 12:2).[109]

Polycarp's martyrdom is interpreted similarly: imitating Jesus in his death to fulfill the love command to its very end.[110] The author of *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* maintains that his martyrdom, like that of other true Christian martyrs, was in accordance with the gospel and was a true sign of the love of the Lord:

> For practically everything that had gone before took place that the Lord might show us from heaven a witness in accordance with the Gospel. Just as the Lord did, he too waited that he might be delivered up, that we might become his imitators, not thinking of ourselves alone, but of our neighbours as well. For it is a mark of true and solid love to desire not only one's own salvation but also that of all the brothers... Who indeed would not admire the martyrs' nobility, their courage, their love of the Master? For even when they were torn by whips until the very structure of their bodies was lain bare down to the inner veins and arteries, they endured it, making even the bystanders weep for pity.[111]

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[109] See also Magnesians 14:1; Trallians 12:2; Romans 1:2; 2:1; 4:1; 5:3; 9:2; Smyrnaeans 11:1.

[110] See: Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, 47.

[111] Musurillo, 3.

Among the Church fathers, Tertullian, writing in the early third century, is one of the most famous proponents of martyrdom, and his understanding of martyrdom is similar to that of Rabbi Akiva.[112] He goes beyond his contemporary, Clement of Alexandria, in his treatment of martyrdom as a means of salvation, arguing that martyrdom is indeed "the only sure means" of salvation (similar to Akiva's belief that martyrdom is the only way to fulfill the love commandment).[113] Tertullian explains this point in Scorpiace 6 by showing how martyrdom is a gift from God for being the key to the kingdom of heaven and eternal salvation:[114]

> For, strictly speaking, there cannot any longer be reckoned ought against the martyrs, by whom in the baptism (of blood) life itself is laid down. Thus, love covers the multitude of sins;[115] and loving God, to wit, with all its strength (by which in the endurance of martyrdom it maintains the fight), with all its life[116] (which it lays down for God), it makes of man a martyr. Shall you call these cures, counsels, methods of judging, spectacles, (illustrations of) even the barbarity of God? Does God covet man's blood? And yet I might venture to affirm that he does, if man also covets the kingdom of heaven, if man covets a sure salvation, if man also covets a second new birth. The exchange is displeasing to no one, which can plead, in justification of itself, that either benefit or injury is shared by the parties making it.[117]

Clement has also his interpretation of martyrdom as "the perfect work of love."[118] In the Stromata 4:4, Clement points out how a Christian should react to their

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[112] Boyarin, 63.

[113] Frend, 358.

[114] Middleton, "Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defence," 564.

[115] 1 Peter 4:8

[116] Matthew 22:37

[117] A. Roberts, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325 Volume Iii Latin Christianity* (New York: Cosimo, Incorporated, 2007), 639.

[118] W. Wilson, *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 146.

own martyrdom, arguing that a true Christian does not choose martyrdom over losing

faith out of the fear of God's retribution, rather they give up life because of their love

of God (just like 1 Peter 4:12-19 that calls suffering and martyrdom joyful (gift)

because the martyr shares Christ's suffering and reveals his glory):

> [The true Christian] will not depart through fear of death; further, he confirms also the truth of preaching by his deed, showing that God to whom he hastes is powerful. You will wonder at his love, which he conspicuously shows with thankfulness, in being united to what is allied to him, and besides by his precious blood, shaming the unbelievers. He then avoids denying Christ through fear by reason of the command, nor does he sell his faith in the hope of the gifts prepared, but in love to the Lord he will most gladly depart from this life: perhaps giving thanks both to him who afforded the cause of his departure hence, and to him who laid the plot against him.[119]

However, unlike Tertullian, Clement does not advocate constant (and perhaps

unreasonable and radical, we may call it) yearning for (and rushing to) martyrdom as

the most important goal in a Christian's life; rather for him, this voluntarily seeking

martyrdom is a kind of suicide that deviates the believer from the requirements of

living in this world through the love of God.[120] Nevertheless, both Tertullian and

Clement admit the superiority of the actual and proper kind of martyrdom over "living

an incident-free life."[121]

The Qur'an also shows traces of the idea of love of God as the most important

motive for accepting violent death (martyrdom) and enduring difficulties while

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[119] Ibid., 145.

[120] For more discussion see: Candida R Moss, "The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern," *Church History* 81, no. 03 (2012): 542.; Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*, 118.

[121] Middleton, "Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defence," 564.

keeping faith in God's way. In 3:146, we read: "Many prophets have fought, with large bands of godly men alongside them who, in the face of their sufferings for God's cause, did not lose heart or weaken or surrender: God loves those who are steadfast." Here, the verse speaks about previous prophets and their disciples who did not fail to remain steadfast in their loyalty and affection to God, which, of course, is a mutual relationship as God loves them in return. Another verse expands this point further by highlighting love of God as the primary motive for some of the distinguished believers who readily put their lives in danger for God's sake: "But there is also a kind of man who gives his life away to please God, and God is most compassionate to his servants" (2:207). Much like the Rabbi Akiva's understanding, here the Qur'an speaks of the extremely praiseworthy virtue of loving God; even to the point of giving up life for his sake, with one's whole heart, mind, and soul.

The Qur'an points to the noblest of the believers, souls in peace, who upon death return to God, their love, in a magnificent fashion: "[But] you, soul at peace: return to your Lord well pleased and well pleasing; go in among my servants; and into my Garden" (89:27-30). Muhammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāī, a famous twentieth century exegete and philosopher, in his magnum opus, *Al-Mizan*,[122] interprets the 'soul at peace' as a firm believer who comes to peace because of his absolute love and remembrance of God, and nothing (neither wealth or poverty, nor any adversary)

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[122] Muhammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāī, *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, 20 vols. (Qum: Ismā'īlīyān, 1992), 20: 285.

could distract from their faith and trust in God. As I will discuss further in chapter three, Shī'a commentaries interpret this verse as having a direct reference to the martyrdom of Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī, the third Shī'a Imām, whose martyrdom, along with his family and disciples, is seen as an exemplary God lover's sincere commitment to sacrifice his whole life for the sake of God, to please Him.[123]

To wrap up this section, it appears that seeing martyrdom as a fulfillment of the commandment to love God gains popularity, particularly after the Second Temple period, when apocalyptic literature also starts to flourish. This leads us to consider how martyrdom as self-sacrifice for the fulfillment of the commandment of love might be seen in relation to the cosmic battle between forces of good and evil.

MARTYRDOM: THE COSMIC BATTLE

It is a well-known phrase by Tertullian that the blood of a martyr is seed.[124] By Tertullian's time in the second and early third century, those who were persecuting and harassing the Christians (mainly Roman authorities) had already been seen as evil forces united to take down the light and voice of God on earth. This unholy alliance of the evil forces was something that martyrs, 'as soldiers of God,' passionately and willingly tried to defeat through shedding their own blood and showing their love to serve God. And not surprisingly, no matter what, martyrs at the end were praised as

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[123] For a reference see: Hāshim al-Baḥrānī, *Al-Burhān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Al-A'lamī, 2006), 8: 284-85.

[124] Tertullian, *Tertullian: Apology* (New York: Heinemann, 1931), Chapter 50.

victorious by keeping alive the hope for the coming of the worldwide kingdom of

God.[125] Tertullian in Scorpiace 6 writes with this mindset, counting martyrs as those

who "participated in Christ's victory over death and Satan:"[126]

> For he [God] wished to make man, now plucked from the devil's throat by faith, trample upon him likewise by courage, that he might not merely have escaped from, but also completely vanquished, his enemy. He who had called to salvation has been pleased to summon to glory also, that they who were rejoicing in consequence of their deliverance may be in transports when they are crowned likewise.

In the same way, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* tends to depict martyrdom in the form

of the victory of martyrs over Satan:

> Similarly did those who were condemned to the beasts endure terrifying torments, being laid out upon trumpet-shells, and bruised by other different kinds of tortures. The purpose was that, if possible, the tyrant might persuade them to deny the faith by constant torment. For many were the stratagems the Devil used against them. But thanks be to God, he did not prevail over them.[127]

This treatment of martyrdom, as a sign of the victory of God over Satan, has its

roots in the apocalyptic Jewish writings where we see the combination of extreme

love of God and the belief in the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil (e.g.,

1 Enoch 10:4-10; Apocalypse of Abraham 13:6-14; Revelation 20:1-0).[128] It also can

be implied from the gospels and Pauline writings. Jesus's call of his followers to take

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[125] For more reading see: Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, 88.

[126] Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, 88.

[127] Musurillo, 5.

[128] For more discussion see: Boustan, 112, 150.

up their cross (Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) can be read in this light as a call for martyrdom. In the taking up the cross command, as Paul Middleton observes, "there is a distinct choice to be made: to be on the side of God/Jesus, or on the side of Satan, determined by the acceptance or rejection of the way of the cross. Significantly, when Peter rejected the way of suffering, he was associated with Satan."[129] Paul's writings, such as 1 Thessalonians 5:5-11,[130] are in line with the book of Revelation, identifying the two sides of the cosmic battle between good and evil. They can be seen as a Christian call for martyrdom with the aim of bringing the kingdom of God onto earth.[131] The key to this call for the cosmic battle through martyrdom is the idea that the blood of martyrs is not spilled in vain since God will avenge their blood (as discussed earlier in the stories of the Maccabees and Daniel). Likewise, in the account of martyrdom of R. Ishmael and R. Simeon, we see the similar expectation of God's vengeance on behalf of the martyrs: "Immediately following R. Ishmael's return to earth to inform his colleagues what he has learned, his colleague Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel declares

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[129] Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, 151.

[130] "For you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:5-11).

[131] See more discussion in: Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, 166.

that they should rejoice because 'God will receive our souls as a sacrifice so that he may exact vengeance through them from wicked Rome.'"[132]

The manifestation of the sincere love of God and having a godly mission in the cosmic battle between good and evil is also evident in the stories of Christian female/mother-martyrs. In the *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papylus, and Agathonice*, a Christian convict named Papylus sees a vision of the glory of the Lord moments before his martyrdom. While watching the scene, Agathonice also experiences the vision and understands it as 'a call from heaven' and throws herself into the fire to fulfill her mission for the sake of the God's kingdom:[133]

> There was a woman named Agathonice standing there who saw the glory of the Lord, as Carpus said he had seen it; realizing that this was a call from heaven, she raised her voice at once: 'Here is a meal that has been prepared for me. I must partake and eat of this glorious repast!' The mob shouted out: "Have pity on your son! And the blessed Agathonice said: "He has God who can take pity on him; for he has providence over all. Let me do what I've come for!' And taking off her cloak, she threw herself joyfully upon the stake… Then she was raised up and as soon as she was touched by the fire she shouted aloud three times: 'Lord, Lord, Lord, assist me! For you are my refuge.' And thus she gave up her spirit and died together with the saints.[134]

The Acts of Perpetua and Felicity is another example of mother-martyrs who put their love of God above their motherly love of their children and behave according to their duty as soldiers of God. It shows the story of two female martyrs who defy the cliché of being a mother/woman. According to the text, Perpetua, a newly married

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[132] Boustan, 112, 166.

[133] See also: Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, 33.

[134] Musurillo, 27-29.

woman and mother of an infant son, together with some other fellow Christians, is

arrested by the Romans. Perpetua rejects her father's emotional begging to renounce

her faith, proudly calls herself 'a Christian' with a divinely-planned mission, and gives

her son to her family to free her mind for martyrdom. In a series of extraordinary and

complicated visions, she realizes she is destined to fight with the Devil for the glory of

God:

> The day before we were to fight with the beasts I saw the following vision. Pomponius the deacon came to the prison gates and began to knock violently. I went out and opened the gate for him. He was dressed in an unbelted white tunic, wearing elaborate sandals. And he said to me: Perpetua, come; we are waiting for you. Then he took my hand and we began to walk through rough. At last we came to the amphitheatre out and broken of breath, and he led me into the centre of the arena. Then he told me: "Do not be afraid. I am here, struggling with you.' Then he left. I looked at the enormous crowd who watched in astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian against me, of vicious appereance, together with his seconds, to fight with me… My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man… Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next there came forth a man of marvellous stature, such that he rose above the top of the amphitheatre. He was clad in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes (one on either side) running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were wondrously made of gold and silver, and he carried a wand like an athletic trainer and a green branch on which there were golden apples. And he asked for silence and said: "If this Egyptian defeats her he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch.' Then he withdrew. We drew close to one another and began to let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to pummel him without as it were touching the ground. Then when I noticed there was a lull, I put my two hands together linking the fingers of one hand with those of the other and thus I got hold of his head. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head. The crowd began to shout and my assistants started to sing psalms. Then I walked up to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me: Peace be with you, my daughter! I began to walk in triumph towards the Gate of Life. Then I awoke. I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil,

but I knew that I would win the victory. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will.[135]

This idea of rejecting the love of motherhood to embrace martyrdom appears once again in the story of Felicity, Perpetua's pregnant servant. Felicity, who is arrested while pregnant, worries that her pregnancy will delay or even keep her away from being with her companions and getting martyred to fulfill her duty as a soldier of God. However, after prayers with her comrades just two days before the execution of the other Christian convicts, she finally is released when she gives birth to a baby girl. She immediately hands over the baby to her sister and goes on to be martyred with her companions.[136] To give up their instinctive motherhood love, female martyrs would have to reject their attachment to their maternal roles as a prerequisite for being eligible for martyrdom.[137] In this sense, Perpetua becomes a male warrior in her vision (free of any obstacle associated with being female and her dependence on men), and Felicity, like Perpetua, abandons her baby and puts an end to her motherly emotions for a bigger passion, which is the love of the Lord, being a soldier of God, and dying for the sake of his Kingdom.[138].

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[135] Ibid., 117-19. For more discussion on the martyrdom of Perpetua and her dreams see: Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 2002), 104-12.; Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*, 52-54.;Gail Corrington Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 37-40.

[136] Musurillo, 123-25.

[137] Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*, 74.

[138] For more similar discussion see: Maureen A. Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth S. Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 846.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented a short survey of different ideas that have been instrumental in shaping the concept of martyrdom, mostly within the Jewish and Christian contexts. I have traced the development of the concept of dying for the sake of God, to some extent chronologically, starting with the need for shedding one's blood as a punishment for committing sin and the guilt feelings associated with it in the relationship between God and humans. I argued that the next development was the realization that obeying God's command is worth giving up one's life for rather than encountering the wrath of God. I then reviewed two other rationales for dying for God, that are the sincere commitment to love God to the very end and participation in glorifying the Lord through the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. This introduction to my discussion of martyrdom contextually examines the meanings behind martyrdom. I wanted to delineate martyrdom and the factors that helped its development in early Judaism and Christianity as I will go to discuss how and in what ways Islam touched the concept which inherited from those Abrahamic traditions. While I have made brief, passing references to the Islamic interpretations of martyrdom through the four lenses of sin, fear, love, and cosmic battle, I have reserved a more extensive account of how martyrdom further developed in Islam for the following chapters. Starting with the second chapter, I will pay attention to the

Qur'anic understanding of martyrdom and its development within Sunni Islam before

focusing specifically on Shī'īsm as the primary concern of this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 2: MARTYRDOM IN THE QUR'AN AND SUNNI TRADITIONS AND TAFSĪRS

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"[Prophet], do not think of those who have been killed in God's way as dead. They are alive with their Lord, well provided for, happy with what God has given them of his favour; rejoicing that for those they have left behind who have yet to join them there is no fear, nor will they grieve; [rejoicing] in God's blessing and favour, and that God will not let the reward of the believers be lost" (Qur'an, 3:169-171).

INTRODUCTION

'*Ahad, Ahad*' (meaning God is one, God is one), Bilāl[1] utters fearlessly under a severe torment in the heat of Mecca, embracing death, staying true to his new faith, and refusing to acknowledge pagan deities, chief among them *al-Hubal*, *al-Lāt* and *al-ʿUzzā*.[2] But, he survives! Bilāl gets freed by Abū Bakr's[3] money, and escapes

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[1] Bilāl was an Ethiopian slave, one of the earliest converts to Islam, and a close companion of the Prophet Muhammad.

[2] 'Abdul-Malik ibn-Hishām, *Al-Sīrat Al-Nabawīyya*, ed. and 'Abdul-Ḥāfiz Shiblī Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā and Ibrāhīm al-'Abyarī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa), 318.

[3] Abū Bakr was a prominent companion of the Prophet Muhammad, his father-in-law, and the first Caliph after Muhammad.

martyrdom, yet, as David Cook argues, he becomes "one of the paradigmatic first martyrs because of his suffering for the sake of Islam."[4] Bilāl, however, witnesses some of his fellow Muslims succumbing to violent death at the hands of the Meccan pagans in the early stages of the new Prophet's mission to revive monotheism among the seventh-century Arabs. And so, with the rise of Islam, the ancient world once again witnesses a fresh drive for martyrdom, a renewed and familiar concept but perhaps with a bit of twist.

Islam inherited the martyrdom tradition from Christianity and Judaism, a fact which cannot be overlooked. When martyrdom was introduced to Islam, it had rich traditions of martyrs. Martyrdom was already understood, especially in terms of the love of God and its eschatological and cosmic ramifications; and Islam borrowed those traditions to form its own martyrdom tradition. In my understanding of the issue, a difference between the concept of martyrdom in Islam and that in Judaism and Christianity is that in Islam, unlike its predecessors, the act of martyrdom emerged during the lifetime of its founder, Prophet Muhammad, and was first articulated by him as part of the process of state-building.[5] In other words, Muhammad's efforts to establish a political society of believers and his direct collision with the Meccan pagans meant there had to be sacrifices coming from his followers in a regular basis; and Muhammad theorized those sacrifices by using the terminology of martyrdom.

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[4] Cook, 14.

[5] See also the discussion of fighting martyrs in Islam in , 23.

Hence, the early Muslims had a refined understanding of the criteria of martyrdom and its consequences, as I will discuss later in this chapter. So, martyrdom soon finds its Islamic term (*shahādah*) and, in effect, becomes intertwined with Muhammad's prophethood. Furthermore, with regard to the difference between the martyrdom paradigms in Christianity and Islam in particular, one should note that, in early Christianity, the focus was mostly on otherworldly salvation through faith in Christ, his second coming, and the final cosmic battle between God and Satan whereas in Islam, right from the beginning, the aim was to struggle actively (jihad) for establishing a just social order in this world in the form of an Islamic state. In other words, martyrdom in Islam started with an objective purpose, that is to facilitate the establishment of the God's law (not very far from the notion which compelled the heroes of the Maccabees to shed their blood). The emphasis on jihad in the path of God is, in fact, a major theme in the Qur'an, with several verses addressing the issue, so, not surprisingly, it had significant value in the eyes of early Muslims.[6] In this sense, for Muslims, martyrdom or dying while struggling in the path of God, was the pinnacle of jihad. Islamic scriptures introduced many criteria for the act of martyrdom to be considered a righteous act; above all, the martyr's intention and their activities (in the path of God) before death are the essential aspects of martyrdom itself. In other

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[6] Some jihad verses in the Qur'an include, but not limited to: 22:78; 29:69; 25:52; 22:39-40; 2:190; 4:95; 16:110; and 3:144.

words, as Cook and Afsaruddin have discussed the issue, in Islam, personal intention was key to the moral worth of the act of martyrdom.[7]

Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam also can be studied based on how the central figure in each religion, namely Jesus and Muhammad respectively, were seen by their early followers. Jesus's crucifixion was crucial in shaping Christian theology, and, therefore, imitating Jesus by becoming a martyr through suffering persecution and being killed for the sake of Christ were viewed as great virtues. Within Islam, by contrast, it was Muhammad's life and his efforts to build a social order in this world, and not his death or his status after death, that shaped Muslim identity and behavior. This is not to say that only in Islam the life and not only the death of its central figure matters. What I am suggesting here is to highlight the fact that for Muslims, unlike how Christians regard Christ, the very death of Muhammad itself has had minimal impact on Islamic theology. The Qur'an, in fact, asks Muslims not to see the Prophets as something special.[8] This means that studying martyrdom in Islam is not complete without being done within the framework of Muhammad's sayings and his vision of the world order.

In this chapter, I survey extensively the development of martyrdom in Islam by looking closely at the Qur'an and Muhammad's traditions and *tafsīr* from the Sunni

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[7] Afsaruddin, 119.; Cook, 36.

[8] "Muhammad is only a messenger before whom many messengers have been and gone. If he died or was killed, would you revert to your old ways? If anyone did so, he would not harm God in the least. God will reward the grateful" (3:144).

perspective before focusing exclusively on martyrdom in Shīʿism in the final two chapters. I will demonstrate how the concept of martyrdom in the Sunni world started from the idea of dying on the battlefield to gradually become a more inclusive concept covering a wide range of deaths in the path of God.

MARTYRDOM IN THE QUR'AN: A LEXICAL STUDY

The Arabic word for martyrdom is 'shahādah' (شهاده), and martyr is 'shahīd' (شهید), meaning 'witness.' The term used for the concept of martyrdom was not coined by the Qur'an; it appears that Islam probably borrowed it from Christianity. Arthur Jeffrey in *the Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* observes that the word *shahīd* "itself is genuine Arabic, but its sense was influenced by the usage of the Christian communities of the time."[9] In the Qur'an, the words from the root *sh-h-d* (ش ه د) and its variant forms appear around 160 times in various contexts. Of all these terms from the root '*sh-h-d,*' the word '*shahīd,*' which is at the centre of our discussion, is generally understood according to its lexical meaning of 'legal witness,' or simply 'witness.'[10] In some verses, God calls himself *shahīd*, in the sense that he witnesses everything in the world and does not miss anything.[11] Yet, in a few cases, *shahīd* in its plural form (*shuhadā*) sits ambiguously beside terms like 'the Prophets,' 'the truthful' (those who bear

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[9] Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 187.

[10] Another variation of the term is *shāhid* (شاهد) which means 'witness' and knowledgeable; and its plural is *shāhidīn* (شاهدین).

[11] "As for the believers, those who follow the Jewish faith, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the idolaters, God will judge between them on the day of resurrection; God witnesses all things" (22:17).

witness to the truth), and 'the righteous.'[12] According to the Qur'an, those groups all join together as recipients of God's mercy and blessings on the day of judgment. In one of the verses, the Qur'an actually defines *shuhadā* as "those who believe in God and his messengers."[13] The Prophet Muhammad himself is specifically mentioned in the Qur'an as a witness (*shahīd*) to his people, above all other witnesses of the community.[14] In a couple of verses, believers are quoted as praying to God to be included with those who bear witness (*shāhidīn*).[15] Finally, the Qur'an speaks about God's knowing and having power over both the "seen" (*shahādah*) and "unseen" (*ghayb*) worlds.[16]

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[12] "Whoever obeys God and the Messenger will be among those he has blessed: the Prophets, the truthful, those who bear witness to the truth, and the righteous– what excellent companions these are! That is God's favour. No one knows better than him" (4:69-70).

[13] "Those who believe in God and his messengers are the truthful ones who will bear witness before their Lord: they will have their reward and their light" (57:19).

[14] "We have made you [believers] into a just community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you." (2:143); "God has called you Muslims ––both in the past and in this [message]––so that the Messenger can bear witness about you and so that you can bear witness about other people" (22:78).

[15] "Lord, we believe in what you have revealed, and we follow the messenger: record us among those who bear witness [to the truth]'" (3:53); "These people are not given to arrogance, and when they listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears because they recognize the truth [in it]. They say, 'Our Lord, we believe, so count us amongst the witnesses" (5:82-83).

[16] "and in the end, you will be returned to the one who knows the seen and the unseen" (9:94); "Say [Prophet], 'Take action! God will see your actions––as will his Messenger and the believers––and then you will be returned to him who knows what is seen and unseen" (9:105); "He is God: there is no god other than him. It is he who knows what is hidden as well as what is in the open, he is the Lord of Mercy, the giver of mercy" (59:22); "so say, 'the death you run away from will come to meet you and you will be returned to the one who knows the unseen as well as the seen: He will tell you everything you have done'" (62:8); "He knows the unseen, as well as the seen; He is the Almighty, the Wise" (64:18).

It is safe to argue that the term '*shahīd'* and its siblings in the Qur'an have little in common with the meaning of martyr as one being killed for God's sake. Although the concept of martyrdom is present in the Qur'an, its terminology did not make it in the book. There are some verses that, without mentioning the term '*shahīd*,' speak about jihad in the path of God and promise those who will be killed in this way the greatest rewards in the afterlife, including a guaranteed place in paradise and the forgiving of their sins. Perhaps this is why gradually it became a common belief among Muslims that there are actually exclusive rewards, as mentioned, for martyrs. Verses 9:111 and 3:169-170 are important and among the most cited verses by Muslim scholars when it comes to the otherworldly rewards of martyrs.[17] However, even in these verses, the emphasis on the martyr's rewards is to contrast them with the ill-fate of unbelievers and hypocrites. In the case of the latter, for example, verse 3:168 talks about those who argue that the slain Muslims were losers who could have done better with their lives instead of dying on the battlefield.[18] In this context, verses 3:169-70's counter argument emphasizes and visualizes the very happy ending of martyrs, counting them as true winners. So, it is not really about the privilege of martyred believers over their non-martyred counterparts, rather, it seems to be more

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[17] "Indeed, God has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have paradise. They fight in the cause of God, so they kill and are killed. [It is] a true promise [binding] upon him in the Torah and the Gospel and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his covenant than God?" (9:111); and "Do not think of those who have been killed in God's way as dead. They are alive with their Lord, well provided for, happy with what God has given them of his favour" (3:169-170).

[18] "As for those who stayed behind, and said of their brothers, 'If only they had listened to us, they would not have been killed,' tell them [Prophet], 'ward off death from yourselves, if what you say is true'" (3:168).

of a showcase to demonstrate the binary of believers versus non-believers and their eternal happiness vs. misery, respectively.

In fact, what can be implied from the Qur'an as a whole is that not only slain 'martyrs,' but also, as a general rule, those who sincerely believe in God, his messengers, and the day of judgment will end up in paradise with their sins being forgiven by then;[19] and this was, of course, a well-established fact among Muslims from the beginning.[20] It can be said, though, that not everyone is at the same level, so those who dare to sacrifice their greatest possession, their lives, for God's sake would get the greatest rewards. While this might be reasonable and is found in the ḥadīth literature, the Qur'an has chosen not to distinguish between the rewards of martyrs and those of other believers. In verses 4:69-70, being an obedient believer is counted as equal to those chosen servants of God including '*shuhadā*:'

> "Whoever obeys God and the Messenger will be among those he has blessed: the messengers, the truthful, those who bear witness to the truth [*shuhadā*], and the righteous–– what excellent companions these are! That is God's favour. No one knows better than him."

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[19] See verses 2:25; 2:82; 4:57; 4:152; 4:69-70; 10:9; 14:23; 22:14; and 57:12.

[20] According to the following verse even those who have committed wrongdoing in the past may expect the otherworldly rewards in heaven provided they repent: "Those who give in prosperity and adversity, and those who restrain anger, and those who forgive people. God loves the doers of good. And those who, when they commit an indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and ask forgiveness for their sins—and who forgives sins except God? And they do not persist in their wrongdoing while they know. Those—their reward is forgiveness from their Lord, and gardens beneath which rivers flow, abiding therein forever. How excellent is the reward of the workers" (3:134-136).

Most exegetes interpret '*shuhadā*' in the verse as 'martyrs,'[21] though some stick to its literal meaning and read '*shuhadā*' primarily as bearing witnesses to truth (God) and people's deeds.[22] Reading *shuhadā* in this verse (and other similar verses) as 'martyrs' even reveals that martyrdom and being killed in the path of God does not provide membership to an exclusive club of elites. Martyrs share this position with other sincere believers who simply happen to miss martyrdom despite otherwise being at the same level of faith, or even above, of those who actually die violently as martyrs. The Qur'an, in fact, uses this indiscriminate approach in praising all true believers regardless of their fate in this world: "There are men among the believers who honoured their pledge to God: some of them have fulfilled it by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least" (33:23). However, a kind of counter argument would say that the category of martyrs (if we interpret *shuhadā* as referring to martyrs) is exemplified and praised in the Qur'an, and this in effect is a privilege for them that others have to wish to be honoured by accompanying the martyrs in heaven.

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[21] Abū 'Alī Faḍl ibn Ḥasan Ṭabarsī, *Majma' Al-Bayān Fī-Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, ed. Hāshim Rasūlī, 10 vols. (Tehran: Nāṣir Khusru, 1993), 3: 111.; Muhammad Ṣādiqī Tihrānī, *Al-Furqān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an Bil-Qur'an Wa Al-Sunnah*, 30 vols. (Qum: Farhang Islāmī, 2011), 7: 163.; al-Baḥrānī, 2: 274-77.; Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, 30 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1992), 5: 103.; Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī Abul Futūh Rāzī, *Rawḍ Al-Jinān Wa Rūh Al-Jinān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, 20 vols. (Mashhad: Āstān Quds Raḍavī, 1988), 6: 12-13.;Muhammad ibn Shāh Murtaḍā Fayḍ Kāshānī, *Tafsīr Al-Ṣāfī*, 5 vols. (Tehran: Maktabah al-Ṣadr, 1995), 1: 468.;Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tha'labi, *Al-Kashf Wa Al-Bayan 'an Tafsir Al-Qur'an* 10 vols. (Beirut: Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 2001), 3: 342.; Mahmud ibn 'Abdullāh al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ Al-Ma'ānī Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an Al-'Aẓīm Wa Al-Sab' Al-Mathānī*, 16 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub 'Ilmīyyah, 1995), 3: 75.

[22] Ṭabāṭabāī, 4: 408.;Muhammad ibn 'Alī ibn 'Arabī, *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2001), 1: 149.

Speaking about exclusive rewards reserved for martyrs is more in tune with post-Qur'anic traditions than with the explicit text of the Qur'an itself. As discussed, no such privilege exists in the Qur'an. Perhaps this was due to the fact that during the lifetime of the Prophet, inspired by his presence and charisma, Muslims had more zeal and willingness to die for the sake of the newly emerged monotheistic religion. Hence, there was no serious need for the Qur'an to overemphasize the merit of martyrdom in the form of exclusive and extraordinary otherworldly rewards for the martyrs. However, this is not to say that everyone willingly rushed to jihad and martyrdom under the Prophet's rule; despite his charisma, even Muhammad himself had, on some occasions, a hard time convincing his followers to take up arms and fight for Islam without reservation and fear of destruction. We know this from a couple of verses where the Qur'an seems frustrated with some Muslims' reluctance toward jihad in the path of God.[23]

A full-blown concept of martyrdom in Islam, as we know it today, was theorized after the Prophet in ḥadīth and theological works, as I shall discuss in this

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[23] See these verses: "Prophet, urge the believers to fight: if there are twenty of you who are steadfast, they will overcome two hundred, and a hundred of you, if steadfast, will overcome a thousand of the disbelievers, for they are people who do not understand" (8:65); "fighting is ordained for you, though you dislike it. You may dislike something although it is good for you, or like something although it is bad for you: God knows and you do not'" (2:216); and "if we had ordered, 'lay down your lives' or 'leave your homes,' they would not have done so, except for a few––it would have been far better for them and stronger confirmation of their faith, if they had done as they were told" (4:66); and "let those of you who are willing to trade the life of this world for the life to come, fight in God's way. To anyone who fights in God's way, whether killed or victorious, we shall give a great reward. Why should you not fight in God's cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, 'Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors! By your grace, give us a protector and give us a helper!'? The believers fight for God's cause, while those who reject faith fight for an unjust cause. Fight the allies of Satan: Satan's strategies are truly weak" (4:74-76).

and the following chapter. I speculate that traditions that highlight the unmatched merits of martyrdom came to light after the Prophet due to an urgent need to encourage the rather reluctant Muslims tired of war campaigns to take serious risks and willingly give up their lives in cases of necessity (particularly due to the constant threat of the Byzantine Empire since the start of the conquests in the early seventh century).[24]

The Qur'an's lack of emphasis on martyrdom is clear in the absence of explicit historical reference to past martyrs. Interestingly enough, other than the general verses that praise those slain in the path of God, there is no account of martyrdom in the Qur'an. Many biblical figures and martyrs, such as John the Baptist,[25] are mentioned by the Qur'an, but in most cases the focus is on the story of their lives, actions, and missions, and not on their martyrdom. Above all, Jesus in the Qur'an is not crucified, a position that challenges the entire martyrdom paradigm in Christianity.[26] There are a few exceptions, such as the Pharaoh's sorcerers; yet in their

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[24] Afsaruddin, 165.

[25] See verses 3:38-39: "There and then Zachariah prayed to his Lord, saying, 'Lord, from your grace grant me virtuous offspring: You hear every prayer.' The angels called out to him, while he stood praying in the sanctuary, 'God gives you news of John, confirming a word from God. He will be noble and chaste, a prophet, one of the righteous.'" Or see verses 19:12-15: "[we said], 'John, hold on to the Scripture firmly.' While he was still a boy, we granted him wisdom, tenderness from us, and purity. He was devout, kind to his parents, not domineering or rebellious. Peace was on him the day he was born, the day he died, and it will be on him the day he is raised to life again."

[26] The Qur'an narrates the fate of Jesus this way: "and said, 'we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God.' (They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him–– God raised him up to himself. God is almighty and wise. There is not one of the people of the book who will not believe in [Jesus] before his death, and on the day of resurrection he will be a witness against them)" (4:157-159).

case, the Qur'an does not clarify whether the Pharaoh actually kills them for their belief in Moses, or somehow, they manage to escape death.[27] So, what matters most in the Qur'an is the story of their conversion and faith and not their eventual fate. Another Qur'anic story with the theme of martyrdom is again related to Moses, where a closeted believer among the Pharaoh's family reveals his belief in God and asks the Pharaoh to spare Moses's life.[28] Again, the believer's fate is not clear as it has nothing to do with the moral of the story. On one occasion, however, we see the Qur'an's partial focus on a death narrative in the story of the unknown Companions of the Pit (*Aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*), in which a group of believers are burned to death in a

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[27] See verses 7:120-16: The sorcerers fell to their knees and said, 'we believe in the Lord of the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron!' but Pharaoh said, 'How dare you believe in him before I have given you permission? This is a plot you have hatched to drive the people out of this city! Soon you will see: I will cut off your alternate hands and feet and then crucify you all!' They said, 'And so we shall return to our Lord–– Your only grievance against us is that we believed in the signs of our Lord when they came to us. Our Lord, pour steadfastness upon us and let us die in devotion to You.'" Or see verses 20:71-73: "Pharaoh said, 'how dare you believe in him before I have given you permission? This must be your master, the man who taught you witchcraft. I shall certainly cut off your alternate hands and feet, then crucify you on the trunks of palm trees. You will know for certain which of us has the fiercer and more lasting punishment.' They said, 'we shall never prefer you to the clear sign that has come to us, nor to him who created us. So, decide whatever you will: you can only decide matters of this present life– we believe in our Lord, [hoping] he may forgive us our sins and the sorcery that you forced us to practise– God is better and more lasting'" (20, 71-73).

[28] "A secret believer from Pharaoh's family said, 'How can you kill a man just for saying, 'my Lord is God'? He has brought you clear signs from your Lord––if he is a liar, on his own head be it––and if he is truthful, then at least some of what he has threatened will happen to you. God does not guide any rebellious, outrageous liar. My people, as masters in the land you have the power today, but who will help us against God's might if it comes upon us?' But Pharaoh said, 'I have told you what I think; I am guiding you along the right path.' The believer said, 'my people, I fear your fate will be the fate of those others who opposed [their prophets]: the fate of the people of Noah, Ad, Thamud, and those who came after them––God never wills injustice on his creatures. My people, I fear for you on the day you will cry out to one another, the day you will turn tail and flee with no one to defend you from God! Whoever God leaves to stray will have no one to guide him" (40:28-33).

huge fire.[29] The narration, however, is so mysterious and ambiguous that exegetes cannot agree on whether the Companions of the Pit are the victims or the killers (the most likely scenario).[30]

Moreover, the Qur'an does not even explicitly celebrate the martyrdom of high-profile early Muslim martyrs, most prominently among them Ḥamzah, the Prophet's uncle, who was killed at the battle of *Uḥud* in 625.[31] This was despite the fact that he was seen as the champion of Islam and crucial in the early success and development of the religion, and his martyrdom was a severe blow to the young Muslim community of Medina;[32] hence, the Prophet posthumously called him *sayyid al-shuhadā* (the lord of the martyrs),[33] a title which later was used for Ḥusayn, the third Shī'ī Imām.[34]

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[29] "Damned were the makers of the trench, the makers of the fuel-stoked fire! They sat down to watch what they were doing to the believers. Their only grievance against them was their faith in God, the mighty, the praiseworthy, to whom all control over the heavens and earth belongs: God is witness over all things" (85:4-9).

[30] Cook, 20.

[31] Many exegetes, however, interpret *shuhadā* in the Qur'an primarily as referring to Ḥamzah.

[32] Abū al-Ḥasan ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil Fī Al-Tārīkh*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Beirut, 1965), 2: 83.

[33] David Cook on choosing the title of *sayyid al-shuhadā* for Ḥamzah points to the importance of his martyrdom for the early Muslims as an example of true martyrdom: "This title was accorded to him not because he was the first martyr-a title that arguably should go to Bilāl or one of those killed at earlier battles because his life and death exemplified what a martyr should be. He demonstrated the qualities of a hero, fought bravely for the sake of Islam and died in a noble manner." Cook, 25.

[34] In a famous fourth century ḥadīth book, there is a tradition from the Prophet regarding the future martyrdom of his grandson, Ḥusayn, saying that "he is master of the martyrs from the beginning to the end in this world and the world to come, and he is master of youth of all human beings in paradise." Ja'far b. Muhammad ibn Qūlawayh, *Kāmil Al-Ziyārāt* (Qum: Nashr al-Faqāhah, 1996), 268.

MARTYRDOM IN SUNNI TRADITIONS

As discussed before, when we move from the Qur'an to the post-Qur'anic ḥadīth literature we see a huge difference in how martyrdom is presented. The Qur'an does not explicitly recognize martyrdom in a particular fashion and frequently speaks vaguely regarding the martyrs' rewards and position in comparison to the rewards of other believers. On the contrary, the vast corpus of ḥadīth literature and Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) present the concept of martyrdom, in varying degrees, as the best way of leaving this world, and a priceless honour. In ḥadīth collections, martyrdom has been delineated in great details: forms of martyrdom, its conditions, the status of martyrs in this world and the world to come, and exclusive awards for true martyrs. We also see the concept of martyrdom being expanded for pious Muslims to include normal (non-violent) ways of dying, virtually opening the door for anyone to be honoured by martyrdom. Roberta Denaro, in her examination of Sunni ḥadīth narrations on martyrdom, has divided them into two broad categories of Definition and Narration.[35] According to this classification, the first group of martyrdom traditions defines the concept of martyrdom and explains different kinds of martyrs. The second group depicts desirable accounts of martyrs' conditions after death, their special status, rewards, and visions (mostly for the battlefield martyrs). In this section, I will examine how Sunni traditions define and describe martyrdom.

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[35] Roberta Denaro, "Definitions and Narratives of Martyrdom in Sunni Hadith Literature," in *Twenty-First Century Jihad: Law, Society and Military Action*, ed. Elisabeth Kenall and Ewan Stein (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015).

The first thing that comes to mind in comparing the literal text of the Qur'an and the ḥadīth literature is that in the latter the words *shahīd* and *shahādah* are used unambiguously for 'martyr' and 'martyrdom,' respectively (in cases where their literal meaning as 'witness' is not meant). As a result, many exegetes have read the Qur'an with this mindset; they interpreted verses of the Qur'an that include the term *shuhadā* as a direct reference to the concept of martyrdom. Moreover, looking at the different ḥadīths on martyrdom reveals how time and place shaped the tone of ḥadīths regarding the definition and boundaries of martyrdom. For example, during the peak of Muslim conquests in the seventh and eight centuries and in the frontiers (particularly in Syria where it was both the Umayyads capital and close to the battleground with the Byzantine), typically those who documented ḥadīths were interested in the ideas of military jihad and in emphasizing the extraordinary rewards that await those who experience violent forms of martyrdom on the battlefield. On the other hand, in places where people were less loyal to the central government and its military agenda, or after the periods of the conquests and with the rise of Sufism beginning in the ninth century, we see more of traditions that highlight the inner (esoteric) aspect of jihad, and a broader understanding of martyrdom, which goes beyond just the battlefield martyrs to include even those who die of a stomach disease, as an example. In the following discussion, I will look into these traditions with more detail.

Who is a martyr? The basic question for early Muslims was to find out who would get the prestigious title of "martyr." The default (and obvious) answer was that one who was killed in the path of God, though with some qualifications. The earliest document available devoted to the subject was written by an eighth-century ascetic/warrior, Abdullāh ibn Mubārak (d.797), who immigrated to Syria to be at the forefront of the war with the Byzantines. In his book, *Kitāb al-Jihad*, ibn Mubārak's great contribution lies in collecting and preserving many ḥadīths on jihad and martyrdom, which then reappeared in later *ḥadīth* works. His first major tradition on martyrdom (ḥadīth number 7) is about its classification, and ranking martyrs in comparison to each other (note that for ibn Mubārak, the default definition of martyr is one who is killed on the battlefield). In this category of traditions, the question is not just who is a martyr and who is not; rather, how martyrs fare in comparison with each other is also important for ḥadīth compilers:

> The slain [on the battlefield] are three men: [1:] a believer who struggles in the path of God with himself and his wealth (possessions) and when he faces the enemy, he fights with them until he is killed; he is a tested martyr (*shahīd*), is placed under the God's throne among his camp, and the prophets are not above him in rank except for the level of prophecy. [2:] A sinful believer who struggles in the path of God with himself and his wealth (possessions) and faces the enemy, fights with them until he is killed; he is cleared, his sins will be forgiven, the sword wipes away sins, and he will enter heaven from whatever gate he pleases (heaven has eight gates while hell has seven gates, some are worse than the others). [3:] And a hypocrite who struggles in the path of God with himself and his wealth (possessions) and faces the enemy, fights with them until he is killed; he is in hell since the sword will not wipe away hypocrisy.[36]

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[36] 'Abdullāh ibn Mubārak, *Kitāb Al-Jihād* (Jidah: Dār al-Matbū'āt al-Ḥadithah), 62.

In this case, the tradition suggests that the martyr is devoted to God's cause (not specified whether it is out of fear of God or love of God). It also implies that forgiveness would be a great motivation for being martyred, though not every sin will be forgiven, hypocrisy in particular. Another tradition puts martyrs into four different levels in rank. It demonstrates how prior sins and moral offenses have adverse effects on the level and value of martyrdom. Here again sin (there is no mention of grave and unforgivable sins such as hypocrisy) will be forgiven, yet it affects the quality of martyrdom in accordance with the degree of the sin:

> A firm believer who meets the enemy and fights until he is killed; people will look at him in awe on the day of judgment… And a firm believer who becomes scared when he meets the enemy and somehow an arrow hits him and dies; he is in second level in rank. And a believer with a mixture of good deeds and misdeeds who when he meets the enemy fights for the sake of God until he is killed; he is in the third level in rank. And a believer who has harmed himself with his own excess, but when he meets the enemy fights for the sake of God until he is killed; he is in the fourth level.[37]

Other ḥadīths classify fighting martyrs from a different point of view: intention. In one instance narrated by ibn Mubārak, we read that angels came down to a group of soldiers slain in the path of God and separated them on the following basis: "this one fought for this world, and that one fought for gaining political power, and the other fought to be remembered, … and another fought for the sake of God, and he will be in heaven."[38] Hence, an important factor from the ḥadīth's point of view is the critical importance of pure intention (*nīyyat al-khāliṣah*) as the absolute

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[37] Ibid., 129-30.

[38] Ibid., 64, no. 9.

prerequisite for the acceptance of martyrdom. In another tradition, which appeared

in later collections, God dismisses claims of martyrdom because of a lack of pure

intention from the person dying like a martyr:

> The first of people against whom judgment will be pronounced on the day of resurrection will be a man who died a martyr. He will be brought and God will remind him his favours and he will recognize them. [The Almighty] will say: 'And what did you do about them?' He will say: 'I fought for you until I died a martyr.' He will say: 'you have lied - you did but fight that it might be said [of you]: 'he is courageous." And so it was said. Then he will be ordered to be dragged along on his face until he is cast into hell-fire.[39]

There is no dearth of traditions emphasising the importance of having pure intention

in virtually every category of beliefs and practices, jihad and martyrdom particularly

included. Hence, we should assume that the level of the would-be-martyr's intention

and his/her expectation of worldly returns determines rank among martyrs as well.

In a tradition collected by Ibn Mubārak we read:

> Martyrs are three types: [1] a man leaves his home, loving martyrdom, yet loving to return [safe home as well]. He gets killed accidentally by an arrow, and God forgives all his sins with the first drop his blood, and with every drop of his blood he elevates in rank. [2] Then a man leaves his home, loving martyrdom, yet loving to return [safe home as well]. He initiates fighting [in the path of God and gets killed]. He accompanies Abraham (peace be upon him) in the high-ranking. [3] Then a man leaves his home, loving martyrdom and not loving to return home as well [wishes to be killed]. He initiates fighting [in the path of God and gets killed]. He will be like a king in heaven, live wherever he wishes, be given whatever he asks for, and his intercession will be accepted for anyone he wishes.[40]

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[39] Abul-Ḥusayn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1991), 1513-14, no. 905. I relied on the translation by Jibril Mohammed, *Above the Law 360°* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013).

[40] ibn Mubārak, 128-29.

Courage in facing death is another factor for comparing martyrs. In his work, Ibn Mubārak included traditions to highlight this point too. In one tradition, the best martyrs are counted as "those who attack [the enemy] and never look back until they get killed. They will dwell in the best places of paradise; God smiles at them, and when God smiles at some people they will not be asked [for their actions on the day of judgment]."[41]

The place and situation of martyrdom seemingly are important as well. According to some ḥadīths, the rewards for those who are martyred at sea will be twice as those who are martyred at land.[42] Perhaps this was due to the fact that naval operations against the powerful fleet of Byzantine became more and more important in the course of the conquests since the mid-seventh century.[43] Later on, in the sixth canonical ḥadīth collection, *Sunan ibn Mājah*, written in the ninth century, we read more details on the merit of fighting and dying at sea:

> The martyr at sea is like two martyrs on the ground, and the one who suffers seasickness is like one who gets drenched in his own blood on the ground. The time spent between one wave and the next is like a lifetime spent in obedience to Allāh. Allāh has appointed the angel of death to seize souls, except for the martyr at sea, for Allāh himself seizes their souls. He forgives the martyrs on ground for all sins except debt, but (he forgives) the martyr at sea all his sins and his debt.[44]

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[41] Ibid., 85-86.

[42] Ibid., 172.; , 86.

[43] See: David Nicolle, *The Great Islamic Conquests Ad 632-750* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2009), 56-58.

[44] Abū ʻAbdullah Muhammad ibn Mājah al-Rabʻī al-Qazwīnī, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Cairo: Dār al-Iḥyāʼ al-Kutub al-ʻArabīyyah, 1954), 928, no.2778.

Ibn Mubārak in a number of traditions touched on the issue of the merits of martyrs compared to the merits of other believers who die of natural causes. In one narration, the Prophet stops at the body of Musʿab ibn ʿUmayr, a martyr in the battle of *Uḥud* (625), and recites this verse: "There are men among the believers who honoured their pledge to God: some of them have fulfilled it by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least" (33:23). Then he turns to the people: "Visit the martyrs' tombs and greet them since, by the one who has my soul in his hand, until the day of judgment, no one greets a martyr unless he responds to their greeting."[45] In another tradition, martyrs are among those mentioned in the following verse where God spares them from the terrifying events of the day of judgement: "the trumpet will be sounded, and everyone in the heavens and earth will fall down senseless except those whom God spares" (39:68). Accordingly, martyrs stand around God's throne while holding their swords.[46] Similarly, martyrs are labelled God's trustworthy agents in another ḥadīth.[47]

A special praise for martyrs in various traditions highlights their absolute desire for repeating martyrdom in the path of God several times. Ibn Mubārak narrated a ḥadīth from the Prophet saying that: "No one who has entered paradise will desire to return to this world even if he should be given all that the world contains,

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[45] ibn Mubārak, 110.

[46] Ibid. ,83 ,no. 45.

[47] Ibid., 87, no.52.

except a martyr. For he will yearn that he should return to the world and be killed ten times on account of the dignity that he will experience by virtue of his martyrdom."[48] In later works, including *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhāri*, we see even the Prophet's desire to get martyred several times: "By him in whose hands my life is! Were it not for some men who dislike to be left behind and for whom I do not have means of conveyance, I would not stay away [from any battle]. I would love to be martyred in God's Cause and come to life and then get martyred and then come to life and then get martyred and then get resurrected and then get martyred."[49]

As for other merits of martyrs, Ibn Mubārak included a couple of ḥadīths where the martyr receives unique favours. One tradition says that the martyr will pass the critical *al-ṣirāṭ* stage on the day of judgment with ease and as fast as the wind.[50] Martyrs also will not be accountable for their deeds and will not face torment (though the text of this ḥadīth specifically speaks of those who die, perhaps by any means, while serving and guarding Muslim frontiers (*fī al-ribāṭ*)).[51] Another ḥadīth similarly praises fighting and dying in the frontiers, comparing one day of fighting there in the

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[48] Ibid., 74, no. 26.; , 75, no. 28.; Abū Zakarīā Muḥyi al-Dīn Yaḥyā Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Rīyāḍ Al-Ṣāliḥīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif), 335, no. 1311.; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 1498, no. 877. For translation I relied on *The Termination of the Afflictions and Fierce Battles - Ibn Kathir*, trans. Abd el Qader al-Azeez (Mansoura: Dar al-Ghad al-Gadeed, 2005), 562.

[49] Muhammad al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Rushd, 2006), 994, no. 7226-27.; , 12, no. 36. I relied on the translation by Andrew G Bostom, *The Legacy of Jihad: Islamic Holy War and the Fate of Non-Muslims* (Prometheus Books, 2010), 137.

[50] In Islamic eschatological literature, *al-ṣirāṭ is* the hair-narrow bridge which every person must pass on the day of judgement to enter paradise. Those with impurities and misdeeds will have difficulties passing that bridge and will fall into hell.

[51] ibn Mubārak, 165, no. 81.

path of God to be equivalent to the value of fasting and worshiping for a whole month. A Muslim dying in that situation would be exempt from the trial of the grave.[52] Moreover, it is said that martyrs will go straight to paradise where they have impressive and stunning palaces, and angels come to visit them in groups with gifts from God.[53]

While Ibn Mubārak was concerned almost entirely with the military aspect of martyrdom in the path of God, later ḥadīth compilers mostly embraced other forms of martyrdom. Perhaps this was because the waves of conquests gradually came to an end and dying in the frontiers became more unlikely for the overwhelming majority of Muslims living in the vast territory under the control of the Umayyads and then the Abbasid Caliphates. These later ḥadīth collections include *al-Ṣiḥāḥ al-Ṣittah* (the authentic six ḥadīth books),[54] the most authoritative books of ḥadīth in Sunni Islam and second only to the Qur'an written around the ninth century. The authors of these books were all from the eastern parts of the Muslim world, far from the war zones and the non-Muslims of Byzantine. Although military jihad and martyrdom materials are found extensively throughout these books, the striking difference between them and the earlier work of Ibn Mubārak is their focus on non-combative forms of jihad and martyrdom. In other words, literally, the later ḥadīth compilers widened the

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[52] Ibid., 165, no. 82.

[53] Ibid., 74, no. 25.

[54] *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ al-Ṣittah* are the collection these books: al-Bukhari, Muslim, al-Tirmidhi, Abū Dawud, al-Nasa'i, and Ibn Maja.

definition of martyrdom simply as dying in the path of God in order to include more believers in this prestigious and sought-after category (examples will follow in this section). Apart from non-military martyrdom, what is also absent from Ibn Mubārak's work is assigning the title of martyrdom to those believers killed violently outside the battlefield for reasons other than fighting with the enemy in the path of God. They include a believer who is killed while fighting to protect themselves, wealth, or family against injustice.[55]

Moreover, while Ibn Mubārak cited only four traditions on martyrs who are not killed violently, later works maneuvered extensively on this category of martyrs (in my survey I found at least 20 related traditions in *al-Ṣiḥāḥ al-Ṣittah*). This trend is more noticeable in a much later collection by the 15th century Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī in his *Abwāb al-Saʻādah fī Asbāb al-Shahādah* in which I found at least 44 ḥadīths that consider various non-violent forms of dying either as martyrdom or its equal in terms of rewards. Typically, traditions in this category cited by Ibn Mubārak and numerously by later ḥadīth compilers count up to seven types of martyrs dying from different causes. The following tradition is an example that provides the seven ways of dying that can make someone a martyr:

> The Prophet came to visit ʻAbdullāh bin Thabit (when he was sick) and found
> him very close to death. He called out to him and he did not respond, so the
> Messenger of Allāh said: "Truly, to Allāh we belong and truly, to him we shall

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[55] Aḥmad ibn Shuʻayb al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan Al-Nasā'ī* (Riyadh: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawlīyyah), 430, no. 4094-96.; Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Isḥāq ibn Khuzaymah, *Ṣaḥiḥ Ibn Khuzaymah* (Riyadh: al-Maktab al-Islāmi, 2003), 1121, no. 2336.; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī, *Abwāb Al-Saʻādah Fī Asbāb Al-Shahādah* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Qayyimah, 1987), 47-49, no. 21-23.

return," and said: "We wanted you to live but we were overtaken by the decree of Allāh, O Abū Ar-Rabi'." The women screamed and wept, and Ibn "Atik started telling them to quiet. The Messenger of Allāh said: "Leave them; when the inevitable comes, no one should weep." They said: "What is the inevitable, O Messenger of Allāh?" He said: "Death." his daughter said: "I had hoped that you would become a martyr, for you had prepared yourself for it." The Messenger of Allāh said: "Allāh, the mighty and sublime, has rewarded him according to his intention. What do you think martyrdom is?" They said: "Being killed for the sake of Allāh." The Messenger of Allāh said: "Martyrdom is of seven types besides being killed for the sake of Allāh. The one who dies of the plague is a martyr; the one who is crushed by a falling building is a martyr; the one who drowns is a martyr the one who dies of pleurisy is a martyr; the one who is burned to death is a martyr, and the woman who dies in pregnancy is a martyr."[56]

In a few traditions cited by al-Suyūtī, we see some other (non-violent) ways of joining the ranks of martyrs. They include dying far away from home in a foreign land,[57] dying while traveling,[58] dying due to fever,[59] dying on Friday,[60] dying of cold while performing the full body washing ablution with cold water,[61] dying of lovesickness,[62] or, generally, dying in any way in the path of God.[63] The problem of dying accidentally while struggling in the path of God was particularly an issue for

[56] ibn Mubārak, 94, no. 68.; see similar ḥadīths naming different types of martyrs: , 173, no. 98. al-Nasā'ī, 338, no. 3194.; al-Bukhārī, 383, no. 2829.;Muhammad ibn Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' Al-Tirmidhī* (Cairo: Maktabah Muṣṭfā al-Bābi al-Ḥalbī, 1975), 368, no. 1063.; Sulaymān ibn al-Ash'ath Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Riyadh: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawlīyyah), 352, no. 3111.; al-Nasā'ī, 211, no. 1846.; ibn Mājah al-Rab'ī al-Qazwīnī, 937, no. 2803.; al-Suyūtī, 36-37, no. 1-2.; , 42-43, no. 9-12.; , 47, no. 20.; , 66, no. 58. For the translation, I relied on https://sunnah.com/nasai/21.

[57] Ibid., 44, no. 13.;, 55-56, no. 34-35.

[58] Ibid. ,44 ,no. 14.

[59] Ibid., 45, no.15.

[60] Ibid., 65, no. 56.

[61] Ibid., 61-62, no. 50.

[62] Ibid., 52-53, no. 28.

[63] Ibid., 52-53, no. 30-31.

early Muslims, hence, traditions were made to address the problem. Ibn Mubārak touched the issue by narrating a tradition regarding a companion named Ḥarīthah, who was fatally hit by a random arrow while watching the fight at the battle of Badr (624 CE). His mother came to the Prophet to inquire if he was among the martyrs in paradise. The Prophet confirmed his place in heaven, hence his status as martyr.[64] Later traditions also backed the idea that being killed inadvertently while serving in the path of God is nothing less than martyrdom: "He who goes forth in God's path and dies or is killed is a martyr, or has his neck broken by being thrown by his horse or by his camel, or is stung by a poisonous creature, or dies in his bed by any kind of death Allāh wishes is a martyr and will go to paradise."[65]

According to some later traditions, becoming a martyr does not even require dying. This is where wishful desires for martyrdom become important and put the zealous believer besides actual martyrs in ranks and rewards. There are many traditions which demonstrate the way a believer can achieve the same level of rewards as a martyr killed in the path of God. In one such tradition we read: "If anyone asks God for martyrdom sincerely, God will make him reach the ranks of martyrs even if he dies in his bed."[66] Rewards of martyrdom can also be achieved through certain rituals and prayers. In one instance, the Prophet is narrated saying: "Whoever

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[64] ibn Mubārak, 101, no. 83.

[65] Abū Dāwūd, 284, no. 2499.; also see: al-Suyūtī, 46, no. 16.; , 46-47, no. 18-19.; , 50-51, no. 25.

[66] Abū Dāwūd, 181, no. 1520.; also see: al-Suyūtī, 67, no. 60-61.; , 68, no. 63.; al-Tirmidhī, 183, no. 1653.; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 1517, no. 908-909.; ibn Mājah al-Rab'ī al-Qazwīnī, 935, no. 2797.

performs *salat al-duha*, and fasts three days every month, and never foregoes the *salat al-witr* at any situation, will be rewarded like a martyr."[67] In another tradition, the Prophet said to his wife 'A'ishah: Whoever recites *'Lord, bless me in death and in the stages after death'* twenty five times every day and passes away in his/her bed will be granted the reward of a martyr."[68] There are similar traditions according to which by reciting a particular chapter of the Qur'an or specific prayers one is guaranteed to get the reward of a martyr after death.[69]

In a number of ḥadīths we also see the idea of 'living martyr', though those that name a particular person usually bear sectarian tones, like the following tradition ascribed to the Prophet: "Whoever would be pleased to look at a martyr walking upon the face of the earth, then let him look at Ṭalḥah bin 'Ubaydullāh."[70] Other traditions are not specific and speak about Muslims with certain virtuous traits that entitle them to be regarded as martyrs. According to a tradition, "the trustworthy, honest Muslim merchant will be with the martyrs on the day of resurrection."[71] In another tradition

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[67] al-Suyūtī, 58, no. 39.

Salat al-duha is a special morning prayer practiced by Sunni Muslims. *Salat al-witr* is a special night prayer practiced by both Sunni and Shī'a Muslims, considered as one of the highest signs of piety.

[68] Ibid., 57, no. 37. (though, the chain of narration consists of unknown and untruthful narrators; see: 'Alī ibn Abū Bakr al-Haythamī, *Majma' Al-Zawā'id*, 12 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 2001), 5: 390.

[69] al-Suyūtī, 59, no. 42.; , 62-65, no. 52-55.

[70] al-Tirmidhī, 5: 644, no. 3739.

Ṭalḥah bin 'Ubaydullāh was a close companion of the Prophet who later fought 'Alī ibn Abītālib, the fourth Caliph and first Shī'a Imām, over the problem of leadership.

[71] ibn Mājah al-Rab'ī al-Qazwīnī, 724, no. 2139.; also see: al-Suyūtī, 59, no. 43.

(though apparently a weak ḥadīth), the Prophet allegedly said: "whoever adheres to my *sunnah* (tradition) when my *ummah* (the community of believers) is corrupt will have the reward of a martyr."[72] Similarly, "a Muslim who works hard for the well-being of his family while enjoining them towards God's orders and feeding them with halal food will be with martyrs in their ranks."[73] In this pattern, there are some traditions that accord high status to the *'ulamā* (religious scholars), putting them on par with or even superior to martyrs. According to a tradition from the Prophet, "when a seeker of [religious] knowledge passes away he/she will die as a martyr."[74] Likewise, a famous (but weak) tradition regarding the virtue of seeking knowledge states that "the ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr."[75]

In a number of traditions that list different kinds of martyrdom other than being killed in the path of God (like the ones mentioned above), we find a clear rationale behind such a broad understanding of martyrdom. In those traditions, the Prophet explains the reason to his followers in this way: "you think that martyrdom only comes about when one is killed in the cause of God. In that case, your martyrs would be few."[76] In other words, the rationale is to make martyrdom more inclusive

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[72] Ibid., 58, no. 40.

[73] Ibid., 60, no. 46.

[74] Ibid., 58, no. 41.

[75] *Al-Muḥāḍirāt Wa Al-Muḥāwirāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2003), 374.

[76] ibn Mubārak, 95, no. 69.; al-Nasā'ī, 338, no. 3194.; ibn Mājah al-Rab'ī al-Qazwīnī, 937, no. 2803.; al-Suyūtī, *Abwāb Al-Sa'ādah Fī Asbāb Al-Shahādah*, 39, no. 4.; *Abwāb Al-Sa'ādah Fī Asbāb Al-Shahādah*, 47, no. 20.; *Abwāb Al-Sa'ādah Fī Asbāb Al-Shahādah*, 57, no. 37.; *Abwāb Al-Sa'ādah Fī Asbāb Al-Shahādah*, 66, no. 57.; *Abwāb Al-Sa'ādah Fī Asbāb Al-Shahādah*, 67, no. 59.

and available to all believers regardless of time and geographical boundaries. However, I found one exception in a tradition from 'Umar ibn Khattab, the second Caliph, that is actually the opposite of the above argument.[77] In this tradition, he argues that counting those who are killed in the cause of God as martyrs would result in too many martyrs, rather, true martyrdom is to make one's soul accountable (implying that this is a rare and precious virtue).[78] The interesting thing about 'Umar's tradition is that it is narrated by Ibn Mubārak where he was obsessed with military martyrdom throughout his work.

Swift admission to paradise as a reward for martyrdom is taken for granted in the *ḥadīth* literature, like the ones I mentioned before from Ibn Mubārak's work. It is also particularly well discussed in al-*Ṣiḥāḥ al-Ṣittah*. In these *ḥadīth* sources, paradise is the obvious reward for martyrdom and is depicted as a strong motivation for early Muslims to participate in jihad against nonbelievers, such as in the following narration in *Sahih al-Bukhāri*: "On the day of the battle of *Badr*, a man came to the Prophet and said, 'Can you tell me where I will be if I get martyred?' The Prophet replied, 'In paradise.' The man threw away some dates he was carrying in his hand, and fought until he was martyred."[79] Since martyrs go directly to heaven and they are in the state of purity by virtue of their martyrdom, they do not need to be ritually cleansed. This, in part, comes from a number of traditions such as this one in *Sunan*

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[77] This could be a case of ḥadīth fabrication which is a big issue in the study of the authenticity of ḥadīth.

[78] ibn Mubārak, 132, no. 29.

[79] al-Bukhārī, 551, no. 4046.; see also: ibid., 1026, no. 7463.; ibid., 1036, no. 7530.

Abī-Dawud that narrates the Prophet's behaviour with the bodies of martyrs: "The martyrs of *Uḥud* were not washed, and they were buried with their blood. No prayer was offered over them."[80]

Sexual appeal of martyrdom is another theme that is seen as part of the exceptional reward package for martyrs.[81] There are very vivid depictions of sexual pleasures in heaven both in the Qur'an and the ḥadīth literature, and martyrs in particular are expected to enjoy this kind of delights to the fullest. Moreover, the whole process of violent and painful death actually turns sweet for martyrs according to a number of traditions such as this one: "The martyr does not feel the pain of being killed, except as any one of you feels a pinch."[82] Upon their death, martyrs also encounter heavenly wives who have been eagerly waiting for their (soon-to-be) martyred mates, right at the place of their martyrdom: "The earth does not dry of the blood of the martyr until his two wives rush to him like two wet nurses who lost their young ones in a stretch of barren land, and in the hand of each one of them will be a *hullah* that is better than this world and everything in it."[83] In another tradition we read that in paradise, the martyr will marry his wives "from among the wide-eyed

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[80] Abū Dāwūd, 354, no. 3135.

[81] See: Cook, 38.

[82] al-Nasā'ī, 335, no. 3161. For the translation I relied on https://sunnah.com/nasai/25/77.

[83] ibn Mājah al-Rab'ī al-Qazwīnī, 935, no. 2798.; see also: ibn Mubārak, 70, no. 20. For the translation I relied on https://sunnah.com/urn/1276470.

Hullah means a very special and decent piece of garment.

hūrīs."[84] Moreover, there are traditions about visions of the would-be martyrs prior to their deaths and their encounters with the *hūrīs.* [85]

Finally, another important aspect of martyrdom in the ḥadīth literature is the question of forgiveness, both for the martyrs and other believers. According to the Qur'an and traditions, the sins of martyrs are always forgiven. However, there is an exception to this rule, and that is debt, which cannot be wiped out through martyrdom: "All the sins of a martyr are forgiven except debt."[86] Debt is, in fact, a serious matter so much so that martyrs with outstanding debt not only lose forgiveness but also end up in hell as the following tradition explicitly states it: "On the day (of the battle) of *Khaybar*, some companions of the Prophet came and remarked: 'So-and-so is a martyr and so-and-so is a martyr.' When they came to a man about whom they said: 'So-and-so is a martyr,' the Prophet declared, 'No. I have seen him in hell for a mantle (or cloak) which he has stolen.'" [87] On the other hand, traditions maintain that those without debt who pay alms are true martyrs and can

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[84] "The martyr has six things (in store) with Allāh: He is forgiven from the first drop of his blood that is shed; he is shown his place in Paradise; he is spared the torment of the grave; he is kept safe from the great fright; he is adorned with a garment of faith; he is married to (wives) from among the wide-eyed hūrīs; and he is permitted to intercede for seventy of his relatives" (ibn Mājah al-Rab'ī al-Qazwīnī, 935-36, no. 2799.).

[85] Muhammad ibn 'Abdullāh ibn-abī-Zamanayn, *Qudwat Al-Ghāzī* (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1989), 241, no. 111.

[86] Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 1502, no. 886.

[87] al-Nawawī, 81-82, no. 216.; Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 107, no. 14. For the translation I relied on https://sunnah.com/riyadussaliheen/1/216.

expect forgiveness for their sins. [88] They even enjoy the prestigious power of intercession and will be granted the right to "intercede for seventy of their relatives."[89] We will see more on the atoning aspect of martyrdom in our discussion on the Shī'ī understanding of martyrdom in the third chapter.

MARTYRDOM IN SUNNI *TAFSĪRS*

Drawing on the traditions as mentioned earlier, Qur'anic exegetes have read many verses containing the word *shahīd* (and its variations) and those related to dying for God with the concept of martyrdom in mind. Generally speaking, in such verses, we see one or more martyrdom traditions that link those verses to the notion of martyrdom. In this section, I will examine Sunni *tafsīr* to understand their usage of martyrdom in various related verses.[90]

For Muslim exegetes, the most obvious verses referring to martyrdom are those that explicitly praise dying in the path of God with the phrases like *qutilu (or yuqtal) fī sabīl-i allāh*. The most cited verses here are 3:169-171 (as mentioned before) as well as 2:153-154: *"O you who believe, seek help through steadfastness and prayer, for God is with the steadfast. Do not say that those who are killed in God's cause [man yuqtal fī sabīl-i allāh]* are *dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it."* One of the earliest Sunni *tafsīr* was written by the eighth-century Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. Under

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[88] al-Suyūtī, *Abwāb Al-Sa'ādah Fī Asbāb Al-Shahādah*, 49, no. 23.

[89] Abū Dāwūd, 286, no. 2522.

[90] *Tafasir* is the plural of *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis).

2:153-154, he uses the term '*shahīd*' to describe '*man yuqtal fī sabīl-i allāh*' (those killed in the path of God). Muqātil says that the verses were revealed after the battle of Badr, where fourteen Muslims lost their lives;[91] the purpose behind them was to reassure Muslims that their fallen peers were not actually dead, rather, they were alive and well received by God (a kind of psychological boost to keep Muslims steadfast in their belief and mission, I would say). Under 3:169-171, Muqātil narrates a revelation regarding a dialogue between God and the martyrs of *Badr* in which they ask God to send them back to the world in order to fight for God and be killed one more time and to let their fellow Muslims know how pleasing their heavenly position is so that they can also be encouraged to rush for martyrdom; in response, God reveals verses 3:169-171.[92]

Abū Jaʿfar Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, a prominent historian and exegete of the Qur'an in the ninth and early tenth century, uses the same tradition[93] (mentioned above) in his *tafsīr* to describe the enviable position of martyrs after death.[94] Under his discussion of verse 2:154, he also raises the issue of whether martyrs receive this

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[91] Most exegetes believe these verses were revealed after the battle of Uhud (seventy Muslims are said died in the battle). See: al-Tha'labi, 3: 200.; Muhammad ibn 'Umar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Al-Kabīr*, 32 vols. (Beirut: Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1999), 9: 425.; al-Ālūsī, 2: 333.; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī, *Al-Dur Al-Manthūr Fī Tafsīr Bil-Ma'thūr*, 6 vols. (Qum: Kitābkhānih Ayatollah Mar'ashī Najafī, 1984), 2: 94.; abū 'Abdullāh al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jami' Li Ahkām Al-Qur'an*, 20 vols. (Tehran: Nasir Khusru, 1985), 4: 268.

[92] Muqātil ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabīī, 2003), 1: 150-51.

[93] The tradition of the dialogue between God and martyrs is found in other tafasir such as: al-Tha'labi, 3: 201.

[94] al-Ṭabarī, 4: 114.

favour of being alive and well provided by God because of their martyrdom, or whether every true believer should expect such an ending. Al-Ṭabarī accepts that there are some ḥadīths from the Prophet indicating that the graves of believers will open to the doors of heaven and the graves of unbelievers will open to the gates of hell; and that both groups will be alive after death in *al-barzakh*, though one in happiness, another in misery.[95] However, pointing to verses 3:169-170, al-Ṭabarī argues that what is exclusive to martyrs is that they will be provided with all the foods and drinks of heaven while other believers do not have the pleasure to have them before resurrection.[96]

Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Thaʿlabī, the eleventh century renown exegete, in his *al-Kashf wa al-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurʾān* mentions the tradition that only martyrs yearn to return to this world in order to get martyred again and again as they know how blissful martyrdom is.[97] Al-Thaʿlabī under 2:154 also narrates a tradition from the Prophet that the martyr's first drop of blood has six consequences for the martyr: "It will atone all his sins; he will see his place in heaven; he will marry to maidens with large and dark eyes; he will have no fear of the great terror [on the day of judgment]

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[95] *Al-barzakh* in Islamic eschatology means the stage between death and the day of judgement in which the souls supposedly will be awaiting until the final resurrection.

[96] al-Ṭabarī, 2: 24.

Abū Hayyān al-Andulusī, a fourteenth century exegete, also understands 3:169-170 in this way that the difference between martyrs and other believers is that the former will be provided even before the day of judgment. See: Abū Ḥayyān al-Andulusī, *Al-Baḥr Al-Muḥīt Fī Al-Tafsīr*, 11 vols. (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1999), 2: 53-54.

[97] al-Tha'labi, 3: 201.

and torments of the grave; and he will be honoured with the honour of *iman* [faith]."[98]

Abū ʻAbdullāh Al-Qurtubī, the great thirteenth-century exegete, in his *Al-Jāmiʻ li Ahkām al-Qurʼān* cites a similar tradition under 3:169-170 regarding five advantages of martyrs over Prophets. Accordingly, while the angel of death takes the soul of every Prophet, God himself does the job for martyrs; all Prophets were ritually washed upon death, whereas martyrs do not need that ritual washing (*ghusl*) after martyrdom; while Prophets needed burial shrouds, martyrs are buried with their clothes; Prophets are not called "martyrs" after death; and finally, Prophets can only intercede on the day of judgment while martyrs can do that all the time before the big day.[99]

The well-known twelfth-century theologian, Muhammad ibn ʻUmar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, in his *Tafsīr al-kabīr* raises several points regarding 3:169-170.[100] First, he sees the verses as a response to those so-called hypocrites who discouraged Muslims from joining jihad in the path of God so that they could live longer and accumulate a fortune and have a pleasant worldly life. So, according to him, the Qurʼan here argues that even though by refusing to participate in jihad one can achieve happiness in this world, it is nothing in comparison to what the martyr would gain after martyrdom. Second, al-Rāzī goes in depth to counter the argument that the issue of martyrs being alive mentioned in 3:169 is about their resurrection in heaven after

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[98] Ibid., 2: 22.; also see: abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *Tafsīr Al-Ṭabarānī*, 6 vols. (Irbid: Dār al-Kitāb al-Thighafī, 2008), 1: 271.

[99] al-Qurṭubī, 4: 276.

[100] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 9: 425-30.

the day of judgment. He argues that this understanding is against the explicit meaning of the verse. He cites Qur'anic examples to demonstrate that true believers and even unbelievers will be alive right after they die, the former in eternal happiness and the latter being tormented.[101] He also draws on some traditions to demonstrate that every person who dies will experience the *al-barzakh's* version of either hell or heaven. In addition, al-Rāzī argues that, in 3:170, the fact that martyrs are depicted to be happy for the would-be martyrs proves they enjoy an enviable life after their deaths. Al-Rāzī refutes the view of some other exegetes that the martyrs' happiness mentioned in 3:170 describes their feelings, after the resurrection on the day of judgment, for their fellow Muslims who are in lower ranks in heaven; in al-Rāzī's understanding, this is not true since such happiness is not something specific to martyrs alone; rather every believer in heaven will be happy for other blessed believers, and it is not something specific for the martyrs to be highlighted in the Qur'an.

Another verse that exegetes tend to link to the concept of martyrdom is 33:23.[102] According to some early tafsīr, such as Muqātil's, it is believed that it was revealed specifically for Ḥamzah and the other martyrs of Badr and Uḥud.[103]

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[101] "They were drowned and sent to hell for their evildoings: they found no one to help them against God" (Qur'an, 71:25); "'[But] you, soul at peace: return to your Lord well pleased and well pleasing; go in among my servants; 30and into My Garden'" (89:27-30).

[102] "There are men among the believers who honoured their pledge to God: some of them have fulfilled it by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least" (33:23).

[103] ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī, 3:484.

However, this verse is especially exploited in sectarian literature. In Sunni *tafsīr*, the "*some of them have fulfilled it by death*" and "*some are still waiting*" are meant to refer to 'Uthman (the third Sunni Caliph) and Ṭalḥah, respectively (there are a number of sectarian traditions that try to identify the 'martyrs' mentioned there in this way). [104] Moreover, in reference to this verse and in order to prove a martyr's life after death, some *tafsīr* report that the Prophet saluted and prayed for the martyrs of Uḥud as if they were alive and could hear his voice.[105]

Muslim exegetes also tend to link some other verses containing the words '*shahīd*' and '*shuhadā*' to the concept of martyrdom. The first case is 3:140-141.[106] Translating '*shuhadā*' to 'martyrs' here is not something out of context though it is not explicit in the text. Understanding the words '*shahīd*' and '*shuhadā*' as 'martyr(s)' in

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[104] al-Ālūsī, 11: 169.; al-Ṭabarī, 21: 94.; 'Abdullāh ibn Muhammad ibn abī Ḥātam, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'an Al-'Aẓīm (Ibn Abī Ḥātam)*, 13 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabah Nazār Mustafā al-Bāz, 1998), 9: 3124.; al-Ṭabarānī, 5: 181.; al-Tha'labi, 8: 24.; 'Abdul-Haqq ibn Ghalib ibn 'Atīyyah Andulūsī, *Al-Muḥarrar Al-Wajīz Fī Tafsīr Al-Kitāb Al-'Azīz*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 2001), 4: 378.; Abul-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād Al-Masīr Fī 'Ilm Al-Tafsīr*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabī, 2001), 3: 456.; Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq Al-Tanzīl*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabī, 1987), 3: 532.; Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'an Al-'Aẓīm (Ibn Kathīr)*, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 1998), 6: 353.; Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī al-Brūsawī, *Tafsīr Rūḥ Al-Bayān*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr), 7: 159.

[105] Qāḍī Thanā'ullāh al-Maẓharī, *Tafsīr Al-Maẓharī*, 10 vols. (Quetta: Maktabah Rāshidīyyah, 1992), 2: 170.

[106] "if you have suffered a blow, they too have suffered one like it. we deal out such days among people in turn, for God to find out who truly believes, for him to choose martyrs [*shuhadā*] from among you–– God does not love evildoers; for him to cleanse those who believe and for him to destroy the disbelievers." (3:140-141)

other verses, such as 2:143, 4:41, 4:69, and 57:19,[107] are less contextually obvious, yet many exegetes treat them as if the verses have to do with the concept of martyrdom.

Al-Ṭabarī says that 3:140-141 were revealed after the Muslims' defeat of Uḥud in which seventy of them died, and so, God wanted to honour them by calling them martyrs (*shuhadā*). [108] The verses are also used to prove the atoning consequence of martyrdom. Many exegetes link "*for him to cleanse those who believe*" to "*for him to choose martyrs*" and interpret it as a proof that indeed God forgives the sins of martyrs to honour them.[109] However, Al-Ṭabarī understands "*for him to cleanse those who believe*" as God's plan to test people with difficulties to distinguish true believers from unbelievers and hypocrites.[110]

Under 3:140, al-Rāzī argues that according to the Qur'an the position of martyrs is something so special that everyone would yearn to achieve it so that they join the special rank. Based on this and some other verses (e.g. 3:169 and 4:69), he claims that those Muslims who were not martyred in the battle of Badr, were

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[107] "We have made you [believers] into a just community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you." (2:143); "What will they do when we bring a witness from each community, with you [Muhammad] as a witness against these people?" (4:41); "Whoever obeys God and the Messenger will be among those he has blessed: the messengers, the truthful, those who bear witness to the truth, and the righteous–– what excellent companions these are!" (4:69); "Those who believe in God and his messengers are the truthful ones who will bear witness before their Lord: they will have their reward and their light. But those who disbelieve and deny our revelations are the inhabitants of hell." (57:19).

[108] al-Ṭabarī, 4: 69.; also see: ibn abī Ḥātam, 3: 773-74.; al-Ṭabarānī, 2: 134.; al-Tha'labi, 3: 134.;ibn 'Atīyyah Andulūsī, 1: 234, 69.; al-Zamakhsharī, 1: 420.; al-Qurṭubī, 4: 218.

[109] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 9: 374.; ibn 'Atīyyah Andulūsī, 1: 234, 69.; al-Zamakhsharī, 420.; 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār Al-Tanzīl Wa Asrār Al-Ta'wīl*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-'Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1997), 2: 40.; al-Tha'labi, 3: 174.; ibn Kathīr, 2:110.

[110] al-Ṭabarī, 4: 70.; also see: ibn abī Ḥātam, 3: 775.

desperately looking for a similar opportunity. Al-Rāzī further says that based on 4:69, martyrs stand in the third position behind that of the Prophets and the truthful. So, this elevated position is well worth the effort to achieve martyrdom. In another argument, al-Rāzī raises the issue of the morality of seeking martyrdom. He argues that voluntary martyrdom is not moral where it involves putting Muslims in an inferior position against unbelievers. But if it is evident that the act of martyrdom has God's consent, it should be pursued without reservation. Here, al-Rāzī points to 3:140, in which we read, "*for him to choose martyrs*", and argues that real martyrdom is a kind of voluntary death that God approves. At the end of his discussion, al-Rāzī summarizes the reasons for calling the martyr '*shahīd.*' He enumerates four reasons for that: first, based on 3:169, we know that martyrs are alive, so unlike others they witness 'the home of peace' (*dār al-salām*), hence they are called martyrs; second, God and his angels bore witness to heaven that is reserved for martyrs; third, martyrs together with Prophets and the truthful ones will bear witness to the truth on the day of judgement (as 2:143 shows us); and fourth, martyrs are called '*shuhadā*' because upon death they go directly to heaven, just as unbelievers go to hell (though it is not a convincing reasoning).[111] So, al-Rāzī sees martyrdom as an essential Qur'anic concept associated with the jihad verses. For him, God actually selected martyrs among the believers and this is part of the reason why martyrs in Islam are held in high respect.

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[111] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 9: 374.; al-Qurṭubī also has similar argument here: al-Qurṭubī, 4: 218.

Concerning verses like 2:143, most early exegetes read '*shuhadā*' in its literal understanding simply as the community of believers who will be witness to the truth on the day of judgment, and not 'martyrs.'[112] However, a much later nineteenth century exegete, Maḥmūd al-Alūsī, maintains that '*shuhadā*' in 2:143 are in fact 'martyrs'. Here, he points to the tradition (as previously mentioned) which says that if martyrs where only those who have been killed in the path of God they would have been few in number. Essentially, al-Alūsī uses the tradition and this verse to include the entire community of believers among the rank of martyrs.[113]

As for 57:19, some exegetes tend to equate '*shuhadā*' with martyrs, or at least to include martyrs among the meanings of '*shuhadā*' in the verse. Muqātil defines '*shuhadā*' here as those who are killed (in the path of God).[114] Similarly, al-Ṭabarī understands '*shuhadā*' in this verse primarily in terms of martyrdom (e.g. those killed in the path of God, or even believers who die in bed).[115] Al-Rāzī quotes Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī's views without any objection.[116] Abū al-Qasim Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, an eleventh-century scholar, also reads '*shuhadā*' here as both those who witness the truth (of the prophecy of Muhammad) and martyrs in the path of

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[112] al-Ṭabarī, 2: 6-7.; ibn abī Ḥātam, 1: 249-50.; al-Tha'labi, 2: 8.; al-Zamakhsharī, 1: 199, 512.; al-Ṭabarī, 5: 59.; ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī, 1:145, 373.

[113] al-Ālūsī, 3: 75.

[114] ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī, 4:243.
[115] al-Ṭabarī, 27: 133-34.

[116] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 29: 463.; Others also translate 'shuhadā' to 'martyrs' in this verse, see: Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt Ahl Al-Sunnah*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 2005), 3: 248.

God.[117] Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān ibn Ahmad ibn Al-Tabarani (ninth and early tenth century) discusses two possibilities for *shuhadā*: first, the term means the Prophets who will bear witness on the day of judgment; second, martyrs of the path of God.[118] Abū Ishāq Ahmad Ibn Muhammed Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʻlabī (eleventh-century) likewise mentions both the Prophets and martyrs in his interpretation of '*shuhadā*' in this verse.[119] However, some other exegetes consider '*shuhadā*' only as those who bear witness, either the Prophets (or a particular group of the Prophet's disciples)[120] or all believers.[121] Under 4:69 we find quite a similar discussion, and many exegetes understand the term *shuhadā* primarily to mean witnesses which include martyrs as well. [122]

There are also a few other verses in the Qur'an where there is no discussion of dying in the path of God or the words '*shahīd*' and '*shuhadā*', yet still some exegetes take the opportunity to elaborate on the concept of martyrdom and connect it to the verses. The first group of the verses speak about intercession, so the point here is that martyrs can be counted among those who can intercede.

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[117] al-Zamakhsharī, 4: 478.

[118] al-Ṭabarānī, 6: 210-11.

[119] al-Thaʻlabi, 9: 243.; also see: ibn 'Atīyyah Andulūsī, 2: 1069.

[120] These early disciples are: Abū Bakr, ʻUmar, ʻUthman, ʻAlī, Ḥamzah, Ṭalḥah, Zubayr, Saʻd, and Zayd (see: ibn al-Jawzī, 4: 236.)

[121] Ibid., 4: 236.; see also: abū-Muslim al-Iṣfahānī, *Mawsūʻat Tafāsīr Al-Muʻtazilah*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 2009), 1: 96.

[122] For example, see: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 10: 135.; al-Ālūsī, 3: 75.

One of the verses on intercession reads: "*No one will have power to intercede except for those who have permission from the lord of mercy*" (19:87). The early tafsīr of Muqātil understands "*those who have permission*" to be a group of angels.[123] This is perhaps derived from another verse (21:28) that mentions that angels can intercede.[124] Al-Ṭabarī sees 19:87 as a reference to the power of intercession of martyrs. He states that some groups of believers will intercede for other groups of believers on the day of judgment. Al-Ṭabarī then narrates a tradition from the Prophet saying that "there is a man among my people that because of his intercession God enters so many believers (more than the population of the tribe of *Bani Tamim*) into paradise." Al-Ṭabarī then quickly jumps to the tradition that "the martyr intercedes for seventy of his relatives," stating that martyrs can intercede.[125] He has the same discussion under 20:109.[126] Under 74:48, al-Ṭabarī counts martyrs as intercessors after angels and Prophets.[127] With some variations, al-Tabarani also under 74:48 says that on the day of judgment, at first, the Prophets, then the truthful, and finally martyrs will intercede for sinners; and those not qualified to be interceded will

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[123] ibn Sulaymān al-Balkhī, 2:639.

[124] "He knows what is before them and what is behind them, and they cannot intercede without His permission" (21:28).

[125] al-Tha'labi, 10: 77.; a similar discussion can be found in: al-Ṭabarī, 16: 97.

[126] "On that day, intercession will be useless except from those to whom the lord of mercy has granted permission and whose words he approves" (20:109).

[127] "No intercessor's plea will benefit them now" (74:48). See: al-Ṭabarī, 29: 105.

remain in hell.[128] Under 74:48, another early tafsīr by Ibn Abī Zamānayn (tenth-century) also narrates a tradition stating that on the day of judgment the Prophet intercedes for his people, the martyr for his family, and the faithful for his family too, before God himself intercedes for even more groups of people.[129]

There are other miscellaneous verses in different contexts where we see references to martyrdom in various *tafsīr.* These verses generally speak about other-worldly rewards for true believers. In *tafsīr* literature, usually, such verses are followed with traditions on martyrdom, implying that martyrs are the default and most notable recipients of such favours. Al-Suyūtī in his take on 14:27[130] interprets the hereafter as referring to the state of being in the grave. After listing a number of traditions on the trail of the grave and the situation of believers there, he comes up with a tradition on martyrs quoting from the Prophet that only martyrs will be exempt from the terror and trial of the grave, and that is because they have already suffered enough due to their violent death in the path of God.[131] In 47:4-6, we also read that those who are killed in the path of God enter into heaven and they recognize it

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[128] al-Ṭabarānī, 6: 389.

[129] Muhammad ibn 'Abdullāh ibn-abī-Zamanayn, *Tafsīr Ibn-Abī-Zamanayn*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 2003), 1: 465.; see also: Aḥmad ibn Muhammad Rashīduddīn Miybudī, *Kashf Al-Asrār Wa 'Uddat Al-Abrār*, 10 vols. (Tehran: Amīrkabīr, 1992), 1: 693.

[130] "God will give firmness to those who believe in the firmly rooted word, both in this world and the hereafter, but the evildoers he leaves to stray: God does whatever he will" (14:27).

[131] al-Suyūtī, *Al-Dur Al-Manthūr Fī Tafsīr Bil-Ma'thūr*, 4: 84.

outright.[132] Al-Rāzī explains this situation by adding that "before martyrdom, the martyr would be shown his position in heaven in advance, and he would desire to reach that position," hence the phrase "*he has already made known to them*" in 47:4-6 can be understood.[133]

Verses on *ṣabr* (patience for the sake of God) are another occasion for the Qur'anic exegetes to highlight the merit of martyrdom. An example of this is 13:22-24.[134] Al-Ṭabarī considers martyrs among those who show the virtue of *ṣabr* par-excellence. Referring to the verse, he retells a ḥadīth saying that in heaven there is a castle called *'adn* that has five thousand doors, and no one enters this castle other than the Prophets, the truthful, martyrs, and the just imams (judges).[135] Al-Suyūtī also narrates this tradition and in one of its variations adds that upon each door of *'adn* there are twenty five thousand 'beautiful companions' (*ḥūr al-'ayn*).[136] Similar

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[132] "He will not let the deeds of those who are killed for his cause come to nothing; he will guide them and put them into a good state; he will admit them into the garden he has already made known to them" (47:4-6).

[133] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 28: 42.

[134] "Who remain steadfast through their desire for the face of their Lord; who keep up the prayer; who give secretly and openly from what we have provided for them; who repel evil with good. These will have the reward of the [true] home: they will enter perpetual Gardens ['adn], along with their righteous ancestors, spouses, and descendants; the angels will go in to them from every gate, peace be with you, because you have remained steadfast" (13:22-24).

[135] al-Ṭabarī, 13: 95.; see also: ibn Kathīr, 4:387.

[136] al-Suyūtī, *Al-Dur Al-Manthūr Fī Tafsīr Bil-Ma'thūr*, 4: 57.

traditions are mentioned under 9:72[137] where martyrs are counted as one of the main subjects of the verse as residences of the garden of *'adn.*[138]

CONCLUSION

This chapter has surveyed Qur'anic verses and Sunni traditions that discuss the concept of martyrdom in Islam. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the Qur'an itself does not connect the concept of 'martyr' with the word '*shahīd*,' yet it does praise and present the act of dying on the battlefield in the path of God as a sought-after form of death for believers. However, in terms of heavenly rewards, the Qur'an does take a non-discriminatory approach by not directing to exclusive rewards for those killed in the path of God. It is only in the vast corpus of ḥadīth literature where we clearly see the terms 'martyr' and 'martyrdom' are being understood with the terms '*shahīd*' and '*shahādah*.' In fact, gradually in the post-Qur'anic literature (in ḥadīths and Qur'anic *tafsīr*) 'martyr' becomes the first meaning of '*shahīd*' that comes to mind instead of its literal meaning as simply (legal) witness. In the world of traditions related to martyrdom, we also see a transition from understanding martyrdom in the early ḥadīth collection primarily as dying on the battlefield for the sake of God to embracing other forms of death, even non-violent ones. Basically, in this transition, we notice a

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[137] "God has promised the believers, both men and women, gardens graced with flowing streams where they will remain; good, peaceful homes in gardens of lasting bliss [*'adn*]; and––greatest of all–– God's good pleasure" (9:72).

[138] See: ibn 'Atīyyah Andulūsī, 3: 58.; al-Tha'labi, 5: 68.; al-Zamakhsharī, 2: 289.; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 16: 102.; al-Qurṭubī, 8: 204.

return to the Qur'anic inclusivist approach where all true believers will receive God's favour and special heavenly rewards regardless of the way they die. In other words, in many late traditions every believer could be a martyr as long as s/he keeps faith in God and performs good deeds (as delineated in the Qur'an). While this chapter in most part has considered the Sunni understanding of martyrdom, as delineated both in their ḥadīth collections and *tafsīr*, I will now examine martyrdom from the Shī'a perspective, in theory and practice, in both the classic and modern periods.

CHAPTER 3: TWELVER SHĪ'ĪSM'S UNDERSTANDING OF MARTYRDOM

"[But] you, soul at peace: return to your Lord well pleased and well pleasing; go in among my servants; and into my garden" (Qur'an, 89:27-30).

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I discussed the meanings of martyrdom as presented in the Qur'an and Sunni traditions. In the next two chapters I will look at how the Shī'as grasped the idea of martyrdom and who they call martyr (*shahīd*). In doing so, we need to comprehend both the general understanding of the Shī'a of martyrdom (and its points of difference with martyrdom in Sunnism), and paradigmatic cases of martyrdom in this tradition, chief among them the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, the grandson of the Prophet and the third Shī'a Imām.

MARTYRS OF THE COMMUNITY: SECTARIAN FACTOR

Historically speaking, in Islam, martyrdom in the form of violent death for one's belief in God (and his Prophet) at the hands of unbelievers (as it was the case in the early

Christianity) was limited to a relatively short period before the migration of Muslims from Mecca to Medina in 622. During that time, those who had accepted Muhammad as the Prophet were persecuted by the pagans of Mecca. Most of the poor and unprotected Muslims were targeted by the Meccans and they were usually tortured to the point of death unless they renounced their faith. However, we can name just a handful of Muslim martyrs who were killed because of their faith in the Prophet.[1] As I touched his story before, perhaps, the most famous Muslim tortured in that period was Bilāl, one of the most trusted and loyal companions of the Prophet. Bilāl was a slave of a Meccan merchant, and after conversion to Islam he was severely tortured by his master, Abū Jahl. When he was on the verge of martyrdom, Abū Bakr, probably by the order of Muhammad, negotiated with Bilāl's master and finally freed him.[2] Although Bilāl was not martyred, he has been remembered as a paradigmatic martyr-like hero in early Islam.

Not all fellow Muslims who were tortured were as fortunate as Bilāl, as Sumayyah and her husband, Yāsir, (two elderly and lower-class followers of Muhammad) did not survive the harsh treatment of the Meccan pagans; they have been regarded as the first martyrs in Islam.[3] However, at the centre of attention was their young son, 'Ammār, not due to martyrdom but because he, like Bilāl, escaped the

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[1] Cook, 30.

[2] ibn-Hishām, 1: 318.; 'Izz al-Dīn 'Abu Ḥamid ibn abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj Al-Balāghah*, 20 vols. (Qum: Maktabah Ayatollah al-Mar'ashī, 2004), 13: 273. Abū al-Ḥasan ibn al-Athīr, *Asad Al-Ghābah Fī Ma'rifat Al-Ṣahābah*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1989), 1: 243.

[3] *Al-Kāmil Fī Al-Tārīkh*, 2: 67.

martyrdom. 'Ammār was among the first converts and remained a very loyal friend and companion of the Prophet; yet he recanted his faith to survive torture whereas his parents did not. It is reported that Muhammad received 'Ammār warmly after the incident and endorsed his tactical and non-genuine betrayal.[4] Reportedly, a verse of the Qur'an (16:106)[5] was revealed regarding that incident to vindicate 'Ammār.[6] The verse also cleared the way for adopting the practice of *taqīya* (cautionary dissimulation of religious belief and practice in the face of persecution), specially by the Shī'a as a minority sect. Nevertheless, 'Ammār himself was martyred on the battlefield years later in his old age in 657 as he fought for 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the first Shī'a Imām.[7] Al-Balādhurī states that at the time of his martyrdom, Muslims knew a ḥadīth from the Prophet stating that: "'Ammār is always with the truth and he would be killed by a group of rebels." [8] 'Alī also allegedly paid tribute to 'Ammār acknowledging that no one had a slight doubt that 'Ammār was destined to heaven and his murderer would go to hell.[9] Hence, when he was martyred in the battle of

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[4] Hāshim Ḥasanī, *Sīrat Al-Muṣṭafā*, trans. Hamid Taraqi Khah (Tehran: Ḥikmat, 1991), 165.

[5] "With the exception of those who are forced to say they do not believe, although their hearts remain firm in faith, those who reject God after believing in him and open their hearts to disbelief will have the wrath of God upon them and a grievous punishment awaiting them" (16:106).

[6] Ahmad Ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri, *Ansab Al-Ashraf*, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dar al_fikr, 1996), 1: 159-60.; Abū 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd, *Al-Ṭabaqāt Al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 1990), 3: 190.

[7] ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil Fī Al-Tārīkh*, 3: 309.

[8] Aḥmad Ibn Yaḥyā al-Balādhūrī, *Ansāb Al-Ashrāf*, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1996), 1: 168.; Abu Hanifa Dinawari, *Al-Akhbar Al-Tiwal* (Qum: Manshurat al-Razi, 1989), 147.; Aḥmad ibn Abū Ya'qūb al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh Al-Yaqūbī*, 2 vols. (Beirut: al-A'lamī, 2010), 2: 88.

[9] al-Balādhūrī, 1: 174.

Ṣiffīn (fought between ʿAlī, the then-Caliph, and Muʿāwīyah ibn Abī Sufyān, the governor of Syria and future Umayyad Caliph), the followers of ʿAlī used the incident as a proof of the righteousness of their leader and the hypocrisy of Muʿāwīyah and his followers. In response, Muʿāwīyah claimed that the real killer of ʿAmmār was the one who brought him to the battle in the first place (that is ʿAlī).[10]

In Shīʿī sectarian literature, other than the *Ghadīr* tradition in which Muhammad allegedly appointed ʿAlī as his successor and pointed to his *wilāyah* over all Muslims, we see Muhammad's individual recommendations to his close companions regarding ʿAlī. [11] According to a tradition, Muhammad revealed to ʿAmmār the turbulent future of Islam after his death and demanded him to follow ʿAlī and fight on his side; he then told ʿAmmār: "obeying ʿAlī is like obeying me (Muhammad), and obeying me is like obeying Allāh."[12] So, in the light of this tradition, the Shīʿa interpreted the martyrdom of ʿAmmār. In retrospect, what that made the martyrdom of ʿAmmār so special for the later Shīʿa was that it served in a way to defend the Caliphate/Imamate of ʿAlī. ʿAmmār was a sage for the community, and a towering figure in early Shīʿīsm; hence, both in his forced betrayal as a young follower

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[10] Ibid., 1: 169.; Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth, 1967), 5: 41.; Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī Ṭabarsī, *Al-Iḥtijāj*, 2 vols. (Mashhad: al-Murtaḍā, 1982), 1: 182.

There are some speculations that the prophecy of ʿAmmār's martyrdom was fabricated by the anti Umayyad front. See: H. Reckendorf, "'Ammar B. Yasir," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986).

[11] For more discussion on the Twelver Shīʿīsm's theory of the Imamate and *wilāyah* see appendix 1.

[12] ʿAlī Kūrānī ʿĀmilī, *Āyāt Al-Ghadīr* (Qum: Markaz al-Muṣṭafā, 1998), 81.; ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsā Bahāʾ al-Dīn al-Irbilī, *Kashf Al-Ghummah Fī Maʿrifat Al-Aʾimma*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwāʾ, 1985), 360.

of the Prophet and in his controversial martyrdom as a respected disciple of ʿAlī, ʿAmmār was influential in how later the Shīʿa approached and formulated martyrdom as a last resort for the defence of faith and a tribute to the truth that (for them) lies on the side of the proper authority of the time (the Prophet and the Imams). It is important here to note again that this is a retrospective reading of history as at the time, until the middle of the second Islamic century, there was no completely distinguishable Shīʿa identity with its specific coherent theology. However, we can argue that history makes faith; in the sense that every aspect of an established belief system can be traced back in recorded history and the collective knowledge and traditions of the people adhering the faith. Hence the martyrdom of ʿAmmār and other early followers of the Prophet's family should have had profound effects on shaping the concept of martyrdom in Shīʿīsm as we know it today.

In the early period of Muhammad's tenure in Mecca, martyrdom, or being killed for one's faith, was not something that Muslims were seeking; though it was honourable for those who could not escape it. The blood of Muslims was more needed flowing in their bodies rather than on the ground at a time when the Muslim community was small and vulnerable. The Prophet hence asked those Muslims in danger to secretly migrate to the Ethiopian Aksumite Empire in order to escape persecution and possible martyrdom; ʿAmmār was one of them. [13] The situation, however, changed dramatically in Medina where the Prophet received the much-

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[13] ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil Fī Al-Tārīkh*, 2: 76.

needed allegiance of the city's two major tribes of *Aws* and *Khazraj*. He established a local Muslim state and engaged in a series of battles with the Meccan pagans until their eventual victory over Mecca and subsequently the rest of the Arabia. There we see an unprecedented emphasis on martyrdom and fighting martyrs, though apparently the martyrdom terminology (the term *shahīd* as martyr) had not been popularized then. So, the Qur'anic jihad verses, as discussed in chapter two, were revealed highlighting rewards for those slain in the path of God to encourage Muslims to accompany Muhammad by taking part in the battles against the enemies of Islam without the fear of their possible death in the process. Therefore, it was Ḥamzah, the chief commander of the young Muslim community (and, of course, a member of the *de-facto* sacred family of the Prophet) who was named *sayyid al-shuhadā'* (master of the martyrs) rather than the very first defenceless martyrs in the Meccan period such as Sumayyah and Yāsir.

In all probability, highlighting the act of (active military) martyrdom was not due to its inherent importance (as we do not see such attention to martyrdom in Mecca), but simply a means to motivate Muslims to defend their faith and the community at any cost once Muslims had established themselves as a new viable force in Arabia. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, reports that before Muhammad's first battle with Meccan pagans (the battle of Badr) began, he distanced himself from his troops and started praying to God and asked him to grant the Muslim army victory; he then

continued: "if this group be defeated no one will remain to worship you."[14] Ṭabarī narrates that Muhammad tried to encourage his followers to risk their lives for defending the young Muslim community: "swear to God that the life of Muhammad is on his hand whoever is patient in the fight for God and does not turn his back and is killed on the battlefield God will grant him to paradise."[15] After hearing this from the Prophet, a Muslim named ʿAmīr ibn Hāmām who had some dates on his hand and was eating them replied: "amazing! for going to heaven they just have to kill me!" Then he dropped the dates and picked his sword and went to fight and was eventually killed.[16] Muhammad needed brave followers who were not afraid of anything, hence he reminded them what rewards would be waiting for Muslims once they died; nothing was special about martyrdom other than being killed a martyr was just one assured way to heaven, and a fallen Muslim was recognized as a war hero. We even see the tradition of asking forgiveness from God for martyrs. It is said that the Prophet asked God to forgive the martyrs of Uḥud, just as he did for other deceased Muslims.[17] Recognizing this sort of traditions probably means that the idea of immediate forgiveness of all sins of the martyr appeared later in Islamic history.

In early Islam, when it was rapidly developing as a new religion in the neighboring regions, participation in battles against pagans and non-Muslims was

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[14] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 2: 447.

[15] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 448.

[16] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*.

[17] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 3: 190.

necessary for the survival of the Prophet's mission, so military martyrdom was theorized and praised by Muhammad. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the context of the constant state of conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, the Qur'an and prophetic traditions were concerned with fighting and being killed for God (*qitāl fī sabīl-i allāh*). After the Prophet's death, during the Muslim conquests under the leadership of the soon-to-be-called Sunni Caliphs, Muslims continued to celebrate the martyrdom of their fellow believers slain on the battlefield by non-Muslims. [18] However, as mentioned before, for the majority of Muslims in the central parts of the Islamic territories and particularly after the conquests, the opportunity to die a martyr in the original sense (of dying in a fight against unbelievers) greatly diminished. Therefore, the definition of martyrdom was expanded to focus mostly on other types of dying for God that had nothing to do with dying on the battlefield where Muslims and non-Muslims fought with each other.

The martyrdom paradigm soon changed in the early Islamic history through the lines of sectarian divisions, as each sect had its own revered martyrs and did not recognize martyrs of the other party. The phenomenon of sectarian martyrs comes from the fact that every group tends to proclaim its belief system authentic while that of the rivals are considered unacceptable deviation from the truth. In this light, polemic works of the Shīʿa consider the Shīʿites as true Muslims, and even trace back

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[18] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, trans. Abulqasem Payandeh (Tehran: Asāṭīr, 1996), 5: 1859.

the very beginning of Shī'īsm to the time of the Prophet;[19] apparently, the first scholar who claimed this was a tenth century Isma'īlī Shī'a, Abū-Ḥātam al-Rāzī: "Verily, the first title appeared in Islam during the lifetime of the Messenger of Allāh was Shī'a and that was the title of four of the [Prophet's] disciples; they were Abū-Dhar, Salmān al-Fārsī, Miqdād ibn al-Aswad, and 'Ammār ibn Yāsir."[20] Those early followers of 'Alī, and other like-minded Shī'a figures such as Mālik al-Ashtar, Ḥujr ibn 'Adī, and Mītham al-Tammār shed their blood in support of 'Alī in one way or another.[21] With their death, they inspired later generations of Shī'as to continue their struggle in keeping alive what they believed was the proper, yet mostly forgotten path in Islam, that is sticking with the *wilāyah* of 'Alī and his successors (the other Imams) and respecting the Prophet's family (*ahlul bayt*) as he mentioned on some occasions, such as the event of Ghadīr.[22]

The initial dilemma, however, with the very phenomenon of sectarian martyrdom was that since martyrdom was normally caused by non-Muslims, if a Muslim were to be killed by another Muslim that would create an uneasy situation as

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[19] Muhammad Husayn Tihrānī, *Imām Shināsī*, 18 vols. (Tehran: 'Allāmih Ṭabāṭabāī, 2006), 3: 70.

[20] Abū Ḥātam al-Rāzī, *Kitāb Al-Zīnah Fī Al-Kalimāt Al-Islāmīyyah Al-'Arabīyyah*, 3 vols. (Sana'a: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wal-Buḥūth al-'Arabī, 1994), 2: 83-84.; Muhammad Kurd 'Alī, *Khitat Al-Shām*, 6 vols., vol. 6 (Damascus: Maktabat al-Nūrī, 1983), 245.; Lothrop Stoddard, *Hadhir Al-'Alim Al-Islami*, trans. Shakib Arsalan, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1971), 188.

[21] Mālik al-Ashtar was Ali's right-hand lieutenant who was later killed by poison on his way to Egypt as designated governor. After Mu'āwīyah received the news of al-Ashtar's death, Ṭabarī narrates, he stood up and said to his court: "'Alī had two hands, one of them was cut at Ṣiffīn, that is 'Ammār, and the other (al-Ashtar) was cut today" (al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 96.).

[22] For more information refer to Appendix I.

to where to put martyrdom in the equation, particularly when both sides of the conflict were former disciples of the Prophet as was the case in civil unrests after Muhammad, such as the battle of *Jamal* (656). This awkward situation was justified when Muslims were clearly divided into Shī'a and Sunni roughly from the later half of the first Islamic century, particularly after the tragedy of Karbalā where the followers of the Prophet's family found themselves at odds with the would-be-called Sunni Caliphate system of beliefs. One of Ḥusayn's disciples at Karbalā, al-Zuhayr ibn al-Qayn, in his efforts to persuade the Kūfan army not to fight with the family of the Prophet was among the first who pointed to the creation of two separate religious groups within Islam:

> O people of Kūfa! A warning for you of the punishment of God, a warning that a Muslim is obligated to give as advice to his fellow Muslim. Until now, we are brothers and partisans of a single religion and part of a single religious community, given that the sword has not come between us, and you are deserving of sincere advice. But should the sword be drawn, the safeguard (*'iṣmah*) will be broken; we will be an *ummah* and you will be an *ummah*. Verily God has tried us through the offspring of his Prophet Muhammad (s.), to see what you and we will do. Verily we call you to support of them (*nasrihim*) and to the abandonment (*khidhlan*) of the tyrant, 'Ubayd Allāh b. Zīyād.[23]

The massacre at Karbalā was, in effect, a decisive moment for the future of Shī'a believers to brand themselves as saved and the enemies of the Prophet's family as cursed.[24] Therefore, it became easy to see those sympathetic to the Shī'ī cause who died in sectarian conflicts as real martyrs. We can understand this from devotional

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[23] Lūṭ b. Yaḥyā Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqtal Al-Ḥusayn* (Qum: 'Ilmīyyah, 1985), 119. For the translation I relied on Maria Massi Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 83.

[24] For a brief understanding of the Karbalā paradigm see: Aghaie, 3-14.

and liturgical texts. In a famous and much-recited Shī'ī prayer, *zīyārat 'āshūrā*, reportedly composed by the fifth Imām (Muhammad al-Bāqir) sometime after the tragedy of Karbalā during the reign of the Umayyads, this duality of the martyrs of Karbalā versus the cursed enemies of the Imams (*Ahlul-bayt*) is evident and made its way to the core belief of the Shī'a. In this *zīyārah* we read:

> May the curse be upon those people who laid down the foundations for the oppression and wrongs done upon you, the family of the Prophet [*Ahlul-bayt*]. May Allāh curse those people who denied you your position (O' *Ahlul-bayt*) and removed you from your rank which Allāh himself had granted you. May the curse of Allāh be upon those people who killed you and may the curse of Allāh be upon those people who made it easy for them by preparing the grounds of your killing. I turn to Allāh and I turn towards you and turn away from them and their adherents, followers and friends.… And may the curse of Allāh be upon the nation that carried out, saw and were silent at your killing.[25]

In later sections of the *zīyārat 'āshūrā*, the faithful further denounces those responsible for the killing of Ḥusayn, and asks for God's forgiveness and wishes to have the same kind of death as that of the Prophet's family, that is martyrdom:

> I disassociate myself from them through Allāh and through all of you and I seek nearness to Allāh and then to you through love for you and your friends and disassociation with your enemies and from those who want to fight against you and disassociation from their adherents and followers. O' Allāh! Make me at this moment, one who receives from you prayers, mercy and forgiveness. O' Allāh! Make me live the life of Muhammad and the family of Muhammad and permit me to die the death of Muhammad and the family of Muhammad.[26]

This implies that for the newly emerging distinct Shī'ī system of thought the casualties from Ḥusayn's camp were true martyrs in its original sense, not different from those

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[25] ibn Qūlawayh, 328-29. For the translation I relied on https://www.al-islam.org/gu/node/19489.

[26] Ibid., 329-30.

martyrs who fought non-Muslims alongside the Prophet. For the Shīʻa, Āshūrā was a revival and the embodiment of the concept of martyrdom as violent death of the oppressed and helpless believers at the hands of the enemies of God. So, similar to the Meccan period and most of the Judeo-Christian martyrdom tradition we discussed in chapter one, sectarian martyrs, in the Shīʻī sense, were not understood primarily as fallen military heroes, but rather as 'exemplary believers' who gave up their lives in the face of injustice or unbelief without losing their faith.[27] In other words, sectarian martyrs, as still understood today, were champions of the way of truth (*shuhadāʼ al-ḥaqq*). Particularly for the minority Shīʻa, they were often remembered and celebrated as those who had the discernment and courage to seek and stick to the truth at the times of *fitnah* (trial) when most people went astray and relinquished their faith.

In retrospect, the Twelver Shīʻī concept of martyrdom in its sectarian understanding is defined by and linked to the sufferings of *Ahlul-bayt* following the death of the Prophet. According to the mainstream Shīʻa, ʻAlī and his designated successors (supposedly divinely appointed Imams) were oppressed and deprived of their right to succeed the Prophet and were killed by sword or poison. Hence, one can argue that in the Shīʻī sense, the family of the Prophet were the true martyrs and others were called martyrs because of them. In other words, much like the idea of martyrdom in Christianity and its dependence on the crucifixion and resurrection of

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[27] Ṭabarsī, 367.

Christ, the Shīʻa martyrs bore witness to the sufferings of the Prophet's family, which started with the dramatic death of Fāṭimat al-Zahrā, the daughter of Muhammad.

The significance of Fāṭimah in Twelver Shīʻīsm, and in the Shīʻī approach to martyrdom, cannot be overlooked. She is revered as the mother of the Imams (*umm al-ʻaʼimmah*), and even in a tradition Muhammad called Fāṭimah the 'mother of his father' (*umm-i ʻabīhā*).[28] Muhammad also reportedly described his daughter as the mistress of womankind of the universe (*sayyidat nisā' al-ʻālamīn*).[29] She is known among the Shīʻa as the first martyr of the Imamate and is called the truthful martyr (*al-siddīqat al-shahīdah*). In popular Shīʻa piety, no tragedy apart from Ḥusayn's martyrdom, rivals the sorrowful fate of her untimely death (martyrdom) which occurred less than a hundred days after the Prophet. According to Shīʻī sources, Fāṭimah inundated herself with sorrow and weeping for the loss of her father partly as a protest against the usurpation of what she thought was the right of her husband, ʻAlī, as the rightful successor to the Prophet. She embraced alleged vicious physical attacks carried by ʻUmar ibn al-Khattab (the eventual second Caliph). The tale of storming in Fāṭimah's home, reportedly a few days after the death of the Prophet in order to get the allegiance of ʻAlī for Abū Bakr, and burning the front door along the way which caused her fatal chest injury has become known as the first tragedy after

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[28]These titles can be found among the Shīʻa as early as the fourth Islamic century: Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān al-Khaṣībī, *Al-Hidāyat Al-Kubrā* (Beirut: al-Balāgh, 1998), 176.

[29] Ibid., 39.

the Prophet, a sorrowful event that opened up the way for more injustice towards the Imams and the family of the Prophet (*ahlul-bayt*), culminating in the tragedy of Āshūrā. [30]

In Shī‘ī myths, the figure of Fāṭimah plays an important role after her martyrdom. Through Muhammad, God revealed to her all tragic events that would happen to her children, especially the martyrdom of Ḥusayn. Traditions tell us that from heaven she witnessed her children's sufferings and mourned for them. She will remain in the state of mourning, waiting for the vengeance, until the day of judgment. [31] In Shī‘ī folktale, Fāṭimah with her wounded chest and a sorrowful appearance frequently appears in dreams to the pious. In such dreams, Fāṭimah often appears to make the person lament for Ḥusayn, or to thank them for their practice of weeping for Ḥusayn. [32] It is reported that on the day of judgment, Fāṭimah appears in a grand manner that astounds all the Prophets, the truthful, and the martyrs, and they all close their eyes while she passes to reach God's throne. Fāṭimah then asks God to fulfill his pledge and exact vengeance from those who wronged her and martyred her children. Assuring her of punishing all who oppressed her and her family, God gives

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[30] Sulaym ibn Qays, *Kitāb Sulaym Ibn Qays* (Qum: al-Ḥādī, 1984), 584-88.; Muhammad Bāqir b. Muhammad Taqī al-Majlisī, *Biḥār Al-Anwār Al-Jāmi'ah Li-Durar Akhbār Al-A'immah Al-Athār*, 110 vols. (Beirut: Dār ‘Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1983), 43: 197.

[31] Ayoub, 48.

[32] Mir Riḍā Ḥusaynī Arḍī, *72 Dāstān Az Shafā'at Imam Ḥusayn* (Mashhad: Hātif, 1998), 84-85.; 15-120.

There are many websites and published treaties which tell tales of the appearance of Fāṭimah in dreams. For example, see: https://goo.gl/ohTVy8.

Fāṭimah the power to intercede for her followers and the Shī'a of her children (the Imams).[33] These tales and traditions show the great status of Fāṭimah, both in Shī'a theology and in popular piety, which is at the same level as Muhammad and Ali. Fāṭimah being the *de facto* mother of the Shī'a, and the connecting bond between the Prophethood and the Imamate has a prominent position in the formation of the myth of martyrdom in Shī'īsm. In other words, it is fair to argue that Shī'a martyrs by shedding their blood in the path of Imamate and *wilāyah* in fact tend to please Fāṭimah. I will discuss this issue in next chapter.

The life and martyrdom of 'Alī after the death of the Prophet also represent a significant tragedy in Shī'īsm. For the Shī'a, the tragedy began when most Muslims failed to acknowledge the will of Muhammad to entrust 'Alī with the leadership right after the Prophet's death. It took some twenty-five long years before 'Alī was given a chance to lead the community, only to be martyred less than five years later after facing continuous opposition and betrayal and engaging in three battles (*Jamal, Ṣiffīn*, and *Nahrawān*). Ali died of a poisonous sword wound at the hands of one of the Kharijites.[34] Ali's fatal wound occurred on the morning of the nineteenth day of Ramadan and he died less than two days later on the night of the twenty-first day on one of the holiest nights of the year, known as *the Laylat al-qadr* (the night of decree); the night in which it is believed that the whole Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet.

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[33] Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Alī ibn Bābawayh al-Ṣadūq, *Al-Amālī* (Tehran: Kitābchī, 1997), 18. Muhammad Bāqir b. Muhammad Taqī al-Majlisī, *Jalā' Al-'Uyūn* (Qum: Surūr, 2008), 280-81.

[34] Kharijites were former followers of Ali who broke up with him when he agreed to an arbitration with the then governor of Syria, Mu'āwīyah, during the battle of *Ṣiffīn*.

Moreover, *the Laylat al-qadr* is the night of blessing and forgiveness; and on that night every year, the angels reportedly descend from heaven to the Imām of the age to configure the fate of all human beings for the next year. Being martyred on such a night added to the significance of the martyrdom of 'Alī for the Shī'a. Furthermore, Ali's martyrdom and *the Laylat al-qadr* have been intertwined; mourning for his martyrdom is now part of the rituals of the night.

The martyrdom of 'Alī and the injustice towards him during his life after Muhammad had such a profound impact on shaping the Twelver Shī'īsm that 'Alī is called "the first wronged person in the world," based on the following tradition from the tenth Imām, al-Hādī, a title which has remained popular among the Shī'a. We might, however, interpret this as the first wronged person in ranks and importance since obviously the literal meaning of the phrase is not correct:

> Peace be upon you, O' *walī* of Allāh, I bear witness that you are the first wronged person in the world, and the first person that his rights were violated. You, nevertheless, acted patiently, seeking the reward of Allāh, until death came upon you. I bear witness that you met Allāh and you are martyr. May Allāh punish your killer with different torments.[35]

Putting the theological Shī'ī interpretations of 'Alī's status and that of his eleven descendants (as martyred infallible Imams) aside, a short review of the historical accounts of the Shī'ī revolts and their relations to the Imams' cause gives us a better understanding of martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm. 'Alī's prominence and authority were indisputable among the early Shī'a, yet after 'Alī's martyrdom there

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[35] ibn Qūlawayh, 95.

was no charismatic leader who could unite the community. As Maria Massi Dakake put it, "if the historical sources indicate that the Shīʿite camp united fiercely behind ʿAlī toward the end of his life, expressing their absolute devotion, or [*wilāyah*], toward him and *ʿadāwah* or *barāʿah* [enmity] toward all of his many enemies, they also detail the gradual disintegration of this unity in the ideological and leadership confusion that followed his death."[36]

Ḥasan, ʿAlī's older son and the second Imām in the Twelver tradition, briefly replaced his father as Caliph, but struggled to attract the same level of loyalty among his father's former companions.[37] Having failed to secure enough support, Ḥasan was forced to surrender power to Muʿāwīyah through a controversial peace treaty.[38] This caused resentment among some of his key companions who, based on their oath of allegiance to ʿAlī's cause, were not willing to accept Muʿāwīyah as a legitimate Muslim ruler. Ḥasan survived a failed assassination attempt by a group of his soldiers and received angry reactions from his Shīʿa allies for his seemingly tactical deal with Muʿāwīyah. Reportedly, Ḥujr ibn ʿAdī, a prominent Shīʿa of ʿAlī, was deeply disappointed with the treaty and called Ḥasan '*yā mudhil al-muʿminīn*' (o' the believers' humiliator).[39] Ḥasan's retreat to Medina and his eventual death by poison

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[36] Dakake, 71.

[37] Ibid., 71.

[38] al-Yaʿqūbī, 122.

[39] Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī al-Ṣaghīr, *Dalā'il Al-Imāmah* (Qum: Bi'that, 1992), 166. In other sources we see different names who uttered this phrase regarding Ḥasan. It is not clear who was responsible for the phrase.

(reportedly planned by Muʿāwīyah) gave Muʿāwīyah the opportunity to strengthen his rule over all Muslims.

As part of his effort to solidify his position as the Caliph, Muʿāwīyah, particularly after the death of Ḥasan, was eager to wipe out all favorable memories of ʿAlī by forcing all mosques to curse him before every Friday prayer, even in city of Kūfa where ʿAlī had based his government and most of his followers lived there.[40] This caused resentment for some of the most loyal former disciples of ʿAlī, notably Ḥujr ibn ʿAdī, who was publicly outspoken about this Muʿāwīyah's decree and vehemently refused to curse ʿAlī. Ḥujr's refusal to denounce ʿAlī resulted in his imprisonment and subsequently he was beheaded by Muʿāwīyah's order in the year 53 of the Islamic calendar.[41] Al-Masʿūdī, a tenth-century historian, believed that Ḥujr was the first martyr since the Meccan period who was killed in captivity.[42] Ḥujr's status as a great martyr has been preserved among the Shīʿa; his shrine near Damascus in Syria had been a place of pilgrimage before it was destroyed by a Salafī jihadist group on May 2, 2013 during the recent Syrian civil war.[43]

The martyrdom of Ḥujr, in fact, was one of a few cases of sectarian martyrdom in early Shīʿīsm. The deprivation and alienation of the Prophet's family and their

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[40] ibn abī al-Ḥadīd, 4: 56.

[41] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 277.

[42] Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Alī Al-Mas'ūdi, *Murūj Al-Dhahab Wa Ma'ādin Al-Jawāhir*, 4 vols. (Qum: Dār al-Hijrah, 1988), 3: 3.

[43] "Prophet's companion grave exhumation condemned." Alalam. 03 May 2013. Retrieved 6 December 2016.

supporters from political power after the assassination of 'Alī left much desire for vengeance and the need to protect 'Alī's legacy by returning the Caliphate to the Prophet's family. However, serious acts of resistance and martyrdom for a purely Shī'ī cause rarely happened before the rise of Ḥusayn almost twenty years after 'Alī's death. This lack of collective attempt by the Shī'a in part can be linked to the inability of the Shī'a to settle around an unquestionable authority of 'Alī's caliber. Ḥasan's forced reconciliation with Mu'āwīyah, a peace treaty that even after Ḥasan's death his younger brother (Ḥusayn) kept intact for nearly ten years until the death of Mu'āwīyah, more than anything else showed how little the broad followers of 'Alī were willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the Prophet's family in the post-'Alī era. Similar to the martyrdom of Ḥujr, Ḥasan's death (or martyrdom due to poison, according to later Shī'ī traditions,) hardly caused an uproar among the Shī'a. [44] Even the tragedy of Karbalā and Ḥusayn's martyrdom could have been prevented had he managed to earn the same authority and charisma of his father ('Alī) and been able to effectively mobilize the Shī'a (of Kūfa) against the Umayyads.[45]

Before the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, the Shī'ī version of martyrdom, that is dying for the cause of the Prophet's family, was not a trend among those sympathetic to the cause. Things changed forever with the tragedy of Karbalā. For a better grasp of the magnitude of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, we need to review the related historical events.

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[44] Al-Mas'ūdi, 2: 427.

[45] Dakake, 71.

With Muʿāwīyah's death, Yazīd, his reportedly impious son, succeeded him. The succession caused the resentment of the community of the Shīʿa, particularly in Kūfa. Immediately after taking power, Yazīd asked his governor of Medina to forcefully take the oath of allegiance from influential citizens of the city, most importantly Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī and ʿAbdullāh ibn Zubayr (son of a famous Prophet's disciple, Zubayr ibn Al-Awwām who later opposed ʿAlī and was responsible for the battle of Jamal). They both refused to endorse Yazīd's rule and fled from Medina to Mecca, which was a safer place for them due to its sanctity. ʿAbdullāh remained in Mecca and later succeeded in capturing the city from the Umayyads for a few years before finally being defeated and killed in battle against the army of the then Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Mālik ibn Marwān in 692, some 12 years after the events of Karbalā.[46]

Ḥusayn, in contrast, after receiving many letters of support from the Shīʿa of Kūfa and feeling unsafe in Mecca abruptly left the city toward Kūfa in the middle of the Hajj season with the company of his family and a small group of followers. In their letters, the Kūfan Shīʿas, many of whom had fought for ʿAlī, asked Ḥusayn to join them as their Imām and leader to revolt against Yazīd. Right after the death of Muʿāwīyah, Sulaymān ibn Surad al-Khuzāʿi, a former disciple of Muhammad, ʿAlī and Ḥasan, and a respectable Shīʿa of Kūfa wrote the first of such letters to Ḥusayn (also signed by other leaders of the Shīʿa in Kūfa). The letter reads:

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[46] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 6: 187.

> Thanks be to God that your enemy and your father's enemy [Muʿāwīyah] is dead now…. Now we are hearing that his cursed son [Yazīd] took power without the consensus of the community, and without knowing the traditions. We do not want to accept his claim for caliphate and will fight him with you. We were your father's friends and Shīʿa, and now we are your friends and Shīʿa. When you receive this letter come to us [in Kūfa] and become our ruler [*amir*], our Imām, and our Caliph. We don't have any ruler and Imām except Nuʿman ibn Bashir [Yazīd's governor in Kūfa] who has no [real authority among the Shīʿa of Kūfa]. [47]

Ḥusayn also sent his trusted cousin, Muslim ibn ʿAqil, to Kūfa to evaluate their readiness for the cause.[48] When he arrived in Kūfa, Muslim was initially impressed by the willingness of the vast majority of the Shīʿa to join Ḥusayn in his mission. He sent a messenger to his cousin asking him to hasten his travel to Kūfa. Meanwhile, in an unexpected turn of events, Yazīd sent ʿUbaydullāh ibn Zīyād as the new governor of Kūfa and he swiftly and easily took control of the city and succeeded in arresting and executing Muslim and his prominent supporter, Hani ibn Urwa. The martyrdom of Muslim put an end to his mission in preparing Kūfa for Imām Ḥusayn's arrival, and consequently cast a deep shadow on the prospect of Ḥusayn's movement.[49] Already some important Shīʿa veterans, including his half-brother, Muhammad ibn Ḥanafīyyah, and his cousin, Ibn ʿAbbās, had warned him not to leave Mecca for Kūfa in opposition to Yazīd as they saw no chance of success for Ḥusayn. They thought Yemen would be a safer option for him since it was far away from Yazīd's Syria. However, Ḥusayn was determined to continue his way to Kūfa under any

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[47] al Kūfī, 5: 28.

[48] Ibid., 5: 32.

[49] Ibid., 5: 64.

circumstances.[50] It is reported that in his insistence to take the grave risk of going to Iraq, Ḥusayn, in response to Umm Salamah (a widow of Muhammad) referred to his dream of the Prophet and his previous premonition from his parents, ‘Alī and Fāṭimah, as well as Muhammad, that he was destined to be martyred and that there was no escape from that fate:

> By God, O mother, I shall be killed without any doubt. There is no escape from the predestined decree of God; there is no escape for me from death. Indeed, I know the day and hour, and the spot wherein I shall be killed. I know the place whereon I shall fall, and the spot in which I shall be buried, as I know you. If you wish that I show you my resting place and that of the men who will be martyred with me, I will.[51]

There is a report that after the martyrdom of Muslim, Ḥusayn, was hesitant to continue his mission; however, the family of Muslim wanted to avenge his death and persuaded Ḥusayn to continue his march to Kūfa.[52] After arriving in Karbalā and confronted with a huge Umayyads army, most of them Kūfan soldiers, it was finally clear to Ḥusayn and his companions that there would be no victory for them. Hence, Ḥusayn offered withdrawal from his mission toward Kūfa if they would let him go somewhere safe. ‘Ubaydullāh ibn Zīyād refused Ḥusayn's request and ordered his army to attack Ḥusayn and his followers and kill everyone in his army in Karbalā. The battle lasted just a few hours on the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram year 680.[53] Almost all adult males in Ḥusayn's camp were killed in battle, except one of Ḥusayn's

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[50] Ibid., 5: 69.

[51] Ayoub, 91.

[52] Ibid., 105.

[53] al Kūfī, 5: 87.; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 411.

sons, Ali ibn Ḥusayn Zayn al-'Abidīn (al-Sajjād), the heir and successor to Ḥusayn's Imamate. Zayn al-'Abidīn was reportedly sick and could not participate in the battle, so he, along with the women of Karbalā, were captured and sent to 'Ubaydullāh ibn Zīyād. Later, ibn Zīyād sent them with the decapitated head of Ḥusayn to Yazīd in Damascus.[54]

The martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet at the hands of the grandson of the most important enemy of the Prophet (Abū Sufyān) just fifty years after Muhammad's death was a massive tragedy for all Muslims. Even the ruling Umayyads family was not happy with the tragic turns of events in Karbalā. Al-Ṭabarī narrates that after the captives of Karbalā were sent to Yazīd, at their presence he also showed his remorse for what had happened to the family of the Prophet and held a mourning ceremony for Ḥusayn in his house.[55] However, Yazīd's attempts to distance himself from those responsible for the killing of Ḥusayn were not effective and did not temper the resentment of the devastated family of the Prophet and their followers. Soon, Ḥusayn's martyrdom fueled anti-Umayyads uprisings that weakened the Umayyads' position in power, which ultimately resulted in their defeat in the revolution led by descendants of 'Abbās, uncle of the Prophet, who formed the Abbasid Caliphate after the last Umayyad Caliph, Marwan ibn Muhammad, was killed in 750. The tragedy of Āshūrā was a turning point, particularly for the Shī'a, as it was the single most

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[54] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 468.

[55] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 464.

important event in early Islam that defined the Shīʿa type of martyrdom forever. Some issues here must be discussed regarding Āshūrā.

Because of the utmost importance of the event in Islamic history, there are many historical and ḥadīth reports that cover every aspect of the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn and his followers in Karbalā. Most of them were written at least 50 years after the events, so they were not produced by first-hand witnesses or those involved in the events. Moreover, due to the sensitivity of Āshūrā for the broader Muslim community and the theological ramifications of the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn for the Shīʿa in particular, historical facts and myths are mostly inseparable in the narrative of the story and that makes an academic study of the events very difficult. However, as we are examining the Shīʿa 'perception' of martyrdom, what that is important is to see how the Shīʿas understood Imām Ḥusayn's martyrdom and how they now use it to justify their religious and political stances. Hence, for the sake of this study, I am not going to distinguish facts from myths to decipher what actually happened in Arabia, Iraq, and Syria around 680.

The martyrdom of Ḥusayn, as shocking as it was, happened in a remote place in a less than a day. It was meant to be out of the public's eye. However, the tragic story ironically was publicized by the Umayyads themselves who brought the captives of Karbalā and let them scatter voices of discontent. The result was a widespread sense of guilt, particularly in Kūfa, where most of the Shīʿa had withdrawn their support from Ḥusayn after ibn Zīyād cracked down on Muslim ibn ʿAqil's mission and

prohibited anyone from joining Ḥusayn. The sermons of Zaynab (Ḥusayn's sister) and ʿAlī ibn Ḥusayn, while in captivity in Kūfa and Damascus, were also effective in denying Yazīd the opportunity to turn the massacre of Karbalā in his favour and strengthen his power. In fact, the killing of Ḥusayn backfired badly and Yazīd was forced to free the prisoners and let them return to Medina.[56] In some reports the captives even were allowed to visit the graves of the martyrs in Karbalā on their ways back to Medina.[57] In an effort to clear his name, Yazīd even blamed ʿUbaydullāh ibn Zīyād for the killing of Ḥusayn; and reportedly said to ʿAlī ibn Ḥusayn that "may God curse ibn Marjanah [ibn Zīyād], God knows if his [Ḥusayn's] fate were with me, I would have accepted whatever he requested and prevented his death, even if I had to lose one of my children, but God had a different plan as you saw."[58] Moreover, for three days, Yazīd let women mourn for Ḥusayn in his court.[59]

Ultimately, Yazīd was unable to clear his name for being responsible for the killing of Ḥusayn. The damage was done, and with the passive, yet effective, role of Zaynab and ʿAlī-ibn Ḥusayn in spreading the story of Āshūrā through lamentation, the martyrdom of Ḥusayn eventually became a symbol of resistance and a marker of identity for the minority Shīʿa. Later Imams adopted this passive strategy of opposing

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[56] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 462.

[57] al-Ṣadūq, 168. However, considering reliable historical resources, it is not clear whether the captives returned to Karbalā directly from Syria or they went there in another occasion.

[58] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 462.

[59] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 462.

the status quo and anti-Shīʻa policies of the Sunni Caliphs by holding and encouraging mourning gatherings for Ḥusayn every year on the day of Āshūrā.[60] The Imams encouraged their followers to perform pilgrimage to Karbalā on the day of Āshūrā as a sign of respect for his cause; and those who could not go to Karbalā were asked to weep and mourn for Ḥusayn at their homes together with their households.[61] The passive resistance in the form of mourning was not exclusively restricted to the martyrdom of Ḥusayn. Reportedly, the fifth Imām, Muhammad al-Bāqir asked his son and successor, Jaʻfar al-Sādiq, to hold mourning ceremonies for ten years on the anniversary of his death (reportedly due to poison).[62] However, the tragic nature of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and his family and followers as well as the captivity of the women and children made Āshūrā the symbol of oppression against the family of the Prophet, worthy of special attention by the Shīʻas. There are many traditions that suggest extraordinary rewards for weeping and commemorating the martyrdom of Ḥusayn. Shīʻa sources are replete with Muhammad's prophecies regarding Ḥusayn's martyrdom and the merits of being sad and mournful for his tragedy. One famous tradition from the Prophet asserts: "verily, the martyrdom of Ḥusayn kindles such a fire in the hearts of the believers which will never extinguish."[63] I will discuss more about traditions on the martyrdom of Ḥusayn later in this chapter.

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[60] Muhammad Bāqir Majlisī, *Biḥār Al-Anwār*, 110 vols. (Beirut: al-Wafā', 1983), 79: 102.

[61] ibn Qūlawayh, 326.

[62] Majlisī, 46: 220.

[63] Mīrzā Ḥusayn Nūrī Ṭabrasī, *Mustadrak Al-Wasā'il Wa Mustanbaṭ Al-Masā'il*, 30 vols. (Beirut: Mu'ssisat Āl al-Bayt li 'Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 1987), 10: 318.

Another issue in the narratives of the events of Karbalā is that, despite the theological importance and significance of Ḥusayn's martyrdom for later generations of the Shī'a, in the available sources, as far as I know, a direct reference to words such as martyrdom (*shahādah, istishhād*) or martyr (*shahīd*) is rare. Ḥusayn did not build a case for himself as a would-be-martyr other than merely embracing the imminent death at the hands of the Umayyads. He did not draw a theological conclusion from his intention for martyrdom. Ḥusayn did use the terminology of martyrdom for himself and his companions on only three occasions. It was never expanded upon on what that would mean to the rest of the community. First, in a letter to the people of his tribe (*Banū Hāshim*) apparently written while he was in Mecca, he expressed: "whoever joins me will be martyred [*istashhada*] and whoever declines my request will not taste victory." Once more, on the night before Āshūrā, during his speech to his followers, Ḥusayn revealed what he had dreamt earlier that night: "And after that, I saw the Messenger of Allāh with a number of his disciples, and he told me 'you are the martyr of this community, the settlers of the heavens and God's throne congratulate themselves for you are going to join them; you will be with me [tomorrow] night, so be hasty; an angel has descended from heaven to collect your blood in a green tube.'" And finally, on the day of Āshūrā, after the mid-day prayer in the heat of the battle, he encouraged his remaining followers to be patient: "you, the nobles, this is paradise

that is opened for you, its rivers have come together, and its fruits are ripe."[64] In

contrast, reportedly, Ḥusayn numerously used words such as 'death' (*mawt*),[65] 'be

killed' (*qutil, maqtūl, qatīl, madhbūḥ*),[66] 'to kill' (*qatl*)[67] as he prepared his followers to

come to the terms with their eventual death if they joined his movement against the

rule of Yazīd. Comparing this with the image of Ḥusayn as the ultimate martyr and the

holiness of martyrdom in the path of God among the later generations of the Shīʿa in

the following centuries after Āshūrā shows us how Āshūrā profoundly changed and

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[64] Āqā ibn 'Ābid Fāḍil Darbandī, *Iksīr Al-'Ibādāt Fī Asrār Al-Shahādah*, 3 vols. (Manama: Shirkat al-Muṣṭafā, 1994), 1: 652.

[65] "Death has been written on the son of Adam in such a suitable way like the elegance of a necklace around the neck of a young girl. I am so eager to meet my ancestors like the enthusiasm of Jacob to see Joseph. The divine fate has destined for me a place of killing to which I have to go. As if my body parts and members are torn between Nawāwīs and Karbalā to quench there thirst and hanger by killing me. There is no escape from such a divine fate. We, the household of the Prophet, are subservient to whatever God has destined us. We will be patient on this calamity which he has planned for us. Of course his Almighty will give us the reward of the patients. We are the body parts of the Prophet and his body parts will not separate from him. We will be surrounding the Prophet in paradise. By our departure from this world the Prophet will be delighted. The promises that have been given to us will be fulfilled. Now, whoever among us is ready for martyrdom and has prepared himself for death and is fond of meeting God, will move with us. We will set out tomorrow; God willing." al-Sayyid Raḍī al-Dīn ibn Ṭāwūs, *Al-Luhūf 'Alā Qatla Al-Ṭufūf* trans. Ahmad Fahri Zanjani (Tehran: Jahān, 1970), 61. (for the translation I relied on https://www.imamreza.net/old/eng/imamreza.php?id=7080; "Be patient O ' the son of the nobles. Death is only a bridge which takes you from misery and loss to the vast Paradise and the eternal graces. Then, is there anyone among you who dislikes to be transferred from a prison to a palace? For your enemies death is the opposite, it is like being transferred from a palace to a prison to be tortured. Be patient O ' the son of the nobles. Death is only a bridge which takes you from misery and loss to the vast paradise and the eternal graces. Then, is there anyone among you who dislikes to be transferred from a prison to a palace? For your enemies death is the opposite, it is like bein transferred from a palace to a prison to be tortured." Majlisī, 44: 297. (for the translation I relied on https://goo.gl/yYFXtR; "To me , death is nothing but happiness, and living under tyrants nothing but living in a hell." Abū Muhammad al-Ḥasan ibn 'Ali ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Shu'ba al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf Al-Uqūl* (Qum: Jāmi'at Mudarrisīn, 1984), 245.

[66] O' my mother, [Umm Salama, a Muhammad's widow], I also know that I will be wrongfully killed and God wants my family to be captive and my children be killed" Majlisī, 44: 231.; "[Muhammad to Ḥusayn in a dream:] Certainly, God wants to see you be killed", 44: 364.

[67] "My father received the prophecy of his murder and my murder from the Messenger of Allāh. He also revealed to me that my tomb will be near his" ibn Ṭāwūs, 27.

reinterpreted martyrdom into something essential for the identity of the Shīʻa community.

Similar to Ḥusayn, his disciples in Karbalā, while eager to shed their blood in defence of their leader, did not paint, or at least envision, their death as an act of martyrdom bearing some extraordinary theological and eschatological significance as was later articulated in the Shīʻa works. Even in Zīyārat Āshūrā, the author(s) did not call the tragic death of Ḥusayn and his devoted family and followers martyrdom. Considering the abundance of attention to the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn in the late Umayyads and early Abbasid periods, we can assume that if the Zīyārat Āshūrā had been composed a hundred years later, it would have been written differently. There would have been a direct reference to the concept of martyrdom; at least, Ḥusayn would have been called *sayyid al-shuhadā* (master of the martyrs), instead of only his title *Abā Abdillāh.*

Certainly, the concept of martyrdom as dying for God was known to the people around Ḥusayn, but not until the tragedy of Karbalā was it a driving force for social and political changes with a theological significance. Martyrdom in the post-Āshūrā setting became a litmus test for identifying truth and falsity in the sectarian context. The desire for martyrdom and holding martyrs in high regards came from the Shīʻī understanding of martyrdom as witnessing the truth which was embodied in the path of the heirs of the Prophet (the Imams) and expressed by showing love towards them

and hatred for their enemies.[68] In other words, the moving death of Imām Ḥusayn and his disciples in Karbalā, made the case for the Shīʻa, that dying in defence of the Imām and the *walī* of the time deserved to be called martyrdom (as if imitating the path of the Imams and following their footsteps was the authentic Islam).

Āshūrā was, in fact, a turning point in how the Shīʻa pursued martyrdom as a strong weapon upon facing relatively dominant adversaries. The martyrdom of Ḥusayn, the grandson of the Prophet, was so shocking in the eyes of the Shīʻa that it overshadowed all martyrs before and after him including his father, ʻAlī, as well as early martyrs like Ḥamzah; hence, he became synonymous with martyrdom and received the title of *sayyid al-shuhadā*, a title previously was reserved for Ḥamzah. Another difference that Āshūrā made was that up until that time, even for the Shīʻa, martyrdom was seen mostly as a personal honour that one would long for. Āshūrā changed it forever by valuing voluntary martyrdom as a duty for the community of the believers in times that the blood of the martyr is needed for the survival of the faith and redemption of the community. For the Shīʻa, the martyr's blood triumphed over the sword; it was a victory in defeat. The concept of martyrdom changed from

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[68] This combination of love (*ḥub:* خُب) and hatred (*bughḍ:* بغض) in Shiʻi teachings comes from some traditions that delineate the essence of faith as being summarized in the love of God, the Prophet and the Imams (acknowledging their *wilāyah*), and the hatred toward their enemies. One such traditions from the sixth Imām, Jaʻfar al-Sadiq, says: "Is faith anything but love and hatred?" Abū Jaʻfar Muhammad b. Yaʻqūb al-Kulaynī, *Al-Kāfī*, 8 vols. (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyyah, 1986), 2: 125. Other traditions specifically speak about the love of the Imams and the hatred toward their enemies as the essence of Islam: "Everything has a foundation and the foundation of Islam is the love for us, the [*Ahlul-bayt*]" M Muhammadi Rayshahri, *The Scale of Wisdom: A Compendium of Shi'a Hadith*, trans. A Kadhim N Virjee, M Dasht Bozorgi, Z Alsalami, A Virjee (London: ICAS Press, 2008), 538.

being beneficial for the martyr in the afterlife to becoming a motivating factor in social and political movements. It turned out to be a vehicle of protest, and a voice of discontent. Āshūrā (and the martyrdom of Ḥusayn) became a representation of lost opportunities for Muslims to make their community the one that the Prophet had envisioned; Āshūrā demonstrated what went wrong in Muslim history. I will say more about this in chapter four.

Preserved sayings of the martyrs of Karbalā are another fascinating topic in the study of martyrdom. In the tragedy of Āshūrā, Ḥusayn was the centrepiece surrounded by about a couple of hundred totally devoted followers. As mentioned before, there are many exaggerated and fabricated reports of the events of Karbalā that have been made mostly to arouse the emotions of the Shī'a audience. Weeping and lamenting for Ḥusayn also gradually gained unparalleled religious and theological significance. Nevertheless, his tale of martyrdom is full of epic quotes that redefined martyrdom as a duty of believers in the face of grave injustice. In one of the most famous quotes we read that on the day of Āshūrā Ḥusayn said to his opponents: "Do you not see how right is not acted upon and falsehood is not prevented? Then let the believer desire the meeting with God, for I see death as being nothing other than happiness while life with the oppressors as humiliation."[69]

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[69] Majlisī, 45: 40.

Shīʿī historians also depicted Ḥusayn's followers and family members as completely selfless heroes who sacrificed everything they had for the sake of their Imām. We find some interesting quotes from the martyrs of Karbalā, all competing to be the first to give their life before Ḥusayn and get martyred. ʿAbbās, half-brother of Ḥusayn, and second only to his older brother among the martyrs in terms of importance, is famously narrated shouting towards the enemies on the battlefield when he stormed to get water for children and women: "O self, there is no point in living after Ḥusayn, I don't want you to stay alive after him…; even if you cut off my right hand I won't turn my back on my religion and my righteous Imām, son of the trustee and pure Prophet, the truthful Prophet who brought the divine religion that attests the oneness of God."[70] Others have been recorded uttering similar epic slogans, wishing to fight for Ḥusayn until the last drop of their blood and be martyred for him and then return to fight again and get martyred for several times.[71]

One of the most cited themes of the story of Āshūrā that appeared in the sayings of Ḥusayn and his family was the issue of the love of God in accepting his tragic fate, similar to what I discussed in chapter one. Ḥusayn's absolute trust in God and his calmness and joy of meeting God is the pinnacle of the story of Āshūrā which has been retold and stressed by Shīʿī orators for centuries. In a couple of late sources, it is reported that moments before Ḥusayn's death, while he was fatally wounded on the

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[70] Ibid., 41.

[71] al Kūfī, 5: 95.

ground, he whispered to himself saying: "O' God, I am pleased with your wish, patient with your trials, submitted to your decree, there is no other (worshiped) Lord than you, O' helper of those in distress."[72] Reportedly, his sister, Zaynab, in the Ibn Zīyād's court on the day after Āshūrā described the tragedy and martyrdom of Ḥusayn in a similar way by conceding to God's will: "I did not see anything but beauty."[73] This esoteric and mystic understanding of Ḥusayn's martyrdom through the lens of the pure love of God and absolute submission to his will particularly has become the dominant narrative in modern Shī'īsm.

The immediate effect of the tragedy of Karbalā was the revolt of (penitents) in 684 by a group of the Shī'a led by a respected former companion of the Prophet, Sulaymān ibn Surad Khuzā'ī, from the city of Kūfa where Ḥusayn was heading to lead an uprising against the Umayyad Caliphate. The primary goal of the group was to avenge Ḥusayn's blood. They were ready for martyrdom (if necessary) out of guilt for their failure to stand behind Ḥusayn in his mission against Yazīd,[74] hence they named themselves *Tawwābūn* (repenters) and chose "*yā lathārāt al- ḥusayn*" (Rise to avenge Ḥusayn's blood) as their slogan.[75] Before their revolt, the *Tawwābūn* visited the grave of Ḥusayn and wept for his martyrdom and for their part in the tragedy. This marked

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[72] 'Abdul-Razzāq Mūsawī Muqarram, *Maqtal Al-Ḥusayn* (Beirut: Mu'assisat al-Kharsan lil-Maṭbū'āt, 2007), 297.

[73] Al-Sayyid Muhsin al-Amīn, *A'yān Al-Shī'a* 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ta'āruf, 1983), 1: 614.; Majlisī, 45: 116.

[74] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 552.

[75] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 583.

the first major public mourning practice for a martyrdom of a Muslim. On Ḥusayn's grave, Sulaymān gave a sermon for his followers and called Ḥusayn 'martyr son of martyr'.[76] Again, this was one of the early usages of the title of 'martyr' in a political context. In accordance with the Islamic traditions to seek forgiveness for the deceased,[77] Sulaymān also asked forgiveness for Ḥusayn, a clear contrast with the later depiction of Ḥusayn as the so-called infallible Imām, the *sayyid al-shuhadā,* and the intercessor of the community on the day of judgment.[78] However, there are elements in the Sulaymān's speech that suggest a super human position for Ḥusayn, a kind of intermediary between God and his people as later became a principle in Twelver Shī'īsm.[79]

An interesting issue regarding the martyrdom story of *Tawwābūn* is the novel concept of the relation between martyrdom, sin, and repentance, something that had no precedence in Islam. As we saw in the previous chapter, according to Islamic traditions, God will forgive the sins of the martyr. Forgiveness for the martyr was essentially a side-effect of their martyrdom. Nevertheless, martyrdom was never seen primarily as a remedy for guilt. No one opted for martyrdom because they thought they did something wrong and wanted to fix that. The Tawwābūn knew their

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[76] al-Baladhuri, 6: 370.

[77] Torsten Hylén, "New Meanings to Old Rituals: The Emergence of Mourning Rituals in Shi'ite Islam" (paper presented at the Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting, Washington DC, Nov. 22-25 2014, 2014).

[78] al-Baladhuri.

[79] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 590.; Hylén.

movement would most likely end in defeat; yet they deliberately chose martyrdom as a form of purification for the sins they committed by abandoning Ḥusayn when he needed their support in Karbalā. In their visit to Karbalā, Sulaymān reportedly said:

> "Oh Lord, we have betrayed the son of our Prophet's daughter! Pardon us for what we did in the past and relent toward us… If you do not pardon us our sin and have mercy on us, then we are among those who are lost… Praise be to God who, if he had wished, would have honored us with martyrdom with [Ḥusayn]. Oh my God, since you forbade us it together with him, do not forbid us it on his account after him." [80]

Their commitment for martyrdom resembles the story of the golden calf where the Israelites killed each other because they failed in their faith to the God of Israel.[81] The *Tawwābūn* wanted to exact revenge Ḥusayn's martyrdom, however, instead of weeping for his loss they were concerned with "the magnitude of the treason of the Kūfan Shīʿites and the need to repent from it," hence their willingness to shed their own blood.[82] They predictably failed to gain victory over the superior Umayyads army, and after suffering so many losses, including Sulaymān, the rest of their army of five thousand retreated to Kūfa.[83]

Following the Tawwābūn's defeat, there was a rather successful revolt of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī in vengeance of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and his followers five years after the events of Karbalā in 685. Mukhtār was reluctant to join Sulaymān's

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[80] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 589-90. (for the translation I relied on Hylén.)

[81] Ibid.

[82] Hylén.

[83] al-Baladhuri, 6: 374.

revolt out of his pragmatism since he did not believe in Sulaymān's competence as a war leader. Mukhtār had lobbied against the Sulaymān's movement, arguing that he would lead his army into fruitless danger.[84] In his revolt, Mukhtār also chose *yā lathārāt al-ḥusayn* as his slogan, but unlike the leaders of Tawwābūn, he believed in martyrdom as the last resort and plotted his revolt meticulously and successfully. He managed to free Kūfa from the rule of the Umayyads for a few months and succeeded in killing most of the people responsible for the killing of Ḥusayn and his followers in Karbalā.[85] Mukhtār himself was finally killed in 687 in a battle with Musʿab bin al-Zubayr, a younger brother of ʿAbdullāh ibn Zubayr, who led a partly successful non-Shīʿī rebellion against the Umayyad Caliphate.[86]

Mukhtār is remembered among the Shīʿa as a great martyr, particularly because of his role in vengeance for the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn; though, he remained a somewhat controversial figure due to some disagreement on his true intentions and whether he was loyal to ʿAlī ibn Ḥusayn al-Sajjād, the fourth Shīʿī Imām. However, the Imams mostly appeared to be pleased with his faith to the family of the Prophet and his actions against their enemies.[87] The case for the martyrdom of Mukhtār came from his courageous effort to kill the enemies of the Prophet's family, particularly Ḥusayn. Most later Shīʿa uprisings near the end of the Umayyad Caliphate

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[84] al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 5: 561.

[85] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 6: 38-66.

[86] *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 6: 93.

[87] Majlisī, 45: 343, 86.

(except the revolt of Zayd which follows) did not build their rebellious attempts around avenging Ḥusayn's blood, rather, more generally they made a case to return the Caliphate into the competent hands of the family of the Prophet (*al-riḍā min āl-i muḥammad*) as the rightful Caliphs (though with some disagreements over the identity of the person within that family).[88]

The revolt of Zayd ibn ʻAlī, grandson of Ḥusayn and brother of the fifth Imām, Muhammad al-Bāqir, was another notable collective Shīʻa attempt against the Umayyads rule and resulted in another instance of Shīʻī martyrdom in 740. He was considered an Imām for the Zaydi Shīʻas; Twelvers also generally respect Zayd ibn ʻAlī as a righteous and learned scholar (not an Imām) and regard him a respected martyr, though with some reservations. Zayd based his ill-fated uprising against Hisham ibn ʻAbdulmalik, an Umayyad Caliph, to avenge the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and to enjoin good and forbid wrong (*al-ʻamr bi al-maʻrūf wa al-nahy ʻan al-munkar*), similar to the intention of Ḥusayn in his revolt and martyrdom in Karbalā.[89] Zayd gathered his followers in Kūfa and started a Shīʻī uprising; but his revolt quickly faced defeat and he was killed in battle. The circumstances surrounding Zayd's martyrdom were also similar to that of his grandfather, Ḥusayn, as most of his initial supporters abandoned him, and his small group of loyal followers faced a huge Umayyads army and lost the

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[88] al-Baladhuri, 3: 140.;, 4: 82.;, 4: 138.;al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 7: 390.;*Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 9: 7.;Abul-Faraj Iṣfahāni, *Maqātil Al-Ṭālibīyīn Wa-Akhbāruhum*, ed. Bihzād Jaʻfarī (Beirut: Dār al-Maʻrifah), 428.

[89] Abū 'Abdullāh Muhammad ibn al-Nuʻmān al-Mufīd, *Al-Irshād Fī Maʻrifat Ḥujaj Allāh 'Alā Al-'Ibād*, 2 vols. (Qum: Kungirih Shaykh Mufīd, 1992), 2: 171.

battle easily.[90] Because he was from the family of the Prophet, grandson of Ḥusayn, and son of the fourth Imām, ʿAlī ibn Ḥusayn, his martyrdom gained a lot of attention and scrutiny later among the Shīʿa. Again, the controversy over his status as a Shīʿī martyr stems from the obscurity surrounding his loyalty towards the Imām of his time, Jaʿfar al-Sādiq (in Twelver Shīʿīsm). Some traditions highly praise the Zayd's revolt and his martyrdom implying that he started his movement with Imām Sādiq's permission.[91] Some other traditions suggest that he acted on his own against the will of Jaʿfar al-Sādiq. According to those reports Zayd expected to be the Imām after his brother Imām Bāqir (like the Imamate of Ḥusayn after his brother Ḥasan) and even expressed his disappointment over the Imamate of Jaʿfar al-Sādiq.[92] Overall, Shīʿī traditions respect the personality of Zayd as a great and righteous member of the Prophet's family, and a martyr, even though the Imams were not totally in agreement with his political activism. In other words, the status of Zayd as martyr came from his close connections to the Imams, his well-known piety, and his supposedly pure intention to struggle in the path pf the Imams.

Another early martyr-like figure among the broad and diverse group of the Shīʿa was Muhammad ibn ʿAbdullāh ibn al-Ḥasan al-Muthanna, better known as *al-nafs al-zakīyyah* (the pure soul), a descendant of both Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, the second

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90 al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh Al-Ṭabarī*, 7: 182.

91 al-Mufīd, 2: 171-72.; Majlisī, 46: 171.;ibid., 46: 194-99.

92 Ṭabarsī, 2: 373.; Majlisī, 46: 252.

and the third Imams respectively. Muhammad was eager to assume Caliphate and revolted against the Abbasid Caliph, Mansur (*al-nafs al-zakīyyah's* former ally against the Umayyads), resulted in his death (or martyrdom) in 762.[93] Because he was a very pious Muslim, and his name was also the same as that of the Prophet, Muhammad ibn 'Abdullāh even gained the reputation of being the awaited Mahdī (since in some traditions al-Mahdī was regarded as bearing the name of the Prophet). He reportedly called himself al-Mahdī and took the oath of allegiance from his followers accordingly.[94] This claim of being the Mahdī put *al-nafs al-zakīyyah* at odds with his influential contemporary, Ja'far al-Sādiq, the sixth Imām, who categorically denied such a claim and refused to acknowledge his revolt, hence Muhammad's death was not praised by Twelver Shī'a as true martyrdom.[95] The point here is that his revolt and other later similar efforts were mostly political and not religious in nature. They were also interpreted by the mainstream Twelver Shī'a as selfish activities for the sake of gaining political power rather than being a part of a Shī'ī specific agenda in defence of the Shī'a Imams; hence martyrdom generally did not completely fit to those killed in such political endeavors.

The last major Shī'a uprising during the historical periods of the Imams was by a group known as the '*martyrs of Fakhkh'* in 786. This revolt against the Abbasids was

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[93] Abū Zayd 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh Ibn Khaldūn*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1988), 1: 250.

[94] Iṣfahāni, 210-16.

[95] al-Mufīd, 2: 192.

led by another descendent of Imām Ḥasan, Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī ibn Ḥasan ibn Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī. Of all martyrdom incidents caused by uprisings against the Sunni Caliphs the martyrs of Fakhkh were particularly praised by the Shīʿa Imams, both for their righteousness and their intention to hand over power to the Imams and their endeavour to enjoin good and forbidding wrong. There are even some reports from the Prophet and Jaʿfar al-Sādiq that they paid tribute to the would-be-martyrs of Fakhkh when they passed by the area of Fakhkh in Mecca. It is reported that Muhammad performed his prayers in Fakhkh and then cried; when he was asked about the reason behind his crying, Muhammad said "during my prayers Gabriel revealed to me that one of your descendants will be killed in this place, and a martyr killed along with him would be rewarded twice a normal martyr."[96] It is also narrated that Jaʿfar al-Sādiq's successor, Imām Mūsā al-Kāẓim, while seeing the decapitated heads of the martyr (Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī ibn Ḥasan ibn Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī) in front of the then Abbasid Caliph, al-Hādī, praised their leader as "a righteous Muslim, who continually fasted and stood in prayer, enjoined what was good and forbade what was evil."[97]

In the transition from the military martyrdom of the Muslim conquests period to the sectarian martyrdom I discussed above, there are two important points worth noting. First, martyrdom in the dominant Sunni Islam gradually loses its relevance as

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[96] Iṣfahāni, 366-67.

[97] Majlisī, 48: 165.

the Muslim conquests came to an end.[98] Hence, as demonstrated in chapter two, unsurprisingly, Islamic martyrdom which was originally understood as violently dying for God on the battlefield was expanded in Sunni traditions to include non-violent forms of death. At the same time, for the Shī'a, as the minority sect, the violent form of martyrdom thrives not through war by non-Muslims, but mostly at the hands of Sunni authorities who started to persecute the Shī'a in order to suppress political opposition movements (as I reviewed some of the high-profile martyrdom cases above). Hence, Shī'īsm sometimes is called by its followers the religion of revolt and martyrdom.

The famous early Zaydi Shī'a historian, Abū al-Faraj *Isfahānī* (897–967) in his hagiographical work, *Maqātil al-tālibiyīn*, collected stories of the life and martyrdom of some 216 martyrs among the descendants of Abū Ṭālib (father of Ali, the first Imām) until his time in the fourth Islamic century. His long list starts with Ja'far ibn Abī-Ṭālib, a respected companion and cousin of the Prophet who was killed in the battle of *Mū'tah* in 629. However, not all of them are considered martyrs within the Twelver Shī'a tradition, and this is due to something that differentiates the theology of martyrdom between Twelver Shī'īsm and other Islamic traditions. The real difference, as touched on before, comes from the unique understanding of the principle of the Imamate in Twelver Shī'īsm in which absolute religious and political

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[98] We are talking about the pre-modern period, as we have seen a fresh drive for martyrdom in Sunni Islam by the rise of political Islam in modern time.

authority is vested in the position of the Imamate that is supposedly occupied by divinely selected individuals (12, to be specific). Anything that goes against or contrary to the will and tradition of the Imams is considered unlawful and wrong. A political revolt, being among sensitive issues, would require the Imām's approval in the Twelver tradition, hence not all deaths occurring during a political uprising by the Shī'a could be termed as martyrdom. So, while in Sunnism the concept of martyrdom is most commonly associated with the concept of jihad without any particular prerequisite other than pure Godly intention, theologically speaking, in Twelver Shī'īsm martyrdom, as it is the case with jihad, first and foremost is closely linked to the concept of Imamate and should be defined as dying in the cause of the Imams. In other words, the authority of the Imams, or those appointed by them, is essential to determine the righteous form of jihad and martyrdom. Therefore, the more an act of martyrdom conforms to the Shī'ī concept of the Imamate and the Imams' teachings the more it is praised.

As is clear from the above discussion, my second point is that Muslim conquests after the Prophet were never fully backed by the Shī'a, who considered the Sunni Caliphs illegitimate rulers of the community. Hence those slain in the wars waged under the authority of the Caliphs were not held in high esteem by the Shī'a as 'true martyrs'. In fact, from the Shī'a point of view, true martyrs were those who were killed while struggling in support of, or under direct leadership of the Prophet or his

divinely guided successors, the just Imams[99] (this was well documented in the Shī'ī ḥadīth collections, in chapters like '*Under whom is jihad permitted?*'). These include martyrs when the Prophet was alive (chief among them Ḥamzah), fighting martyrs who served in the armies of Ali and Ḥasan, the first and second Imams and particularly those killed along with Imām Ḥusayn in Karbalā in 680, and finally loyal Shī'as who died or who were killed in prison or under torture by the Sunni authorities due to their faith. In fact, the issue of the obedience to the divinely guided religious authority (Imām) has such importance in Twelver Shī'īsm that, in effect, it measures the purity of one's faith and defines the greatness of his/her martyrdom. For this very reason, Shī'as narrate traditions from the Prophet and the Imams stating that those who died while loving and following the heirs of the Prophet (the Imams) die as true martyrs.[100] In next section, I will review some of these Shī'ī martyrdom traditions.

SHĪ'A MARTYRDOM TRADITIONS

 When it comes to defining martyrdom in a general way and dealing with the question of who should be counted as a martyr and what their rewards will be in the afterlife, there are no discernible differences between the Sunni and Shī'a traditions (for the most part). Most of the ḥadīths discussed in chapter two are also found in Shī'ī sources. Generally speaking, different categories of martyrs, all requirements that are needed for one to be counted a martyr, and any rewards associated with martyrdom,

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[99] 'Abdul Ḥusayn Ṭayyib, *Aṭyab Al-Bayān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, 14 vols. (Tehran: Islam, 1990), 2: 251.

[100] Abulḥasan 'Alī ibn 'Īsa Irbilī, *Kashf Al-Ghummah Fī Ma'rifat Al-'A'immah* (Tabriz: Banī Hāshimī, 2002), 1: 107.

including forgiveness, the power of intercession, and sexual rewards, are also found in Shī'ī sources. Again, we read things like a "drop of blood on the way of God" is second to none in terms of merit;[101] believers who suffer from diseases die as martyrs;[102] those who defend their family and possessions die as martyrs;[103] martyrs will not be put on trial in the grave;[104] for martyrs, dying is easy and sweet and they will meet their heavenly partners (*hūrīs*) upon martyrdom;[105] martyrs will intercede for seventy or seventy thousands of their relatives, friends, and acquaintances;[106] and so on. In *tafsīr* works, we also see a similar pattern with no discernible differences between Sunni and Shī'a understanding of martyrdom. As it is the case with Sunni sources, some Shī'ī tafsīr interpret the Qur'anic terms *shahīd* and *shuhadā* mainly as witnesses to people's deeds on the day of judgment, and consider *shahīd* as 'martyr' a post-Qur'anic development;[107] and some other *tafsīr* on verses 3:160 and 4:69 speculated that the term '*shuhadā*' used there could mean martyrs since it is contextually acceptable.[108] So, I will not repeat those common martyrdom traditions

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[101] al-Kulaynī, 5: 53.

[102] Ibid., 2: 93.; , 1: 354.

[103] Ibid., 5: 52.

[104] Ibid., 5: 54.

[105] 'Ali ibn Mūsā al-Riḍā, *Ṣahifah Imām Riḍā* (Mashhad: Kungirih Jahāni Imām Riḍā, 1986), 92.

[106] Ibid., 93.

[107] Ṭabāṭabāī, 4: 29.; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ṭurayḥī, *Majma' Al-Baḥrayn*, 6 vols. (Tehran: Murtaḍavī, 1997), 3: 78.; Ṭabarsī, 1: 416.

[108] Ṭayyib, 3: 368.; Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1: 468.; Muhammad Jawād Mughnīyyah, *Tafsīr Al-Kāshif*, 7 vols. (Qum: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 2003), 2: 164.

here in detail and instead will try to explain what the Shī'a sources add to the discussion from the sectarian perspective.

Basically, when we talk about martyrdom in Shī'īsm, we mean the sectarian understanding of martyrdom. In some traditions, the righteous among the Shī'a are considered martyrs regardless of their way of dying simply by virtue of their acceptance of and faithful adherence to the truth, which comes from obeying the Prophet and his successors (the Imams) in every aspect of their life. Generally speaking, this is the case for all believers according to Islamic martyrdom traditions (as discussed in the previous chapter, all believers could die as martyrs), but in the Shī'ī understanding of the issue, believers are exclusively meant to be from the Shī'a community. *Al-Maḥāsin*, an important early Shī'a work (probably written in the third Islamic century during the later period of the Imams), narrates the following ḥadīth from Imām Ḥusayn on the merits of being a believer (a devout Shī'a): "there is no one from our Shī'a except they are righteous martyr (*shahīd*)." When he was asked how this could be the case as most of the Shī'a believers die on their bed, the Imām replied: "have not you recited the book of Allāh, chapter *al-Hadid,* saying that '*And those who believe in God and his messengers—it is they who are truthful and are witnesses [shahīd] before their Lord*'?" [109] Note that in this tradition, the term *shahīd* mentioned in the verse is meant 'martyr' since the person who asked the question from the Imām

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[109] Aḥmad ibn Muhammad Barqī, *Al-Maḥāsin*, 2 vols. (Qum: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyyah, 1952), 1: 163-64.; see also: Muhammad ibn 'Alī ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī, *Faḍā'il Al-Shī'ah* (Tehran: A'lamī), 38.

seemed to be confused that how while most of the Shīʿa died peacefully on their bed they could be counted as *shahīd* (martyr). Dying from diseases and misfortunes also is something that can be rewarded based on faith as in some ḥadīths a Shīʿa suffering from health or natural calamities qualifies for martyrdom or even gets the rewards of up to a thousand martyrs: "there is no Shīʿa of us that gets misfortunes or diseases and be patient with that except Allāh secures rewards of one thousand martyrs."[110]

The issue of following the path of the Imams is clearly highlighted in numerous Shīʿī traditions as a major criterion for being martyr; it is usually mentioned in the forms of 'staying with our issue' (*ʿalā ʿamrin*ā), or 'this issue' (*hādhal-ʿamr*) which refer to those among the Shīʿa who adhere to the path of the Imamate and *wilāyah* wholeheartedly and sincerely, and particularly firm believers of the promised al-Mahdī. [111] A very interesting ḥadīth from Imām Sādiq (with some variations) regarding the importance of the Imamate and *wilāyah* in the Shīʿī theology reads: "whoever dies while steadfast on our issue is like someone who is under the tent of the *Qāʾim* (al-Mahdī), or even like the one who is fighting with his sword alongside al-Mahdī, or even like the one who gets martyred while serving him, or even like the one who gets martyred serving the Prophet." [112] Remaining a firm believer (in the principle of the Imamate) during the occultation of Imām al-Mahdī is the highest

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[110] al-Kulaynī, 1: 354.; Majlisī, 68: 94.

[111] Barqī, 1: 172-74.; al-Kulaynī, 8: 146.; ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī, 38.

[112] Barqī, 1: 173.

challenge, according to some Shīʻī traditions; hence such a believer would get the highest honour - the rewards of one thousand martyrs of the battles of Badr and Uḥud (which are typically considered to be the purest martyrs in Islam).[113]

Sectarian literature shows the preponderance of its followers. Similarly, martyrdom in Shīʻī sources is treated as something authentically belonging to the Shīʻa and their privilege. So, in this light, of all Muslims, only the Shīʻa are truly eligible for the title of 'martyr' whereas all other so-called martyrs, at best, they have gone astray and wasted their lives or, at worst, are seen as enemies of the true Islam. This means that even in a fight with a sworn enemy of Islam (such as pagans of the early Islam), martyrs of the Shīʻa would be superior in ranks to those martyrs coming from other traditions as if they are the real martyrs while others are the counterfeit, or, at the very best, inferior to them. In a tradition ascribed to Imām Sajjād (the fourth Imām) cited by the early Shīʻī tafsīr, *Furāt al-Kūfī*, we see this kind of distinction between martyrs of different traditions: "A martyr of us (family of the Prophet) is better than ten ordinary martyrs, and a martyr from our Shīʻa is better than seven[114] martyrs from other traditions."[115] In a similar tradition attributed to the Prophet he tells his daughter, Fāṭimah, seven exclusive characteristics of his family: "Our Prophet,

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[113] Majlisī, 52: 125.;, 65: 142.; , 79: 173. Muhammad ibn Shāh Murtaḍā Fayḍ Kāshānī, *Al-Wāfī*, 26 vols. (Isfahan: Kitābkhānih Imām 'Amīr al-Mu'minīn, 1985), 2: 441-42.; Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan Al-Ḥurr al-ʻĀmilī, *Ithbāt Al-Hudāt Bil-Nuṣūṣ Wal-Mu'jizāt*, 5 vols. (Beirut: al-Aʻlamī, 2004), 5: 81.

[114] In another ḥadīth from Imām Rida (the eight Imām), martyrs of the Shīʻa are said to be better than nine martyrs of other traditions. Majlisī, 26: 243.

[115] Furāt ibn Ibrāhīm al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr Furāt Al-Kūfī* (Tehran: Mu'assisat al-Ṭab' wal-Nashr, 1989), 284.

your father, is the best of the Prophets, our successor, your husband ('Alī), is the best

of the successors, our martyr, your uncle Ḥamzah, is the best of the martyrs, and there

is someone from us who has two wings that can fly with them in heaven, and he is

your cousin Ja'far ibn Abītālib, and the *sibṭs*[116] of this community are from us [your

sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn], and their Mahdī is one of your decedents."[117]

In Shī'a piety, no one is comparable to the Prophet and the Imams; likewise,

not even martyrs can surpass them in terms of merit and significance. Hence,

according to a popular tradition, it is believed that all Imams have died as martyrs, so

they hold the positions of martyr and Imām simultaneously: "there is none of us but

killed a martyr (by sword or poison)."[118] Moreover, the Qur'anic verses with the terms

'*ṣiddīqūn*' (truthful) and '*shuhadā*' (witnesses) are generally considered as primarily

referring to the Imams. For example, a prophetic tradition explains that in verse

"those whom God has blessed, the Prophets, the truthful ones, the witnesses

(martyrs), and the righteous" (Qur'an, 4:69), the truthful is 'Alī, and the witnesses

(martyrs) are Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Ḥamzah (the Prophet's uncle), and the other Imams.[119]

Hence, remembering them and performing the devotional acts of *zīyārah*, (pilgrimage,

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[116] *Sibt* in Arabic means a descendant. In the Shi'i terminology, *sibṭ al-nabi* particularly refers to either Ḥasan or Ḥusayn. *Sibt* then sometimes means 'chosen', or 'imām.'

[117] Muhammad ibn Jarīr ibn Rustam al-Ṭabarī Āmulī, *Al-Mustarshad Fī Imāmmat 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib* (Qum: Kūshanpūr, 1994), 613.

[118] Al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, 4: 314.; al-Ṣadūq, 63.

[119] 'Alī ibn Muhammad Khazzāz Rāzī, *Kifāyat Al-Athar* (Qum: Bīdār, 1980), 183.; al-Husaynī al-Shūshtarī Al-Sayyid Nūr Allāh, *Iḥqāq Al-Ḥaqq* 23 vols. (Qum: Maktabah Ayatullah Mar'ashī, 1988), 3: 542.

which basically involves saluting the Imams and asking for intercession or even resolving mundane needs) are commonly justified by referring to verse 3:169 that reads "[martyrs] are alive with their Lord, well provided for."[120]

Visiting the tombs of martyrs is highly encouraged in Shī'ī sources, particularly those of the Imams, and more specifically, the shrine of Ḥusayn and other martyrs of Karbalā who are considered the martyrs par excellence that every devoted Shī'a yearns to be with them; as they repeatedly recite the famous section of the *zīyārat wārith*: "how we wish we were with you so we would earn a great achievement" (*Ya laytanā kunnā ma'akum fa nafuḍa fawḍan 'aẓimā*). According to a long tradition from the eighth Imām, 'Alī ibn Mūsā al-Rida, reciting that phrase results in getting the rewards of those martyred with Ḥusayn. Moreover, visiting the shrine of Ḥusayn or weeping for his martyrdom would wipe out all minor and major sins. Cursing those responsible for the tragedy also would put the person in the company of the Prophet in paradise. The Imām also asked the Shī'a to weep for Ḥusayn whenever they happen to be sad: "If you have to cry over something, then do so over Ḥusayn for surely, he was slaughtered in the manner in which a ram is slaughtered."[121] In another narration from Ja'far al-Sādiq, the sixth Imām, visiting the grave of the "lonely martyr" (Ḥusayn) is equivalent to performing twenty pilgrimages to Mecca.[122] There are many other ḥadīths on the merits of visiting the graves of the Imams while paying proper

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[120] Muhamad Riḍā Muẓaffar, *'Aqā'id Al-Imāmīyyah* (Qum: Anṣārīān, 2008), 106.

[121] al-Ṣadūq, 129.

[122] al-Kulaynī, 4: 581.

attention to their position as martyrs and righteous Imams of the community that must be obeyed. Some traditions even guarantee rewards equal to that of a thousand pilgrimages to Mecca, a thousand martyrs of *Badr* and *Uḥud*, a thousand of those fasting, and a thousand accepted *ṣadaqahs* (voluntary charity) for pilgrims of Ḥusayn's shrine.[123]

There is no dearth of such traditions linking extraordinary rewards and consequences of commemorating Ḥusayn's martyrdom. Many of these are appeared to be fabricated tales attributed to the Imams by those who benefited from the expanding and lucrative business of Āshūrā since the rise of the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1736), that established Twelver Shī'īsm as the mainstream tradition in Persia, and particularly after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Those fabricated and exaggerated traditions may not have been composed during the first couple of Islamic centuries by Muhammad and the Imams, yet they have had a lasting impact on the way the Shī'a community understands martyrdom and theological issues related to it.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing the history and traditions of the Shī'ī version of martyrdom, we see mostly similar ideas with that of Sunni Islam when it comes to the merits of martyrdom and the afterlife rewards guaranteed to the martyr. Yet, in terms of the motives for martyrdom, we notice quite a difference between the two traditions. While martyrdom primarily remains dying in the path of God, for the Shī'a this

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[123] ibn Qūlawayh, 142.

extends to dying for the sake of the God's caliphs on earth, i.e. the Imams. Since a true believer of God worships him only through the lens of the *walī* of God, true martyrdom is the one that occurs due to the love of and obedience to those chosen servants of God (the Imams). A much-recited prayer narrated from the Sixth Imām explains this important Shī'ī teaching: "O' Allāh, let me know you; for if you do not let me know you I will not know your Prophet. O' Allāh, let me know your Messenger; for if you do not let me know your Messenger I will not know your proof. O' Allāh, let me know your proof [*al-ḥujjah*, the Imām]; for if you do not let me know your proof, I will deviate from my religion."[124]

While after the Prophet Sunni understanding of martyrdom gradually (particularly after the early Muslim conquests) expanded from dying on the battlefield in jihad to include almost any sort of death, for the Shī'a the original (violent) form of martyrdom thrived because they saw the Sunni Caliphate system a deviation in the Islamic community, hence they were eager to shed their blood in defence of the Prophet's family (the Imams). This Shī'ī understanding of martyrdom was seen in its best form during the tragedy of Karbalā and later Shī'ī uprisings inspired by the Āshūrā events. When fighting for the right of the Imams to lead the Muslim community was not an option (especially after the occultation), Shī'ī martyrdom went into the eschatological direction where remaining faithful to the Twelver Imamate theology and the hidden twelfth Imām became the real deal and the

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[124] al-Kulaynī, 1: 337.

de facto spiritual martyrdom. Hence righteous believers to the cause of Imām Mahdī, reportedly, get rewards of up to a thousand martyrs. With this introduction to the importance of Imamate in Twelver Shīʻīsm and its link to the concept of martyrdom, in the final chapter, I will turn my attention to the modern Shīʻa world, and the new developments in the attention of the Shīʻas to martyrdom.

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CHAPTER 4: MARTYRDOM IN MODERN SHĪ‘A WORLD (THE CASE OF IRAN)

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INTRODUCTION

When I started writing chapter four, it was on October 11, 2016, and I was heading to a fellow Iranian McMaster graduate student's apartment in Hamilton. The occasion was the day before the anniversary of Āshūrā (known as *Tāsū‘ā*), and I met several other Iranian students who had gathered there to commemorate the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn. But in accordance with a long-held tradition, the star of the day (*Tāsū‘ā*) was ‘Abbās the martyred half brother of Ḥusayn. Everyone would know the occasion and the rituals associated with it fairly well: a Karbalā related lecture by a cleric or religious scholar followed by a few minutes of lamentation (*matām*) and weeping for Ḥusayn and ‘Abbās and other martyrs, and at the end, some prayers and then a light refreshment or feast known as *ghadhā-yi nadhrī* or *ghadhā-yi imām*

ḥusayn in Persian (the meal that the Shī'ite mourners believe has *baraka* (blessings)). The commemoration of Imām Ḥusayn's martyrdom has long been institutionalized among the Shī'a. Shī'īsm, the doctrine, is well documented in scholarly books. The Imām Ḥusayn, called *sayyid al-shuhadā* (master of the martyrs), has become the most talked-about figure of Shī'īsm in popular culture. The Muḥarram mourning rituals attract even those who normally would have nothing to do with religious practices as public mourning for Imām Ḥusayn is now a cool social and spiritual experience for the youth. As part of the Āshūrā rituals, where the faithfuls long for the opportunity to serve in the path of Imām Ḥusayn, wishing to be honoured as martyr has become a cliché and is popular in religious circles. This leads us to the last chapter of this study of locating the importance and magnitude of the concept of martyrdom in the contemporary Shī'a world, with a particular focus on Iran as the major Shī'ī country. For this purpose, we need to go back to 19th century Iran to track the developments that gradually shaped the way Shī'ites look at martyrdom today.

CHANGING THE GEARS: REVIVING MARTYRDOM AMONG THE SHĪ'A

Historically speaking, the early Shī'ī struggle to secure political power for the Imams or other members of the Prophet's family subsided after a series of setbacks (most notably the tragedy of Karbalā). As a result, the would-be-called Twelver Shī'īsm had turned into quietism by the time the eleventh Imām (Ḥasan al-'Askarī) died/martyred at a young age (28) in 874. The lack of an apparent heir to the eleventh Imām, or as it was understood by the followers of the Imām, the occultation of the Twelfth Imām (al-

Mahdī), forced the Shī'a into a long and everlasting phase of passive waiting for the return of the Imām at the end of the time. Hence, most of the post-occultation Shī'ī authorities ruled out the lawfulness of fighting and political activism in favour of the *taqīya* practice (dissimulation) in the absence of an infallible Imām. *Taqīya,* particularly as envisioned by the sixth Imām, in its original meaning was understood as "keeping or safeguarding of the secrets of the Imams' teaching."[1] That also meant when the time was not ready (before the rise of al-Mahdī) any sort of uprising against the Sunni governments would be problematic and against the will of the Imams because it would endanger the Shī'a community. Therefore, actively seeking martyrdom was not encouraged by the Imams in the later period of their presence.[2] In a tradition narrated from Imām Ja'far al-Sādiq in the introduction of *al- Ṣaḥīfat al-Sajjādīyya* (the collection of some prayers which were composed by 'Alī ibn-Ḥusayn, the fourth Imām), it is even stated that "before the rise of our al-*Qā'im* [Imām al-Mahdī] not one of us folk of the house [*Ahlul-bayt*] has revolted or will revolt to repel an injustice or to raise up a right, without affliction uprooting him and without his uprising increasing the adversity on us and our partisans."[3] The renown 17th century Twelver Shī'a scholar, Al-Ḥurr al- al-'Āmilī, in his influential *ḥadīth* collection, *Wasā'l*

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[1] Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 26.

[2] Denis McEoin, "Aspects of Militancy and Quietism in Imami Shi'ism," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 1 (1984).

[3] 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn Imām Zayn al-'Ābidīn, *The Psalms of Islam (Al-Ṣaḥīfah Al-Kāmilah Al-Sajjādīyyah)*, trans. William C. Chittick (London: The Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2006).

al-shī'a, has a chapter titled '*the ruling of uprising with sword before the return of al-Qā'im,*' and collected ḥadīths that prohibit political activism without the consent of the Imām or during the occultation. He cites a ḥadīth from Imām al-Sādiq warning the Shī'a that "any raising of the flag before the appearance of *al-Qā'im* would be the flag of evil."[4] This kind of apolitical stance, until fairly recently, has more or less been the consensus among the Shī'a scholars. Hence, for the most part, the traditional Shī'ī martyrdom, that is dying for the cause of the Imams in an uprising against the Sunni Caliphate system subsided; or at least one would argue that active martyrdom was not recommended and sanctioned by the Shī'a scholars. So, as reviewed in the previous chapter, in ḥadīth collections written after the occultation, there appeared more and more traditions emphasizing that waiting for the return of the Imām is more precious than martyrdom in the path of God.

The lack of legitimate Shī'ī fighting martyrs in the later period of the Imams and during the first centuries of the occultation did not mean the Shī'a had no more martyr to remember and revere. In fact, passive martyrs who did not take arms in a sectarian cause shined in that period; most notably among them several Shī'ī scholars (*'ulamā*) who lost their lives for spreading Shī'ite beliefs. Some of those scholars later became known and remembered mainly with the title of 'martyr': 'the first martyr' (*Shahīd al-awwal*), Muhammad Jamāluddīn al-Makkī al-'Āmilī, m. 1385; 'the second

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[4] Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan Al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, *Wasā'il Al-Shi'ah Ilā Tahsil Masā'il Al-Shari'ah*, 29 vols. (Qum: Mu'assisat-i Aalul-bayt, 1988), 15: 52.

martyr' (*Shahīd al-thānī)*, Zayn al-Dīn al-Juba'i al-'Āmilī, m. 1558; and 'the third martyr' (*Shahīd al-thālith),* Qazi Nūrullah Shūshtarī, m. 1610. 'Abdul Ḥusayn Amīnī, a great 20th century traditionalist Shī'a scholar, best known for his magnum opus *al-Ghadīr fī al-kitāb wa al-sunna wa al-adab*,[5] wrote a book on the hagiographies of martyred Shī'a scholars from the fourth to the fourteenth Islamic centuries. The book is called '*Shuhadā' al-faḍīlah*' (martyrs of the virtue) and includes the martyrologues of 130 scholar-martyrs. In the biographies of the scholar-martyrs, Amīnī depicted them as passive martyrs in the sense that they were allegedly wrongfully killed merely because of their faith and status as 'Shī'a scholars' or because of their proselytizing activities or their efforts to disseminate the Shī'a beliefs. In the preface, Amīnī described the work as a "history of the martyrs among our great scholars who sacrificed everything in the way of religious truths."[6] He borrowed the phrase '[those] who sacrificed everything' (*alladhīna badhalū mahajahum*) from the end of *Zīyārat 'āshūrā* where the reciter repeats the phrase while in *sujūd* (prostration):

> O' Allāh! To you belongs the praise, the praise of those who are thankful to you for their tribulations. All praise belongs to Allāh for my intense grief. O' Allāh, grant me the blessing of intercession of Ḥusayn on the day of appearance (before you) and strengthen me with a truthful stand in your presence along with Ḥusayn and the companions of Ḥusayn – those people who sacrificed everything for Ḥusayn, peace be upon him.[7]

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[5] Al-Ghadīr (20 volumes) is a collection of first-hand ḥadīths (taken from Sunni sources) from the first and second generations of the Prophet's disciples and followers on the issue the event of Ghadīr and the appointment of 'Alī by the Prophet as his successor.

[6] 'Abdul Ḥusayn Amīnī, *Shuhadā' Al-Faḍīlah* (Beirut: Mu'assisat al-Wafā', 1983), preface.

[7] ibn Qūlawayh, 330.

In the *Zīyārah*, the martyrdom of the companions of Ḥusayn is defined as sacrifice for Ḥusayn (that is the Imām of the time), which is purely a Shīʻī understanding of martyrdom. In Amīnī's understanding, those martyred scholars did the same by sacrificing everything in the way of religious truth, that is the Imamate and *wilāyah* of the twelve supposedly *infallible* Shīʻa leaders. Having explained in chapter two that in Islamic ḥadīth collections the merit of a religious scholar is considered more than that of the blood of martyrs, combining the two virtues, the scholar-martyrs are usually held in high esteem, second only to the martyrs of the Prophet's family.[8]

Although prior to the modern period, most Shīʻa scholars took the *taqīya* practice seriously during the absence of the Imām, political realities made them come up with a way to legitimize the use of violence, if needed, without violating the quietist posture. Hence, prominent Shīʻī jurists of the early occultation period, such as Abū Jaʻfar al-Ṭūsī (995-1067), known as *Shaykh al- ṭāʾifah*, the father of jurisprudence and founder of the Shīʻa seminary of Najaf, ruled for the legitimacy of *defensive jihad* in the absence of the Imām to protect the Shīʻa faith.[9] There were many conflicts between Shīʻa and Sunnis that turned into violent confrontations and sometimes resulted in scores of casualties from both sides. Those tensions occurred particularly when the

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[8] See for example: Majlisī, 1: 178-84.

[9] McEoin, 22.

Shī'a managed to establish their own states (Buyid, 934–1062, and Safavid, 1501–1736) or with the rise of a hardline Sunni state like the Seljuq Empire, 1037–1194.[10]

The Buyid rulers initiated public Āshūrā mourning rituals for the first time in Islamic history. Ibn al-Athīr tells us that on the day of Āshūrā in 963, Mu'izz al-Dīn, a Buyid ruler, ordered Baghdad's marketplace to be closed, and men and women to go to the public places in mourning and to avoid drinking water during the day to honour the sufferings of Imām Ḥusayn and his martyred family and followers.[11] With the rise of the Seljuqs, Āshūrā public processions and mourning were banned again (before gaining much more attention and publicity during the Twelver Shī'ī Safavid dynasty). In that period, the ban on Āshūrā rituals and pilgrimage to Karbalā resulted in sporadic violent clashes between devout Shī'ī mourners and Sunnis. For instance, it is reported that in 1049, a Sunni-Shī'ī deadly clash occurred in Baghdad at the beginning of the Seljuq period.[12] A year later, a group of the Seljuq-backed Sunnis attacked the Shī'ī section of Baghdad (*al-Karkh*), burned the area and killed some of the Shī'a.[13] There were several more reported incidents of such sectarian violence in the medieval period.[14]

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[10] See for example: Abul-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Muntaẓam*, 19 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 1992), 15: 325.; Abū 'Alī Ḥasan ibn 'Alī Ṭusī Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyr Al-Mulūk* (Tehran: Bungāh Tarjumih wa Nashr Kitāb, 1968), 221-22.

[11] ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil Fī Al-Tārīkh*, 8: 549.

[12] Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyat Wa Al-Nihāyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1986), 12: 62.

[13] ibn al-Jawzī, *Al-Muntaẓam*, 16: 8.

[14] See: ibid.*Al-Muntaẓam*, 14: 75.; *Al-Muntaẓam*, 84.; *Al-Muntaẓam*, 126.; ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil Fī Al-Tārīkh*, 8: 221.

Starting from the sixteenth century, the Muslim world was divided into two powerful opposing camps: the Shīʿī Safavid dynasty and the Sunni Ottoman Empire. This division resulted in a series of regional wars and conflicts between the states for almost a century. Soon after the rise of the Safavids in Iran (1501), a significant Shīʿī and pro-Safavid rebellion occurred in the Ottoman Empire territories by the Turcoman tribes of the Taurus mountains in 1511 that resulted in the persecution of pro-Shīʿite groups and later sparked major conflicts between the Ottoman and Safavid states.[15] The battle of Chaldiran in 1514 was particularly devastating for the Safavids as they were defeated by the Ottomans and lost their capital (Tabriz) to the Sunni Turks before recapturing it in 1602, ending a long period of hostilities and semi-sectarian conflicts between the two states.[16] Nevertheless, it is hard to find any enduring and important references to martyrdom as a result of those conflicts. To my knowledge, no prominent and revered fighting martyr has been remembered or revered during the occultation period up until the modern era when martyrdom was reinvented as follows.

Before the modern period, the martyrdom paradigm in Shīʿīsm was primarily defined by the tragedy of Karbalā and the martyrs of the formative period of Shīʿīsm. All later martyrs emulated the martyrs of Karbalā as their role models. However, since none of the early Shīʿī uprisings and political movements (including Imām Ḥusayn's)

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[15] Derin Terzioğlu, "Sufis in the Age of State-Building and Confessionalization," in *The Ottoman World*, ed. Christine Woodhead (London: Routledge, 2011), 94.

[16] Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World around It* (New York: IB Tauris, 2005), 34-36.

met with a long-term success, towards the end of the formative period of Twelver

Shī'īsm and particularly with the occultation, the collective mindset of the Shī'a was

that of being *oppressed*; hence 'martyrdom' was seen as the greatest weapon of the

oppressed, mostly as the last resort in their struggle to defend the legacy of the Imams.

As the Shī'a community came to terms with the absence of the Imām, the concept of

martyrdom almost became a thing of the past; it was even eclipsed by the idea of

taqīya in terms of importance. Martyrdom was overshadowed by the then

unparalleled merit of waiting passively and piously for the return of al-Mahdī. The

Twelfth Imām supposedly went into the hiding for fear of his life. Essentially, he

avoided Imām Ḥusayn's kind of martyrdom, as did the Shī'a in his absence. It was

believed that the time was (and still is) not right for the form of idealism that Twelver

Shī'īsm had championed: a global Islamic state ruled by an infallible and divinely-

guided God's caliph (*khalīfat allāh*).[17] Moreover, by the time the occultation began, the

Twelver Shī'ī Imām had been envisioned as a divinely-guided person, and "the most

virtuous and perfect" of human beings; one who had the responsibility of guiding

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[17] al-Kulaynī, 1: 338.; Majlisī, 51: 135.; On the contrary, in Sunni Islam, the Caliphate system was not something divinely planned, and the Prophet's caliphs were not supposed to be infallible and divinely-guided persons. According to a prominent Sunni jurist, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d.1058), the Caliphate was a temporal system "to replace prophecy in the defence of religion and the administration of the world." Wael B Hallaq, "Caliphs, Jurists and the Saljūqs in the Political Thought of Juwayn?," *The Muslim World* 74, no. 1 (1984). Hence, for Sunnis, the successor to the Prophet would not necessarily need "exceptional spiritual qualities, but would merely have to be an exemplary Muslim, who could ably and virtuously direct the religious and political affairs of the community." Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 35.

people in their 'external' lives and 'acts,' as well as their 'spiritual' lives.[18] In the

Twelver Shī'īsm's doctrine, the living Imām was recognized as "the witness for the

people [shahīd], and he was the gate to God (bāb allāh) and the road (sabīl) to him,

and the guide (dalīl)."[19] Theologically speaking, with all these extraordinary virtues

of the Imām, in his absence during the occultation no one could step in and take his

duties; therefore, some of the social and political Islamic traditions, such as jihad,

which required the presence and approval of the divine-inspired Imām ceased to be

practised.

With the occultation turning into a painful reality for the Shī'a, one that is

expected to continue for a long and indefinite period, some Shī'ī theologians (as I

discuss later) felt the necessity to be more politically active and to try bringing Muslim

societies closer to the ideals of Shī'ite Islam, hence they abandoned the long-held

quietist tradition. They justified their involvement in politics by virtue of being

general deputies of the Hidden Imām. The jurists envisioned themselves "as the acting

sovereigns and guardians of the religion and community during the occultation of the

Imām."[20] This 'general viceregency on behalf of the Imām meant there would be

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[18] Muhammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāī, *Shī'a*, trans. Sayyid Husayn Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 189.

[19] Husain Mohammad Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 294.

[20] Sarvenaz Bahar, "Khomeinism, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and International Law: The Relevance of Islamic Political Ideology," *Harvard international law journal* 33, no. 1 (1992).

someone who can call for and legitimize the act of martyrdom; hence martyrdom became important again despite the absence of the Imām.

Peaking in the twentieth century with the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, Shī'ī idealism came closer to Sunni realism as jurists stepped in to undertake the roles that were traditionally reserved for the infallible Imām. To some extent, the transformation of Twelver Shī'īsm into a politically conscious tradition and the reviving of its culture of martyrdom in recent decades came as a "natural response" to the paradox of Shī'īsm, which was "a deeply political theological doctrine that lacked a direct political expression."[21] The politicization process completed with the revolution, however, was the result of a long-term development of the Shī'ī political thought as well as the consolidation and centralization of religious authority that began during the Safavid period. Yet, Shī'ī jurists could not completely embrace the Sunni realism and act independently on their own religious judgment as the "inescapable presence of the Hidden Imām" always limited the "theological grounds for the designation of leadership."[22]

The first major engagement of Shī'ī jurists in politics came during the wars between the Iranian Qajar dynasty and the Russian Empire (1804-13 and 1826-8) that eventually resulted in defeat and loss of some territories for Iran. In those wars, the Qajar royals approached prominent *'ulamā* of the time to secure their support by

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[21] Hillel Fradkin, "The Paradoxes of Shiism," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 8 (2009).

[22] Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 150.

construing the conflict with the Russians as a jihad against unbelievers, making the casualties of the war martyrs. Those jurists who sanctioned jihad against the Russians were also pioneers of the theory of *wilāyat-i faqīh* (guardianship of the jurist) that later would be developed and implemented in the Islamic Republic of Iran by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The *'ulamā* carefully crafted their fatwas in favour of jihad with the Russians to assert their religious authority over the Qajar king, Fatḥ-Alī Shāh (1797–1834). For instance, Shaykh Ja'far Kāshif al-Ghitā' (1743-1812), the *de facto* leader of the Shī'a of Iraq and Iran, counted the Shāh of Qajar as his agent and authorized him to wage jihad against the Russians and called the faithful to embrace martyrdom to save the lands of Islam. In his fatwa in the first round of the conflict between the two countries (1804-1813), he addressed the Shī'as of Iran and Iraq, urging them to help the Qajar Shāh to repel the Russians from the north of Iran:

> … So, sell your lives for a very high price that is saved for you in paradise… Rise to help the believers so that you gain heaven. Haven't you supplicated God during the month of Ramadan that martyrdom is our ultimate wish? … Haven't you repeatedly said '*how we wish we were with the martyrs of Karbalā?*' Then do not contradict your saying; know that those killed in Azerbaijan in defence of the core of the Islamic land and for the protection of the believers are like the martyrs of Karbalā and in seek of the God's favour.[23]

It was among the first instances of referring to the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn and the extreme sectarian emotions attached to it in order to motivate people to make the necessary sacrifice for a certain religious/political cause. The fatwa went on with further references to martyrdom trying to convince the religious audience to

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[23] Mīrzā Abul-Qāsim Qā'im Maqām Farahānī, *Risālih Jahādīyyah* (Qum: Mu'ssisat Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif Fiqh al-Islāmī, 2005), 552-53.

participate in jihad against the Russians. Kāshif al-Ghitā' maintained that due to the inability of the *'ulamā* to wage jihad on their own, the Shāh of Qajar would be like his deputy and should lead the jihad on his behalf (who was, at the same time, acting on behalf of the Imām). Trying to assert his authority, Kāshif al-Ghitā' then continued with putting himself in the position of the Hidden Imām by attributing the power of intercession to himself and claiming to be the *de-facto* chief commander of the army: "whoever from the Qajar's army that is killed [in the battle with the Russians] is like being killed in our army; and whoever obeys him [in this matter] will be as if they obeyed us; and whoever refuses to obey him will be sorry and deprived from our intercession on the day of judgment."[24] This was a bold statement on jihad and martyrdom under the authority of clerics, and elevated the position of the so-called general deputies of the Imām (top jurists) by attributing some of the traditionally exclusive qualities of the Imām to his deputies. It meant that people would die under the flag of the top jurist (or religious authority) and become martyrs. What made that fatwa important and influential for later generations was that it was coming from one of the most prominent jurists of the time. Although the organization of *Marja'iyyat* (source of imitation) shaped later at the top of the Shī'ite hierarchy with the universal leadership of Shaykh Morteza Ansari (1781–1864),[25] Kāshif al-Ghitā' enjoyed an almost peerless and unprecedented leadership over the Shī'a world. This meant that

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[24] Ibid., 554.

[25] Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 210.

for the first time during the occultation a leader of the Shīʻa world issued a decree and called for active martyrdom.

This development of making the jurist such authorities who can legitimize jihad and martyrdom on behalf of the Imām, however, was not possible without the triumph of the *Uṣūlīs* (the rationalists) over *Akhbārīs* (traditionalists), largely because of the efforts of the Kāshif al-Ghitā's mentor, Muhammad-Bāqir Wahid-Bihbahānī (1704-1791)[.26] Ever since the *Uṣūlīs'* triumph, there has been a growing number of jurists who have used their position as 'deputy of the Imām' and the authority associated with that to mobilize the faithful for jihad-like activities. Kāshif al-Ghitā' was not alone in issuing fatwas on jihad and martyrdom in fighting the Russians; his pupil, Sayyid Muhammad Mujāhid (1766-1826), was particularly active in urging the Qajar Shāh and the Shīʻa of Iran to wage jihad against Russia in the next round of the

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[26] Historically, the root of *Akhbārī/Uṣūlī* division among the ʻulamā goes back to the severe crisis at the beginning of the occultation of Imām Mahdī. In the absence of the infallible Imām, many who later became known as Akhbārīs held the Qur'an as well as the traditions of the Prophet and the Imams as the exclusive guides. For that purpose, "they collected enormous volumes of putative sayings, which they sought to put off-limits for reasoned examination."Cole, 193. The Akhbārīs confined the function of the ʻulamā to transmit those Shīʻa traditions which are explicit in meaning. On the other hand, the rationalists (later known as Uṣūlīs) insisted that the independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) as well as the consensus of the jurisprudents could also serve as sources of legal judgment.Bahar. In this way, the Uṣūlīs "divided all Shīʻites into formally trained jurisprudents (*mujtahids*) and laymen, stipulating that the ordinary believers must emulate the mujtahids in matters of subsidiary religious laws."Cole, 66.

In terms of the authority of *ʻulamā*, also, the *Uṣūlīs* considered mujtahids, as the general deputy of the Imām, with the authority to perform some tasks such as "rendering legal judgments," issuing fatwas, collecting *zakāt* and *khums* taxes, leading Friday prayers and even, in some cases, mandating defensive jihads. In contrast, although the Akhbārīs generally accepted performing the function of judges by the ʻulamā, they often disallowed doing the other functions during the occultation. Ibid. Therefore, according to the *Akhbārīs'* line of thought, "the *ʻulamā* hold far less power both in religion and in politics."Nasr, 69.

territorial conflict between Iran and Russia (1826-1828). He called for martyrdom and moved to Iran from Najaf to be personally on the front line of jihad and encouraged other *'ulamā* to join him in the fight with Russia, hence his title of 'Mujāhid.'[27] With Iran failing to capitalize on its early progress due to some internal power struggles and losing ground against the Russians, he subsequently withdrew from his 'jihad' mission and literally "died of grief."[28]

The fighting martyrs during the Russo-Persian conflicts formed a kind of new category of martyrdom in Shī'īsm. During the presence of the Imams, the would-be-revered martyrs fell on the battlefield (or in prison) in support of the living Imām as the rightful successor to the Prophet, and their martyrdoms were sanctioned by the Imams (either explicitly or implicitly) for that reason. With the occultation, as mentioned before, that kind of active martyrdom due to participation in an armed struggle was less and less practiced, and most jurists adopted the quietist position. Hence, scholar-martyrs who were killed mainly with the charge of adhering and scattering the teachings and traditions of the Imams were typical of martyrs during that period. However, by the time of the Russo-Persian wars, the theology of jihad and martyrdom had changed considerably as the Shī'a jurists embraced political activism in cooperation with (pro) Shī'ite governments in order to strengthen the Shī'a community in a hostile environment. Hence, the jurists' call for defensive jihad and

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[27] al-Amīn, 9: 443.; Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 88.

[28] Ibid., 91

martyrdom was no longer for the defence of the legacy of the Imams or hastening the return of the Hidden Imām, rather, (first and foremost) it was for the protection of the Shī'ī country; it was meant to keep the (only) Shī'ī country of the time (the Qajar's Iran) independent and secure from the invasion of foreigners (the Russians).

The participation of the *'ulamā* in defensive jihad and their call for martyrdom during the Russo-Persian wars, however, did not go quite smooth. The *'ulamā*'s stance was met with some controversies. Moreover, because of their fatwas for jihad and martyrdom, the pro-jihad clerics found themselves in a difficult position following the back-to-back defeats at the hands of the Russian army. Some felt that the *'ulamā* had gone too far with their religious zealotry and single–handedly pushed the country into disastrous wars (particularly the second war).[29] Moreover, the *'ulamā* were accused of being responsible for the defeat as they withdrew from the battlefield after the Persian forces had started to lose ground. [30] Apart from the secular anti-war advocates, it was reported that when Sayyid Muhammad Mujāhid retreated from the front line to the city of Tabriz, he was not treated well by its religious population. The reason was that a popular preacher, along with some other Shī'a fighters from the city, had been '*martyred'* during the battle, and people held Mujāhid accountable for the defeat and the loss of their loved ones.[31] Despite the not-so-successful mobilization of

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[29] Ibid.; Jahāngīr Mīrzā, *Tārīkhi Nu* (Tehran: Kitābkhānih 'ALīakbar A'lamī, 1948), 15.

[30] Ḥasan Fasāyī, *Fārs Nāmih Nāṣirī* (Tehran: Amīrkabīr, 2003), 731.; 'Alīqulī Mīrzā I'tiḍād al-Salṭanah, *Iksīr Al-Tawārīkh* (Tehran: Wīsman, 1991).

[31] Fasāyī, 732.

the Shī'a population of Iran for participating in jihad and embracing martyrdom against the Russians, it was just the beginning and a lesson to learn for the Shī'a establishment to assert its authority over the religious segments of the society more systematically.

The twentieth century was a turning point in the development of the concept of martyrdom for both Sunni and Shī'a. The fragmentation of the religious authority arguably plagued the traditional Sunni establishment more than that of the Shī'a. Salafīsts (or Islamists in general) who took the lead in the fight against unbelief were (and still are) mostly lay believers who were disappointed with the corruption or the inability of the traditional *'ulamā* to stand up against injustice and un-Islamic rules.[32] Therefore, the Sunni Grand Muftis of Al-Azhar and elsewhere somewhat lost their grip over the Sunni population around the Muslim world and became relatively irrelevant in the fight against the Western countries' hegemony over the Muslim world. On the contrary, the Twelver Shī'īsm's religious establishment has remained more or less at the centre of religious and political movements in the last couple of centuries. This difference between the way Sunnism and Shī'īsm responded to modern developments in the Islamic world resulted in two different approaches toward martyrdom. While Islamists and independent Muslim warriors in the Sunni world took matters into their hands and embraced jihad and martyrdom as individual duties in order to re-establish

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[32] Hatina and Litvak, 6. All notable and influential Sunni Islamists of the Twenties century were not trained in traditional seminaries; they were journalists, writers, engineers, physicist and etc.: Hasan al-Bannā, Sayyid Qutb, Abul A'lā Maudūdī, Muhammad 'Abd-al-Salām Faraj, Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to name a few.

the rule of God, Shī'ī martyrdom was orchestrated and valued by the religious establishment. Furthermore, after the Islamic revolution in Iran, martyrdom became part of the state's agenda and served as a legitimizing factor for the Islamic government.

In contrast with the trend of martyrdom among the Sunnis, since the beginning of the Twentieth century until the Islamic revolution in Iran most of the well-known Shī'a martyrs were members of the clergy from different ranks. Even since the revolution, when the number of Shī'a martyrs in Iran skyrocketed, many of the influential and iconic martyrs have been clerics. Some of the most prominent martyrs before the revolution were as follows: Shaykh Faḍlullāh Nūrī (martyred during the Constitutional revolution in 1909); Shaykh Muhammad Khīyābānī (martyred in 1920 during the rebellion against the central government in the Qajar era); Mīrzā Kūchak Khān (died of frostbite during a rebellion against the Qajar government in 1921, officially regarded as a martyr in Iran after the revolution); Sayyid Ḥasan Mudarris (martyred in exile allegedly by the order of Reza Shāh Pahlavi in 1937); and Sayyid Nawwāb Safavī (the pioneer of militant Shī'ī fundamentalism, executed in 1955 by the Pahlavi regime with the charge of terrorist activities).

Of all the martyrs mentioned above, Shaykh Faḍlullāh Nūrī and Sayyid Ḥasan Mudarris stood out partly because Ayatollah Khomeini, the ultra charismatic leader of the Islamic revolution, admired them the most and shaped his political career by following their footsteps. Nūrī's execution (or martyrdom) came after his

uncompromising opposition with the constitutionalists who demanded the rule of law and equality of all citizens before the law. He found it as fundamentally against Islam. In a fatwa released at the peak of the civil war in 1909, he condemned the whole idea of the constitutionalism as something that the seculars had used to revoke the Islamic Sharia law in favour of the Western-inspired legislations. He thought it would be his duty to stop the constitutionalism by any means. By this, he implied that he was ready to give up his life, if necessary, and remain steadfast during that "big trial [*fitnah*] of the end of time, and the huge test for Muslims wherein the grown ups are feeble, and the young grow."[33]

Mudarris was also a role model and paradigmatic martyr for Khomeini because of his tenacity in the face of the despotic anti-clerical rule of Reza Shāh Pahlavi (1925-41). Mudarris was elected to the national parliament several times, and he became the most outspoken critic of the Shāh's policies before being forced into exile in a small city in Northeast Iran where he was murdered/martyred in 1937. In post-revolutionary Iran, both Nūrī and Mudarris are officially regarded martyrs/heroes, and as it has become customary in the Islamic Republic regarding other martyrs, some highways, streets, hospitals, schools have been named after them. A picture of Mudarris is even depicted on the back of the 100-Rial Bank Note. His martyrdom anniversary is also celebrated as the Parliament Day in Iran.

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[33] Mihdī Malikzādih, *Tārīkh Inqilāb Mashrūṭīyyat Iran*, vol. 4-5 (Tehran: A'lamī, 1994), 870-79.

Ayatollah Khomeini on several occasions hailed Nūrī and Mudarris as "great martyrs." As for Nūrī, Khomeini called him "a crusading [*mujahid*] jurist of high status," who was martyred because he opposed the separation of religion and state, and insisted on the supervision of *mujtahids* over the lawmaking process of the state.[34] Shaykh Abdul Hossein Amīnī in his '*Shuhadā' al-faḍīlah*' also included Nūrī as one of the prominent scholar martyrs of the Twentieth century. The description of his martyrdom in Amīnī's words is interesting: "[Nūrī] was martyred by the hand of injustice and enmity, [he] sacrificed [himself] in the way of *da'wah* (calling) to Allāh, sacrificed in the way of religion, sacrificed in the way of [enjoining good and] forbidding wrong, sacrificed in the way of nobleness and religiosity."[35] And for Mudarris, Khomeini had high regards as well, calling him 'our great martyr whom titles cannot do justice':

> It is necessary in this age of flourishing of the Islamic revolution, to commemorate the prominent *mujāhid*, prolific committed Muslim and magnanimous scholar who lived in the dark age of suffocation of Reza Khān. At a time when pens had been broken and tongues tied and throats squeezed, he did not spare expressing the truth and invalidating the wrong. In those days, the right to life had been stripped of the people of Iran, the arena of foray for affronting hectors was open across the country and the hands of his evil mercenaries throughout the country were stained in the blood of liberal ones of the country especially the *'ulamā* and people from different walks of life. This weak-bodied scholar with a thin body and great fresh spirit invigorated by faith and purity of heart and a tongue sharp as the sword of Haydar-Karrar (reference to Imām 'Alī,) stood against them and shouted the truth. He disclosed their crimes, straitened the chances of Reza Khān and ruined him.

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[34] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifih Imam*, 22 vols. (Tehran: Mu'assisah Tanzim wa Nashr Aasar Imam Khomeini), 13: 357-68. (For the translation of quotes from *Sahifih-i Imām* I relied on its official website at http://emam.com).

[35] Amīnī, 367.

Finally, he sacrificed his pure life in the cause of dear Islam and the noble nation. He achieved martyrdom hand of the monarchical headsmen and his soul joined his pure ancestors. In fact, our great martyr, the late Mudarris, whom titles cannot do justice, was a brilliant star on the firmament top of a country that had become dark at the result of the oppression and tyranny of Reza Shāh. Unless one has experienced those times, one cannot appreciate the value of this noble character. Our nation is indebted to his services and sacrifices.[36]

The praises for Nūrī and Mudarris are significant and show another nuanced transition in the development of martyrdom. Those martyrdoms were two contemporary, high profile cases of sacrifice for the principles of enjoining good and forbidding wrong (*al-ʿamr bi al-maʿrūf wa al-nahy ʿan al-munkar*). In Khomeini's understanding, Nūrī and Mudarris' martyrdoms were significant as they gave up their social and religious positions and prestige and stood firm on Islamic principles and voiced against injustice, tyranny, exploitation, and un-Islamic trends with all their capacities. Nūrī, became the ally of the Qajar Shāh against the constitutionalist rebels after he saw the despotic rule of the Shāh would be much less harmful than the secular and anti-clerical demands of the constitutionalists. And Mudarris was a great and admirable martyr in Khomeini's view because he had no fear of losing his respectful status (as a member of parliament) and even his life in the face of the tyrannical rule of Reza Shāh, something that Khomeini himself later emulated in his opposition to Muhammad Reza Shāh.

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[36] Khomeini, 19: 73.

REOPENING OF THE GATES OF ACTIVE MARTYRDOM: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The fever of martyrdom in the Shī'a world came into the spotlight with the beginning of Ayatollah Khomeini's movement in 1963 in opposition to the Pahlavi regime which led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. This came after the Shī'a top jurists had adopted quietism following their disappointing involvement in politics and Iran's constitutional revolution, a failed attempt to Islamize the lawmaking process in the early twentieth century. The execution/martyrdom of Shaykh Faḍlullāh Nūrī by the victorious constitutionalists shocked the religious establishment (both pro and anti constitutionalists' camps in Iraq and Iran). The bitter division in the clerical body during the constitutional revolution was followed by the exclusion of the *'ulamā* from the political arena by the secular governments; particularly during the reign of Reza Shāh (1925-1941), who was keen to dismantle and loosen clerical authority in all aspects of the society. With Reza Shāh's de-Islamizing policies even the authority of the clerics in the educational sector and the Judiciary branch of the government was significantly reduced. [37] The result was the retreat of the top jurists to their pedagogical and scholastic role confined within the boundaries of religious seminaries and mosques.

With the revival of quietism in the early twentieth century, extreme political activities and calls for active martyrdom were looked upon with skepticism. The

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[37] Hamid Hosseini, "Theocracy Versus Constitutionalism: Is Velayat-E-Faghih Compatible with Democracy," *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis* 15, no. 2 (1999).

leading jurists of the time prohibited clerics from engaging in any sort of activity which gave the authorities the excuse to further crack down on the public practice of religion. Ayatollah Seyyed-Hossein Burūjirdī, the sole leader of the Shīʻa of his age, similar to his predecessor and the founder of Qum Seminary, ʻAbdulkarīm Haʼirī-Yazdī (1859-1936), was silent on all sensitive political issues.[38] In response to critics of his reluctance to be politically active, Burūjirdī once said: "some people criticize me for not interfering in politics. The reality is that when I was in Najaf, I observed the involvement of Ākhūnd Khurasānī and Nāʼīnī [two leading pro-constitutionalist jurists] in politics and saw the result. Consequently, I became very sensitive about this issue…. Since we are not well versed in political issues, I am afraid we will be tricked and stopped from achieving our main objectives."[39] Burūjirdī particularly condemned the activities of *Fadāʼīyān-i islām* (Devotees of Islam), an extremist Islamist group who advocated the use of violence and called for active martyrdom.[40] In 1949, Burūjirdī invited some 2000 clergymen to attend a conference in Qum to envision the future of the religious establishment. By his demand, the clergy "adopted a firm non-interventionist position which prohibited all members of the clergy from joining parties and trafficking in politics."[41] This was in line with the original definition of

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[38] Mottahedeh.

[39] Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 69.

[40] Ibid., 70.

[41] Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavī Period* (Albany State University of New York Press, 1980), 63.

taqīya, and the long-held position of quietism adhered to by the Shīʿa during the later period of the Imams and after the occultation where certain provocative acts and behaviours (including political activities and actively seeking martyrdom) had been prohibited due to their potential to endanger the Shīʿa community and compromise the Imams' mission and legacy.

With the death of Ayatollah Burūjirdī in 1961, reformists in the religious establishment found an opportunity to propose reforms in the socio-political doctrine of Shīʿīsm in order to address the problems of the modern society. In 1961, a volume of essays, "*an Inquiry into the Principle of Marjaʿīyat and the Religious Institution*," was published by some prominent religious scholars of the time. It was widely circulated among the younger generations of the ʿ*ulamā* and university students. In fact, this was the first major scholarly effort in the way of a transition from quietism to political activism. What the authors had in mind[42] "would have led to the emergence of an

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[42] Akhavi (1980, 119-120) has summarised the authors' views in these points:

"(1) the need for an independent financial organization for the clergy; (2) the necessity of a *shūrā-yi fatvā* – i.e., a permanent committee of mujtahids [jurists], the members of which were to be drawn from the country at large, to issue collective authoritative opinions in matters of law; (3) the idea that no Shiʿi society is possible without the delegation of the Imām's authority; (4) an interpretation of Islam as a total way of life, therefore incorporating social, economic and political issues Into the religious ones; (5) the need to replace the central importance of *fqih* [jurisprudence] in the madrasah curricula with *akhlaq* (ethics), *ʿaqaʿid* (ideology) and *falsafah* (philosophy); (6) the need for a new concept of leadership of youth based on a correct understanding of responsibility; (7) the development of *ijtihad* as a powerful instrument for the adaptation of Islam to changing circumstances; (8) a revival of nearly defunct principle of *al-amr bi-maʿrūf wa al-nahy ʿan al-munkar* [enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong] as a means of expressing a collective and public will; (9) specialization among mujtahids and making *taqlīd* (emulation of a mujtahid) contingent upon it; (10) the need for mutuality and communal sprit to overcome the individuality and mistrust that pervades Iranian culture." Ibid., 119-20.

autonomous religious institution which might effectively have challenged the state's domination of that institution since the Safavid period."[43] The emerging unified politically conscious and self-controlled religious establishment claimed authority on both religious and political fronts, would act and behave like the infallible Imām and exercise the same kind of lasting religio-political authority that traditionally had been reserved only for the Prophet and the twelve Imams. Therefore, theologically, there was more degrees of freedom for the subjects of jihad and martyrdom.[44]

The impact of the reformed religious establishment on the Shī'ī concept of martyrdom has been significant. No longer was calling for martyrdom necessarily a defensive last-resort strategy to repel foreign threats to the lands of the Shī'a. Martyrdom was seen as a decisive multi-purpose weapon on its own. It was transformed into a mobilization tool in any religiously motivated violence or protest, and a means to strengthen the authority and legitimacy of the religious establishment. Hence, rather than discouraging the act of martyrdom, the Shī'ite leaders started to embrace it in its full capacity. The powerful and emotion-packed message that

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[43] Ibid., 120.

[44] While particularly since the triuamph of the *Uṣūlī* school of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) over traditionalists (*Akhbārīs*), the rulings and reasonings of *mujtahids* have been binding for their followers, they have been diverse (or even contradicory at times), from one mujtahid to another, and also "deemed to die with [the *mujtahid*]."Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (London: IB Tauris, 2005), 14. On the contrary, the new effort for the unification of the religious establishment, especially as implemented in the Islamic Repulic of Iran in 1979 in the form of the *wilāyat-i faqīh*, made the authority of the unified religious estabishment (as a single body of lawmaking) complete, autonomous, and long lasting similar in functions to that of the Prophet and the Imams. This can be seen as part of the process of embracing the Sunni realism, that is the Sunni idea that the collective body of religious scholars ('ulamā) would never go wrong (*ijmā'*) which helped the religious establishment claiming righteousness and collectively exercising the same authority as that of the Imām.

martyrdom carried with itself was needed to reignite devotion and faith to the Shīʿa leadership.

With the Islamic Republic in Iran and the merging of the state and religion together, there were no more excuses for practicing the long-accepted tradition of *taqīya* that had prohibited actively seeking martyrdom for centuries. Even sixteen years before the Islamic Republic, at the early stages of Khomeini's movement, he had signaled the end of the practice of *taqīya*. In response to the allegedly brutal and deadly state-sponsored attack to a famous religious school (*fiyḍīyyah*) in Qum, in 1963, Khomeini argued that in situations where the principles of Islam were in danger *taqīya* was *ḥarām* (not permissible), and the faithful should be ready to shed their blood for the defence of Islam in such cases.[45] Hence, later, with the Islamic Republic in place, Khomeini called for martyrdom as a sacred means to preserve Islam. His definition of Islam, however, was closely linked to the ideology of the Islamic Republic; so, with the defence of Islam, he actually meant the Islamic Republic. On numerous occasions, he maintained that the preservation of the Islamic state from inside and outside threats was, in fact, the preservation of Islam and it was the most important duty of Iranian Muslims.[46]

It is noteworthy, however, that even after the death of Ayatollah Burūjirdī and during the heat of the revolution when an entire generation of clergy was politicized,

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[45] Khomeini, 1: 177.

[46] Ibid., 15: 328.

some groups of senior traditionalist *'ulamā* in Iran and Iraq still questioned Ayatollah Khomeini's break with the idea of *taqīya*, his political activities and his call for martyrdom in an effort to establish an Islamic state – a task which they argued was traditionally reserved exclusively for the Hidden Imām to fulfill when the time was right.

The most vocal critic of Khomeini's political activism was the Najaf-based top jurist of the time, Ayatollah Abul-Qāsim al-Khoei (1899-1992). In his view, although the learned of the community (*'ulamā*) were in charge of the affairs of religion, their guardianship (*wilāyah*) on behalf of the Hidden Imām was limited to organizing and overseeing some necessary religious obligations,[47] the practice of which could not be ceased, such as receiving Islamic taxes (*khums* and *zakāt*)[48] and using them in appropriate ways.[49] Therefore, some key functions of the Imamate, including legitimizing (offensive) jihad and martyrdom should be halted until the Imām's return. For al-Khoei, there was no theological justification for assuming absolute authority (*wilāyah*) for the *'ulamā* on behalf of the Imām.[50] In this sense, what those traditionalists generally considered as a legitimate involvement of *'ulamā* in political activities during the occultation of the Imām was "limited to [the] idea of protecting

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[47] In the Islamic terminology, these issues are called '*umur al- hisbiyyah*.'

[48] Other issues include overseeing religious endowments, inheritance and funerals, etc.

[49] Abul-Qāsim al-Khoei, "Sharḥ Al-'Urwat Al-Wuthqā," *Al-Khoei Foundation*, 360.

[50] Ibid.

the interest of the Shīʿī community."[51] Hence, calling for martyrdom had to be limited to the defensive purposes, as the ʿulamā did during the wars with the Russian Empire in the Qajar era. In Iran, as it was the case in Iraq, most of Ayatollah Khomeini's peers and seniors were skeptical of his political adventure. They were especially cautious on becoming responsible for the blood of the so-called martyrs of the revolution if they publically encouraged their followers to engage in revolutionary activities.[52]

Despite the reluctance of the top level jurists in sanctioning the political activism of Ayatollah Khomeini and his few like-minded peers, Twelver Shīʿīsm was poised for sweeping changes by taking a more socially and politically conscious attitude toward the contemporary issues around it. Had it not been for Khomeini and the younger generation of clergy's revolutionary activities and their call for sacrifice and martyrdom for the greater good of the society, (like what happened in the Sunni world) lay thinkers and activists would have taken the lead, particularly in response to social justice issues of the time, while the *ʿulamā* took a back seat. Nevertheless, one lay thinker had a tremendous influence on both university and religious seminary students by eloquently borrowing the communist language of the time for his reinterpretaion of the principles of Shīʿīsm: Ali Shariati (1933–1977).

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[51] Babak Rahimi, "The Discourse of Democracy in Shi'i Islamic Jurisprudence: The Two Cases of Montazeri and Sistani," *The Mediterranean Programme Series* (2008).

[52] Ḥādī Ṭabāṭabāī, "Taqyīri Sīāsī Dar Raftār Marāji' Shī'a," *Mubāhithāt* (2015).; *Ayatollah Mar'ashī Najafī Bi Rivāyati Asnādi Sawāk*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Tehran: Markaz-i barrisī-i asnād-i tārīkhī wizārat-i 'iṭṭilā'āt, 2009).

A Sorbonne educated social scientist, Shariati is widely regarded as an ideologue of the Islamic revolution.[53] A lot has been said about the indisputable role of Shariati in popularizing the idea of the Islamic revolution and causing Khomeini's ideas of the Islamic state look appealing to the university students of his time.[54] Shariati's epic narrative of Imām Ḥusayn's martyrdom depicted Shī'īsm as the religion of martyrdom and rebellion against the corrupted inheritors of the Islamic culture. His contribution to the development of the Shī'ī concept of martyrdom came with ruthlessly criticizing the long-practiced political passivism embodied in the idea of *taqīya* by calling it "total irresponsibility; the uselessness of all action under the pretext of the Imām's absence."[55] Shariati's contribution to reigniting the fever of martyrdom came from his efforts to bring back Imām Ḥusayn's martyrdom from the piles of history books and passive traditional mourning rituals for his martyrdom to the everyday lives of the Shī'a by depicting his martyrdom one of "fighting and dying for a just cause."[56]

Shariati's understanding of the Shī'ī concept of martyrdom had two equally important parts driven from the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and the captivity of his sister,

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[53] Ervand Abrahamian, "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," *Merip Reports* 102 (1982).

[54] Haleh Afshar, *Iran: A Revolution in Turmoil* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), 223.; Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000): From Bazargan to Soroush* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 122.

[55] Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 112.

[56] Ibid., 116.

Zaynab: first, is the actual martyrdom (he called it 'blood') when the martyr (despite having legitimate excuses not to give up his life) consciously chooses death as his "weapon of jihad for the sake of great values which are being altered;" [57] second, 'the message' that should be borne "to the whole world", and it should be "the eloquent tongue of this flowing blood and these resting bodies among the walking dead [those who refused to become martyr for the sake of their world]," as Zaynab did with regard to the martyrdom of her brother (a mission perhaps harder than that of Ḥusayn's).[58] For Shariati, Shī'ī martyrs "committed a Ḥusayn-like act," while the rest "must perform a Zaynab-like act. Otherwise, they are followers of Yazīd."[59] For Shariati, martyrs commit self-sacrifice when they do not see the point of living with injustice knowing that values are compromised. In his left-leaning ideology, there was almost the binary of good and evil with no middle ground; a believer must choose either to die (martyrdom) or (in case martyrdom is not an option) become a messenger of the martyrs; otherwise, that individual would be in the camp of evil. Therefore, Shariati depicts martyrdom as something at the heart of history beginning with the tale of Cain and Abel; Cain martyred Abel, and thus history began with the confrontation of good versus evil.[60]

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[57] Ali Shariati, "After Shahādat," in *Jihād and Shahādat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, ed. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (Houston: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986), 247.

[58] Ibid., 249.

[59] Ibid., 251.

[60] "Thār."

Shariati's powerful and emphatic lectures with a novel reinterpretation of the Shī'ite's ideals and their legendary leaders and martyrs was the best thing that a revolution could ever have needed in a deeply religious society. While he did not survive to witness the peak of the revolution and its success, his call for martyrdom and ability to make it appealing to his audience in a world fascinated with the Marxist idea of class struggle was a strong motivation for young and educated Iranians to join the wave of the Islamic revolution and make sacrifices for its success. Following his death of mysterious circumstances at age 43 in 1977 in the UK, he became known as 'the martyred teacher' and 'the teacher of martyrdom.'

As Shariati tried to change the perception of the Shī'a regarding martyrdom, and Ḥusayn's martyrdom in particular, to make the idea of seeking martyrdom relevant to everyday life of his people, others followed with their narratives of Ḥusayn martyrdom. One such thinker was Ayatollah Ni'matullāh Ṣālihī-Najafābādī (1923-2006). He was the author of a highly controversial book called *Shahīd javid* (The Eternal Martyr), first published in 1968, in which he criticized the traditional narrative of Imām Ḥusayn's movement. Given that Ṣālihī-Najafābādī denied "the Shī'ite tradition which endows the Imams with occult wisdom which enables them to peer into the future, the gap between his portrayal of the potentially fallible Imām and the traditional portrayal of a supernaturally wise Imām was so much the greater."[61]

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[61] Evan Siegel, "The Politics of Shahid-E Javid," in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political History* (Leiden Brill, 2001), 150-51.

In Ṣāliḥī-Najafābādī's view, the traditional understanding of Imām Ḥusayn's martyrdom "is only good for making people weep. It is supernatural, presenting no model for believers to follow." [62] Instead, he proposed the idea that Ḥusayn's martyrdom was the result of a calculated political move to take the Caliphate from the Umayyads. Ḥusayn did not leave his hometown, Medina, seeking martyrdom for the sake of the love of Allāh, rather he was tempted by the letters of support, which he received from the Kūfan Shīʻa, to go there and establish a government.

In this reading of the events, once the Kūfans withdrew their support, Ḥusayn had no choice but to die honourably and not to surrender without gaining any tangible benefit for the Muslim community. Therefore, unlike the traditional reading of his martyrdom account, Ḥusayn did not intend to be killed in Karbalā at the beginning of his movement; rather, he first tried for a political gain in Kūfa, but when the plan did not go well, and later after his peace talks failed, he proudly accepted martyrdom.[63] Ṣāliḥī-Najafābādī even made a bold point by arguing that martyrdom is not essentially valuable; it is the defending of religion that God asks from us and not martyrdom. In other words, martyrdom is a means to defend religion, not a goal in itself and one should not opt for martyrdom in the first place, even though they might end up getting martyred along the way.[64]

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[62] Ibid., 161.

[63] Ni'matullāh Ṣāliḥī Najafābādī, *Shahīd Jāwīd* (Tehran: Umīd Fardā, 1999), 159.

[64] Ibid., 400.

Another influential view on martyrdom came from Ayatollah Murtiḍā Muṭahharī (1919-1979), again an ideologue of the Islamic revolution and the right-hand of Ayatullah Khomeini during the course of the revolution and beyond until his assassination/martyrdom in the early months of the Islamic Republic. In Muṭahharī's words, martyrdom "is the death of a person who, in spite of being fully conscious of the risks involved, willingly faces them for the sake of a sacred cause, or, as the Qur'an says, *fī sabīl allāh* (in the way of God)…. *Shahādat* is heroic and admirable, because it results from a voluntary, conscious and selfless action. It is the only type of death which is higher, greater and holier than life itself."[65]

His take on martyrdom was that the great cases of martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm were of the nature of reforming the *ummah* (community) of the Prophet. In his view, the principle of 'enjoining good and forbidding wrong' (and not establishing a government as Ṣālihī-Najafābādī had argued) was the main motive for Ḥusayn to accept martyrdom. Ḥusayn's rationale was that only through shedding his blood could other Muslims understand the extent of corruption that had plaugued the community of the Prophet. In seeing martyrdom this way, Muṭahharī focused his attention on the epic and heroic (*ḥamāsī*) side of martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm.[66] So, unlike Ṣālihī-Najafābādī's view that martyrdom has no merit in itself, Muṭahharī thought of

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[65] Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen, "Jihād and Shahādat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam," *The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies* (1986): 128.

[66] Murtiḍā Muṭahharī, *Ḥimāsih Ḥusayni*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Tehran: Ṣadrā, 2016), 149.

martyrdom as an agent of change, a heroic act with far reaching consequences in reforming the wrong in the society.

THE MARTYRDOM PARADIGM AFTER THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

The widespread appeal of martyrdom during the Islamic revolution was certainly a reason behind its success, yet the real need for martyrdom was felt once the Islamic Republic was established in 1979. From the viewpoint of the religious establishment that succeeded in taking control of the revolution and subsequently the state, self-sacrifice/martyrdom was all that the newly created Islamic state needed to secure its continued existence. The Islamic Republic opened an all-new chapter in the history of Twelver Shī'īsm. Its unforeseen creation, however, not only shocked the region and the world powers but the Shī'a leaders themselves, who had not expected to achieve a revolution so quickly, and they had little theoretical and theological preparation to take the helm of the first real Shī'ite state. Ayatollah Khomeini's "*Islamic Government*," written while he was in exile in Najaf, was not a blueprint for how to rule an Islamic government in practice; instead, it was a start at giving the theory of *wilāyat-i faqīh* serious thought. Even though his students and like-minded 'ulamā, most notably the Iraqi-based Muhammad Bāqir al-Sadr (1935–1980) and Ḥusayn-'Alī Muntaẓirī (1922–2009), wrote commentaries on Khomeini's idea of the Islamic government, the whole notion was new and vague for the Shī'a. It needed polishing through some years in practice before it could become an all-around political philosophy suitable for modern times. That meant the new Islamic government was prone to religious and

political crisis and went through one conflict after another, domestically and internationally. Nevertheless, surprisingly for outside observers, the new Islamic state survived all the turmoils and passed through each crisis stronger than before. The leadership had found the recipe for success by relying on the revolutionary zeal of the people and fully utilizing the power of martyrdom, both as a legitimizing factor to strengthen the pillars of the state and as an extremely effective motive to mobilize people with a broad spectrum of political orientations on a large scale to preserve the outcome of the revolution and the newly created popular government.[67]

A major incident of mass martyrdom that led to the revolution happened on Friday, September 8, 1978, in Jālih Square in Tehran when the Shāh's armed forces opened fire on the protestors who had violated martial law. The casualties/martyrs were later officially reported by the Islamic Republic's Martyrs Foundation to number 84 persons.[68] However, at the time, the religious leaders (and even the Western media) reported hundreds or thousands of martyrs in a massive one-day massacre in Tehran. The religious leaders also claimed that the armed forces responsible for the killings were Zionist agents, a claim that enraged the devout Shī'a population even more.[69] The revolutionaries were quick to call that day 'Black Friday,' and the square was renamed 'Martyrs' Square.' The anniversary of the massacre is held officially

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[67] Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 176.

[68] *A History of Modern Iran*, 161.

[69] Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution* (Adler & Adler Publishers, 1986), 223.

every year by the Islamic Republic via the broadcast of special TV programs and the installation of propaganda billboards. The anniversaries are to remind the people of the importance of that tragedy; they are meant to depict the blood of the martyrs as a turning point in the victory of Islam over 'ṭāghūt' (arrogant, or false god), a term made popular by Khomeini in reference to the Shāh and his followers. In fact, the shock of the martyrdom, assisted by the exaggerated numbers of martyrs, helped seal the fate of the Pahlavi regime. Leading to the incident, Khomeini had penned a letter to his followers and encouraged them "to die in order to defeat the enemy of the people." For the revolutionaries, the massacre and its aftermath was another example that demonstrated the victory of the martyrs' blood over the sword.[70]

In the eyes of the religious leaders, the September 8 tragedy was reminiscent of the Āshūrā massacre, and the martyrs of Jālih Square followed in the footsteps of the martyrs of Karbalā. Ayatollah Maḥmūd Ṭāliqānī (1911-1979), a highly charismatic leader of the revolution and second only to Khomeini, made the connection between those martyrs and the celebrated early martyrs of the Shīʿa. In the first anniversary of the event, just two days before his death, Ṭāliqānī, in the Friday Prayer held beside the graves of the martyrs of September 8 defined martyrdom as a redeeming and transcending act that would make a mundane and sinful human being into an inspiring and god-fearing soul worthy of the highest respects; the would-be martyrs

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[70] Meir Litvak, "Martyrdom Is Bliss: The Iranian Concept of Martyrdom During the War with Iraq, 1981-88," in *Martyrdom and Sacrifice in Islam: Theological, Political and Social Contexts*, ed. Meir Hatina, and Meir Litvak (London: IB Tauris, 2016), 117.

by closing themselves to the point of martyrdom find so much spiritual power that would free their self from the constraints of the material world, and, in doing so, they even lead other people to ascend toward God, essentially saving a nation fallen into immorality and corruption (a sort of redemptive power traditionally linked to the martyrdom of Ḥusayn). In another occasion, Ṭāliqānī depicted the martyr as someone "who operates above this lowly world;" a person who in the final chapter of their life gets rid of "worldly attachments" and becomes "a *shahīd* even before [they become] a martyr [that is getting killed]."[71] Ṭāliqānī saw the martyrs of the Jālih Square in this light and put them in the same category as the martyrs of Karbalā. In his view, they were martyred for the freedom of all human beings from the arrogance of the global *ṭāghūt*; they were martyred for reviving "progressive virtues and rulings of the Qur'an and Islam" which had been neglected in the materialistic and imperialistic world.[72]

However, nothing like the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) was as effective in institutionalizing the culture of martyrdom and the mass inclination to seek refuge in the sacredness of becoming a martyr in Shī'a-dominated Iran. Having emerged fresh from the revolution, the people of Iran were not in the mood to let a foreign invasion of their country occur without putting up a fight. This made the country, which had been so divided into factions and prone to civil war, to become united against the Iraqi invasion. Ayatollah Khomeini and other religious leaders of the revolution actually

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[71] Maḥmūd Ṭāliqānī, "Jihād and Shahādat," in *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, ed. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (Houston: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986), 70.

[72] Muhammad Ḥusayn Mīr Abulqāsimī, *Ṭāliqānī, Faryādī Dar Sukūt*, 2 vols. (Tehran: Shirkat Sahāmī Intishār, 2003), 1:263.

benefited from the state of war as it consolidated their authority by virtue of being able to rely on the already rich Shī'ī tradition of martyrdom to mobilize the deeply religious Iranian society and make people sacrifice themselves for the independence of the country. The fact that Khomeini was an ultra-charismatic leader and had a strong background in mysticism helped give martyrdom a fresh and robust mystical dimension.

Martyrdom has always been a subject of interest to Muslims for its promise of sweet, otherworldly rewards delineated in ḥadīths and traditions. Martyrdom has also long been praised for the precious sacrifice that the martyr makes in the path of God and his religion. Moreover, martyrdom has been seen as the price a Muslim willingly pays for the defence of national territories from the threat of foreign and non-Muslim invasion. Nevertheless, Khomeini should be credited with successfully popularizing the esoteric meaning of martyrdom as a subject of love on its own. In Khomeini's illustration, the love of martyrdom, which comes from the love of God, appears to be the main motive for giving up life. In that mystical understanding, the martyr receives an unparalleled blessing by becoming closer to God; hence martyrdom becomes the goal of someone who loves God.[73] Early on, in the first months of the war, in a meeting with workers of the Martyr Foundation (*Bunyād-i shahīd*) and a number of the martyrs' families, Khomeini praised martyrdom in a

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[73] Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 50.

mystical fashion by highlighting a part of a famous tradition that reads: "A martyr

looks at the face of God."[74] He then went on to expand on this point:

> According to this narration that has been recorded, God, the blessed and
> exalted, manifests himself to the martyr when he attains martyrdom, just like
> he did in the case of the Prophets, because the martyr has given his all in the
> way of God. This is last stage in man's ultimate perfection.… the categories of
> the Prophets and martyrs have been placed on the same level in that just as the
> exalted one manifests himself to the Prophets, so does he to the martyrs. The
> martyr, too, beholds God's visage by removing the curtain, just as the Prophets
> had done. This is the last stage man can possibly attain. This last station of the
> Prophets is the gift bestowed on martyrs. They, too, will reach this final stage
> according to the limits of their existence.[75]

Khomeini's definition of martyrdom in love language can be best seen in his message

to the Iranian nation after the war ended:

> As for the martyrs, nothing (enough) can be said. The martyrs are the light of
> the candle of the meeting of the friends. The martyrs are in their drunken
> cachinnation and in the happiness of their union "*with their Lord they have
> provision.*"[76] They are among the" souls at peace" who have been addressed by
> God, thus: "Enter thou among my bondmen! Enter thou my garden!"[77] Here is
> the talk about love and affection. In describing it, the pen will stop from
> inscribing by itself.[78]

In Khomeini's view, martyrdom was not just a means to get some fantastic rewards in

the afterlife or a by-product of joining a jihad for religious or national purposes;

instead, it was a real target and the most appealing goal for the faithful. [79] The way he

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[74] Al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, *Wasā'il Al-Shi'ah Ilā Tahsil Masā'il Al-Shari'ah*, 15: 16.

[75] Khomeini, 13: 513.

[76] The Qur'an, 3:169

[77] The Qur'an, 89:29-30

[78] Khomeini, 21: 147.

[79] Meir Litvak argues that "as military victory became increasingly unattainable, Khomeini portrayed martyrdom as an end in itself, whose occurrence meant the realization of a major goal of Iran's war against Iraq, namely the fight for Islam" (Litvak, 118.). However, Khomeini's speeches early in the war and during the revolution were replete with the reference to martyrdom as a goal for the faithful.

defined martyrdom made it mainly a spiritual adventure in the pursuit of God without taking into account its worldly consequences. He seemed untroubled by the vast number of martyrs and wounded Iranian soldiers during the war that ended without gaining victory other than pushing back the Iraqis to their borders. He had already maintained in his message to announce the acceptance of UN Resolution 598, which ended the war with Iraq:

> Martyrdom in the way of God is not a concept to be compared with victory or defeat in battle. The station of martyrdom is itself the pinnacle of servitude to God and wayfaring in the world of spirituality. We should not degrade martyrdom to the extent of saying that in exchange for the martyrdom of the children of Islam, Khurramshahr and other cities were liberated. All these definitions of martyrdom are wrong assumptions of nationalists.[80]

Thus, for Khomeini, martyrdom, like true human love, was something beyond rational calculations; the death of the martyrs may or may not pave the way for the victory of their people, and this is totally fine since what really matters is the incredible spiritual pleasure of becoming a martyr.

Although this mystical attitude towards martyrdom was not a new development in the understanding of martyrdom (as it had its roots in in classic ḥadīth works), the credit goes to Khomeini for making it relevant for a whole nation as he was in a position that could easily influence people's thoughts and worldview. Someone charismatic and enigmatic like Ayatollah Khomeini who returned victoriously from the fifteen-year exile and was received by his people as if al-Mahdī

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[80] Khomeini, 21: 71-94.

had come had the luxury of ruling the hearts of millions of zealot Shī'as, who, by calling

him 'Imām,' were ready to totally submit to the views and wills of the Messiah-like

leader of their revolution.

The subtle change in the perception of martyrdom created a whole new kind

of enthusiasm for martyrdom in Iran which reflected in the formation of a popular

paramilitary volunteer militia called 'the *Basīj*' (the mobilization). The *Basīj* was

formed by Khomeini's order in 1980 originally as a civil force to help rebuild the

country after the revolution. Nevertheless, the *Basīj* became a very large and strong

organization during the war, responsible for recruiting and training hundreds of

thousands of volunteer fighters (many of them young school students) who had

responded to Khomeini's call for martyrdom and joined the ranks of the Islamic

revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).[81] Khomeini envisioned the *Basīj* to become a

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[81] It is a challenging task to find a neutral and true report of the whole issue of recruiting children for the war. Because of the ideological nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran, any such reports from within the state or those who defected from the regime should be considered with caution. For example, in an unverified account of a former Basīj member responsible for recruiting children there are allegations of immoral methods of attracting and training school children to become killing machines and ready for martyrdom:

If any children refused, we vilified them. We asked them if their parents perhaps weren't good Muslims, and wondered out loud whether we would have to send them to prison. Every evening, new children were standing in the barrack-yard: distraught, intimidated, and with no real idea of what lay ahead. There were panicking children; children who imagined they'd soon be with Muhammad, the Prophet, in Paradise and children who wanted to feed their families by serving in the war. For every child at the front, the parents receive 6,000 tuman[s], the monthly wage of an Iranian worker. If the child dies, the family is given a "certificate of martyrdom." This means privileges when buying groceries, clothes, and fridges and, above all, high prestige and social advancement in class-conscious Iranian society, with its finely wrought systems of rank and status.

For ten hours every day, the children learnt to handle hand grenades and machine guns. Some children didn't survive even the first few days. They threw the hand grenades in the wrong direction or too late-and blew themselves up. After a couple of days, we had to test the youngsters for the first time. We drove dogs across the parade ground and shot them. The children had to catch the animals and slit

"twenty-million army to safeguard the Islamic Republic and the beloved country, protecting it against the dangers of the transgressing superpowers."[82] Initially, many among the *Basīj* volunteers (called *Basījīs*) were illiterate or with low education; and a part of the reason they turned to *Basīj* and participated in the war was to escape from the hardship of their day-to-day lives. [83] However, seeking martyrdom and submitting to God was the dominant culture with which the *Basīj* was created. Hence, *Basījīs* usually called themselves martyrdom lovers (*āshiqān-i shahādat*).[84] Ayatollah Khomeini even called the *Basīj* "the sincere army of God:"

> *Basīj* is a pure and fruitful tree whose blossoms give out the aroma of spring, the freshness of certainty and the story of love. *Basīj* is the school of love and the academy of martyrdom. Its anonymous martyrs, whose followers have recited on top of its towering minaret the call to martyrdom and valor. *Basīj* is the locus of the barefooted and ascension of the pure Islamic thought whose trained ones have gained name and fame in having no name and fame. *Basīj* is the sincere army of God whose organizational account has been endorsed by the *mujahidin* from the beginning up to the end. [85]

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their throats. Anyone who refused was given a rucksack full of stones and had to run with it on his back until he collapsed. After a week, all the children were ready to kill the dogs. Before the children went to the front, their parents were allowed to visit them twice. Any boy who cried when they said good-bye had to cart the rucksack full of stones around again. Slogans of Khomeini decorated the huge dormitories, and the Qur'an lay on the narrow bedside table. There were no family photos, no toys, no teddy bears, no mementos-nothing of their own. After their two-week training, the children had to function like machines: without fear, hope, feelings. We were forbidden to play with little ones. If we'd played with them, they'd have become children again, children who laughed and cried. And such children don't go to war, say our superiors. Christoph Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 45.

[82] Khomeini, 15: 386.

[83] Varzi, 58.

[84] Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: IB Tauris, 1999), 249-50.

[85] Khomeini, 21:189.

In many of the hagiographies of the war martyrs published in Iran, longing for martyrdom is seen as the most dominant characteristics of the martyrs. For example, it is reported that before martyr Mahdī Ziynuddīn (a young major general who was killed in the Iran–Iraq War in 1984) married his wife, he told her about his priority in life which was to get martyred: "You should know that I am a married man. I married the war and the front lines. You will be my second wife. Martyrdom is the end of my path. If I survive the war without getting martyred, I will go anywhere that is a war between truth (*ḥaqq*) and false (*bāṭil*) to get martyred there."[86] The theme of treating martyrdom as a priority in life continues to be common among ultra-devoted *Basījīs* forces. I will discuss the current situation later in this chapter.

The love of martyrdom entails dying consciously and purposefully, something that has become widespread since the revolution in Iran. Before the Islamic Republic, Shariati was instrumental in changing the paradigm from seeing martyrdom as a by-product of jihad into the focus and centre of attention as the deliberate way of dying in a heroic and liberating fashion. Martyrs, as Shariati explained, sacrificed themselves to deliver a message to all of humanity; their martyrdom was a thoughtful act, and they sacrificed themselves for "thought" and, in doing so, they became "thought" themselves.[87] Shariati juxtaposed two types of martyrdom through the comparison of the martyrdom of Ḥamzah and that of Imām Ḥusayn: "In the first case,

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[86] Muhammad Bāqir Ḥiydarī Kāshānī, *Nasl Ṭūfān* (Qum: Zulāl-i Kuthar, 2007), 89.

[87] Shariati, "A Discussion of Shahīd," 233.

shahādat [martyrdom] is a negative incident. In the latter case, it is a decisive goal, chosen consciously. In the former, *shahādat* is an accident along the way; in the latter, it is the destination."[88]

Ayatollah Khomeini championed the conscious attitude towards martyrdom in his inspirational speeches to mobilize people to give up their lives for the sake of Islam and the Islamic revolution. For Khomeini, seeking martyrdom was a deliberate act by the lovers of God; martyrs were the flag-bearers of the caravan of salvation. In a speech delivered to the families of the martyrs at the beginning of the war, Khomeini maintained that the martyrs with their conscious choice to shed their blood led others in the way of salvation: "They were the leaders and have now left our presence and have attained salvation while we have lagged behind on this path and could not pace up with the caravans and tread their paths. We are all from God; the entire universe is from God and is his manifestation, and the entire universe shall return to him. Thus, it is better that man chooses a voluntary return to God through martyrdom for him and for the cause of Islam."[89]

Shariati's distinction between two types of martyrdom and the Khomeini's take on the issue highlights the extent of the departure from the passive martyrdom paradigm of the past, which pushed the boundary of martyrdom toward suicide. In other words, in the new martyrdom paradigm that emerged out of the Iran-Iraq war,

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[88] "A Discussion of Shahīd," 240.

[89] Khomeini, 14: 257.

heroism was defined by the active desire and determination for martyrdom that required taking extreme and irrational risks for the sake of the love of God.[90] This martyrdom-seeking culture has been cultivated and educated among young *Basījīs*. Since the end of the war, there have been propaganda tours just before the Persian New Year (late March) which take the religiously motivated youth, especially school-aged and university students to visit the war zones in south and southwestern Iran and to commemorate the heroism of martyrs and soldiers during the eight-year war with Iraq. These caravans are called *Rāhīyān-i nūr* (the Passengers of Light). The visitors walk in the so-called "holy lands," in which one would find a sign of martyrs everywhere. In these guided tours, the visitors indulge themselves in an atmosphere of martyrdom, heroism, and jihad for the sake of Islam. Most of the visitors, particularly the young ones who do not have memories of the war, idolize some of the most famous martyrs (e.g. martyrs Chamrān, Hemmat, Bākiri, Bāqirī, Jahān-*Ā*rā, Bābāī, to name a few). A tableau installed in an area of the war zone (Figure 1) is self-explanatory and motivational, and it shows the state's determination in popularizing the martyrdom-seeking culture. The message is simple and strong; it reads: "Let's be cautious, if we won't get martyred, we will die." This is exactly what Shariati and Khomeini had preached before; that is to say, what that really matters is to become a martyr, otherwise life is in vain, or ordinary at best.

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[90] Mahmoud Ayoub, "Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam," *Religious Resurgence: Contemporary Cases in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism* (1987).; Hatina, 86.

Figure 1 (Source: http://bayanbox.ir/view/6737303656775689026/shahīd-s-mohajer.blog.ir.jpg)

The war with Iraq was demonstrated by the religious leaders (notably Ayatollah Khomeini) to be the continuation of the Āshūrā movement. Hence, the Iranian side was depicted as the truth (*jibhi-yi ḥaqq*), and the Sunni Ba‘athist Iraqi side was the false front (*jibhi-yi bāṭil*), even though the majority of Iraq's population and part of its army was Shī‘ite. Saddam Ḥusayn, then the Iraqi President, was also labeled as the Yazīd of the time by Iranian propaganda. The state media purposefully dropped the 'Ḥusayn' in Saddam's name and replaced it with 'Yazīd' in an attempt to vilify the image of Saddam. Often, the term '*kāfir*' (infidel) was also added at the end of Saddam's name to make the war with Ba‘athist Iraq look like a jihad against unbelievers. Ayatollah Khomeini even called Saddam's forces in the war "the devil's soldiers" and proclaimed that their fate would be hell.[91] Before the war, during the

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[91] Khomeini, 15: 417.

revolution, the Shāh was called Yazīd by the religious revolutionaries and Khomeini enjoyed an Imām Ḥusayn-like character.[92] This trend proved to be popular in the Iranian post-revolution political literature. The holder of the position of *walī-i faqīh* (now Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) is treated like Imām Ḥusayn, and the enemies of the Iranian brand of Islam are called the Yazīds of the time (*Yazīdiān-i zamān*).

The war with Iraq quickly became more connected to the tragedy of Karbalā and the sufferings of the other Imams. After the initial phases of the war, where the Iraqi forces had occupied some Iranian territories, Iran was able to recapture its soil and even started penetrating inside Iraq. Khomeini's stance, particularly in the later period of the war, was to continue the military mission to topple Saddam and free Iraq from his despotic rule. With the fact that the shrines of several Imams, including Imams ʿAlī and Ḥusayn are in Iraq, the war was also seen as jihad for the sake of the Imams and to free their shrines (especially Karbalā) from Sunni rule. The love of martyrdom had been intertwined with the love of the *'Ahlul-bayt'* (the Prophet's family). Hence, the most common headbands Iranian soldiers wore had the names and titles of the *'Ahlul-bayt'* such as *'Ya Ḥusayn,' 'Ya Zahrā,' 'Ya ʿAlī,'* and *'Ya Mahdī.'* As part of the state strategy to connect the war to Imām Ḥusayn's movement and depict its martyrs like the martyrs of Karbalā, there was a popular chant among Iranian soldiers saying "Karbalā, Karbalā, we are coming [for your liberation]" (*karbalā,*

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[92] Varzi, 54-55.

karbalā, mā dārīm mīyāyīm). Ten of the Iran's military operations against Iraq were named Karbalā (Karbalā 1 to Karbalā 10). Other Karbalā-related operation names were 'Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī,' 'Thār Allāh,'[93] 'Āshūrā,' 'Muḥarram,'[94] and '*Muslim ibn ʿAqil.*'[95] For the *Basījīs* seeking martyrdom, the war meant responding to Imām Ḥusayn's famous call for support just before his martyrdom: "*Hal min nāṣirin yanṣurunī?*" (Is there anyone to help me?).[96] Hence, '*Labbayk yā ḥusayn*' (We are at your service, O' Ḥusayn) was another common headband title during the war, and the chant was a declaration of one's readiness to become a martyr for Ḥusayn. So, typically in posters and murals, martyrs were painted with the image of Imām Ḥusayn being present at the scene of martyrdom to take the new martyr with him to paradise.[97]

'The night of the operation' (as we see this term numerous times in memos of the war veterans) was very special for many of the volunteer *Basījīs* as for them, it was the reminiscence of the night of Āshūrā; so they became extremely emotional and, similar to the martyrs of Karbalā, spent the night praying to God and weeping for their sins and the plights of Imām Ḥusayn. Prior to any operation, preachers and *marthīya khwāns* (also known as poets of the *Ahlul-bayt*) were sent to the front lines to prepare

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[93] '*Thār Allāh*' is a title used for Imām Ḥusayn.

[94] Āshūrā occurred on the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram.

[95] Muslim ibn ʿAqil was Ḥusayn's first cousin and his ambassador to Kūfa to confirm the loyalty of the Kūfan Shīʿa. He is widely revered by the Shīʿa as the first martyr of the tragedy of Karbalā who was betrayed by the Kūfan Shīʿa and eventually was executed by the governor of Kūfa a few weeks before Āshūrā (see chapter three).

[96] Even though "*Hal min nasirin yansuruni?*" is quoted frequently, in historical sources we see a different version: "*Ama min mughithen yughithuna bi wajh-i allāh?*" which means 'is there anyone to help us for the sake of God?' ibn Ṭāwūs, 102.

[97] Hatina, 87.

the soldiers emotionally and spiritually for martyrdom by reminding them of the sufferings of Ḥusayn and other martyrs of the *Ahlul-bayt*. There are some first-hand documentaries and reports that show the genuine pre-operation Āshūrā-related emotions and mourning rituals coming from their ostensible zeal for martyrdom.

The desire for martyrdom and the degree of detachment from the material world was so high in some of the soldiers that one would feel they were, indeed, walking martyrs. As the youngest Iranian commander during the war, Ḥasan Bāqirī (martyred in 1983 at age 26) before an operation in one of his latest interviews told a TV reporter that "all brothers are eagerly counting the hours until the start of the operation. And the spirit of self-sacrifice and martyrdom-seeking is so high among [the soldiers of Islam] that an hour is an hour [even one hour sooner is better]."[98] Bāqirī's quiet, somber demeanor is the first thing one would notice in the video, a typical trait of many martyrs during the war. He never looked at the camera or the interviewer; rather, he gazed down during the entire interview as if he were living in a higher world disassociated from the social etiquette of normal people in the material world.

The Iran-Iraq war was also a turning point for Muslims in terms of blurring the line between martyrdom and suicide. In accordance with the unprecedented zeal for martyrdom, during the war, Iran allegedly used the so-called human-wave attack

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[98] "Sukhanrani Shahid Hasan Baqeri," updated June 1, 2017, accessed May 1, 2018, http://www.aparat.com/v/HQyf5.

tactic to overwhelm the Iraqi forces and their superior warfare with the sheer number of soldiers on the ground ready to die if needed, hence resulting in a substantial number of martyrs after each operation. Two operations (Karbalā 4 and Karbalā 5, both in 1986) were examples of the human-wave attack with the casualties rapidly reached thousands of martyrs and wounded soldiers in each operation. Eyewitnesses say that after one of those offensives piles of Iranian soldiers' bodies littered the ground for miles, many of them children of about 15.[99] However, Iranian officials have denied the allegations of Iran's use of the human-wave tactic in the war; a senior staff member of the *Centre for Documents and Research on the Sacred Defence* called this a "baseless" and "laughable accusation."[100] Despite this refusal, it is widely believed that the Iran-Iraq War introduced a new approach to martyrdom for the entire Muslim world to follow. The problem of suicide bombers among the Sunni Islamists such as Al-Qaeda and Hamas is said to have its roots in the Iran-Iraq War.[101]

The Islamic Republic enjoyed having tens of thousands of volunteer forces (*Basījīs*) who were ready to die under the leadership of the charismatic and Imām-like religious figure (Ayatollah Khomeini). Iran's strategy, in accordance with Khomeini's

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[99] Muhammad Salam, a Lebanese journalist described the aftermath of an Iranian offensive this way: "A Yugoslavian colleague and I set off from Basra at sunrise. At around nine o'clock, we reached the area where the Iranians had tried to break through. There were bodies lying there. Just bodies — that was all you could see as far as the horizon. We started to count them. We counted them all day. We gave up when we'd got to 23,000 because we were supposed to leave the area before dark. We hadn't finished. And yet all we'd done from 9 a.m. until evening was walk up and down counting the bodies. The offensive was called Karbalā IV or Karbalā V, I don't exactly recall which it was now" Reuter, 35.

[100] https://goo.gl/aOqjS6 (accessed on June 14, 2017).

[101] Hatina, 89.

teachings, was martyrdom first, victory second; the love of martyrdom was what drew many of those volunteers to the front lines, not the desire for worldly victories or patriotism. Ayatollah Khomeini put the priority on performing the 'duty' (*waḍīfih*) and not seeking the desired 'result' (*natījih*): "All of us are bound to perform our duty and obligation, and not wait for the result."[102] Khomeini's successor and the current *walī-i faqīh*, Ayatollah 'Alī Khamenei, later backed this idea and clarified Khomeini's words by saying that "the person who acts according to obligations in order to reach the desired results will not feel regretful even if he does not achieve the desired results."[103] That 'duty first' approach led the *Basīj* and other armed forces of IRGC to fearlessly and with complete trust and belief to the so-called Imām's line (*khatt-i imām*) embrace martyrdom and take serious risks to hurt the Iraqi forces and push them out of the occupied territories of south and southwestern Iran.

The zeal for martyrdom in the early years of the war and the state propaganda around it resulted in a high number of child martyrs as well. There are no verifiable independent statistics of the exact number of children who joined the *Basīj* forces and got martyred. However, according to *the Center for the Propagation and Preservation of the Values of the Sacred Defense*, of 190 thousand martyrs (in their estimate), more than 33 thousand were school children.[104] Other sources claim up to 90000 children

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[102] Khomeini, 21: 284-85.

[103] http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1820/Leader-s-Speech-to-Students (accessed on June 15, 2017).

[104] https://goo.gl/jQPcRR (accessed on June 04, 2017).

were martyred during the war.[105] Moreover, according to other unverifiable statistics, there were 7054 martyrs aged fourteen or under and 65575 martyrs aged between 15 and 19.[106] Recruiting children became easier with Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* in 1982, in which he declared that volunteer children no longer needed parental permission to join the *Basīj* forces on the front lines.[107] Child soldiers, after a few weeks of training, were mostly used in situations where a bulk of soldiers was needed for an operation. Hence, many of those child martyrs voluntarily sacrificed themselves in human wave attacks or exploded themselves to clear the way in a minefield for other soldiers to take the offensive.[108]

The most paradigmatic child martyr was a 13-year-old boy from Qum, Muhammad Husayn Fahmīdih, who performed a suicide attack to stop an Iraqi tank column. The incident happened just a month after the war's outbreak on October 30, 1980, when the Iraqi forces were on the verge of occupying the city of Khurramshahr. In order to stop an Iraqi tank column's advance through a narrow route in the city, he reportedly wore a grenade belt and threw himself under the first tank, killing himself, disabling the tank, and causing the other tanks to retreat. His martyrdom is believed to be the first case of a suicide attack in the modern Muslim world (both Sunni and Shīʿa) and inspired others to embrace this kind of martyrdom, which later became

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[105] George R Pitman, *Why War?: An Inquiry into the Genetic and Social Foundations of Human Warfare* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2016), 144.

[106] https://goo.gl/VELPYZ (accessed on June 04, 2017).

[107] Pitman, 143.

[108] Hatina, 86.

known as a "martyrdom operation" (*'amalīyāt-i istishhādī*). A major reason that Fahmīdih became a martyrdom icon in Iran was the message of Ayatollah Khomeini in praise of his suicidal martyrdom: "Our true leader is that [thirteen]-year old boy- whose tiny heart is much larger than hundreds of our pens and words- who threw himself with a grenade under the enemy's tank and destroyed it, and attained the sweet blessing of martyrdom for himself."[109] Khomeini's words immediately became an inspiration for other students to join the ranks of soldiers seeking martyrdom and set the tone for other soldiers to emulate Fahmīdih, knowing that the way to victory would come through sacrifice. Khomeini's praise of the sacrifice made by Fahmīdih appeared on the walls of schools and mosques throughout the country, and the story of his martyrdom was taught in schools. Since then, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Fahmīdih has been named the 'Day of Student *Basīj*' on the official calendar of Iran.

The eight-year war produced too many martyrs in Iranian society. Official reports in Iran estimate that there were 200,000 martyrs, though other estimates present even higher numbers going up to 600,000 Iranian casualties during the war (directly or indirectly).[110] Almost everyone in Iran knew at least one martyr among their relatives and friends. As for the motivation for others to flock to the war zones voluntarily, ready for self-sacrifice, martyrdom had to be revered and remembered. Martyrdom became the most prestigious status one could get in the revolutionary

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[109] Khomeini, 14: 71.

[110] Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 175.

society of Iran. The martyrs' families were supposed to be proud of gifting the martyrs to the country and Islam. In their last wills (*waṣīyat nāmih*), martyrs commonly urged their parents/wives to be proud of their sons'/husbands' achievement of martyrdom. Many of the martyrs' parents were genuinely happy with their 'offerings' and wished they had more sons so they could see them becoming martyrs, as well.[111]

The martyrs' last wills were mostly similar in content and typically demonstrated their desire and anticipation of the joy of martyrdom.[112] According to a study of one hundred martyrs' wills performed by Muhammad Hussein Shā'irī, the love of God was the dominant motivation for martyrdom.[113] In other words, they mostly saw martyrdom as the way to get closer to God. The martyrs saw Imām Ḥusayn as the best role model for the seekers of God; hence, his name or a reference to his martyrdom appeared in almost every martyr's will. A famous wartime chant (which is found in the martyrs' wills) read: "*Ḥusayn ḥusayn shu'ār-i māst, shahādat iftikhār-i māst*" ([shouting] "Ḥusayn! Ḥusayn! is our chant, martyrdom is our pride"). In many of the last wills written by the famous martyrs of the war that I personally examined, the martyrs also urged their fellow countrymen to follow Ayatollah Khomeini (better known as "Imām") word for word and stick to the principle of *wilāyat-i faqīh* as the only way to preserve Islam and the revolution. In the political literature after the

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[111] Reuter, 11.

[112] Varzi, 59.

[113] Muhammad Ḥusayn Shā'irī, *Jāmi'ih Shināsī Shahādat Wa Angīzih Hāyi Shahīdān* (Tehran: Shahīd, 2002), 170.

The statistical population of this study was composed of martyrs coming from the education sector.

revolution, this is known as "the protection of the blood of martyrs" (*ṣīyānat-i khūn-i shuhadā*).

According to Shā'irī's study, the martyrs saw Khomeini as the heir to the Prophet and the Imams. For them, the love of Khomeini was equal to the love of al-Mahdī, the Hidden Twelfth Imām, which itself was the sign of the love of God. This is coming from the perplexing logic of Shī'īsm, which is best demonstrated in a famous supplicant called by different names such as '*Ma'rifat imām al-'aṣr*' (as I mentioned it in chapter three): "O' Allāh, let me know you; for if you do not let me know you I will not know your Prophet. O' Allāh, let me know your Messenger; for if you do not let me know your Messenger I will not know your proof. O' Allāh, let me know your proof [*al-ḥujjah*, the Imām]; for if you do not let me know your proof, I will deviate from my religion."[114] In other words, the knowing (*ma'rifah*) of the Imām is the cornerstone of religion, and it guarantees that one already has belief in God and his Prophet. In post-revolutionary Iran, this line was extended to include the *walī-i faqīh* as well. So, martyrs in their wills attested to their devotion to Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic mission and counted their blood as offerings to that mission. This was known for them as the criterion of true faith, which was branded "*islām-i nāb-i muḥammadī*" (pure Muhammad's Islam). Popular chants uttered by the soldiers and reflected in the martyrs' wills were also indicative of their devotion to Khomeini and their genuine wish to get martyred for him: "*Rahsipārīm bā khomeini tā shahādat*" (we are heading

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[114] al-Kulaynī, 1:337.

[ahead] together with Khomeini until martyrdom); "*Mā hamih sarbāz-i tuyīm khomeini, gūsh be farman-i tuyīm khomeini*" (O Khomeini, we all are your soldiers, O Khomeini, we are awaiting for your order). After Ayatollah Khomeini, these chants remained and have been tweaked to address the current *walī-i faqīh*, Ayatollah Khamenei. While "Khamenei" replaced "Khomeini" in some of the mentioned chants, the general term "*wilāyah*" (the guardianship of the Imām and the *walī-i faqīh*) is mostly used in chants; a commonly seen chant written on posters and in weblogs is "*Bā wilāyat tā shahādat*" (along with *wilāyah* till martyrdom).

Facing the more sophisticated and superior Iraqi army, Iran needed to rely on its greater population; hence, the culture of martyrdom had to be rooted deep in the society for a mass mobilization of volunteer fighters to occur. Although Ayatollah Khomeini and other religious leaders of the Islamic Republic depicted the war as the war between Islam and *Kufr* (unbelief),[115] they did not officially call for jihad as traditionally, as I discussed before, there have been reservations about the legitimacy of waging jihad in the absence of the Twelfth Imām.[116] Moreover, the war was between two Islamic countries and, more than that, two countries with the majority Twelver Shī'a population, so not everyone was comfortable with participating in a war in the form of jihad under the authority of Ayatollah Khomeini, especially after 1982 when Iran recaptured all of its occupied territories and went on the offensive.

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[115] Litvak, 118.

[116] Abedi and Legenhausen, 19.

The Islamic Republic's religious leaders presented the conflict with Iraq first and foremost as self-defence, and second, as a liberation mission to free the holy cities of Iraq and its Shī'a population from the despotic rule of the Ba'athist Saddam. Hence, the war was labelled as "the Sacred Defence," or "the Imposed War" so that the Iranians, regardless of their political and religious orientations, would feel obliged to defend their country from the Iraqi invasion.

The memories of the revolution and martyrs were fresh in Iran and had the potential to produce a huge number of volunteers ready to die in a defensive war, something that Saddam and his allies had underestimated. A large-scale strategy had been implemented aiming to cultivate the value of seeking martyrdom among people (most importantly students). Cultural products, including war-related movies and TV programs, heroic and emotional songs and posters, and other forms of propaganda, were produced by the state to encourage a culture of martyrdom among the youth. The streets of Tehran (and other big cities in Iran) literally became an open museum of martyrs. The commemoration of war martyrs became a part of the daily life. Paintings of martyrs were the first things one would notice walking around the city. The large, realistic paintings, mostly based on personal portraits, were accompanied by their names and sometimes part of their last will or a quote from

Ayatollah Khomeini on martyrdom, made the citizens relate to the martyrs and their cause.[117]

Moreover, new martyrs would make a celebrated return home as their emotion-packed funerals attracted large crowds; most of the people in attendance did not know the martyrs personally. The popularity of the martyrs' funerals have remained high, and people often attend the processions to respect the martyrs' blood. Official news headlines reporting the martyrs' funerals usually read something like '*Tajdīd-i piymān ba ārmānhāyi imām wa shuhadā*' (the renewal of the pledge to the ideals of the Imām (Khomeini) and martyrs). During the war, in almost every neighbourhood, there was a special booth for honouring a recent martyr of that area. The booth was usually decorated with lights and small pieces of glass and mirrors, and it normally had a picture of the martyr beside a photo of Ayatollah Khomeini. Frequently, there was an audio cassette of a Qur'an recitation, *rawḍa khwānī* for Imām Ḥusayn, or war-related songs playing from the booths.

During the Iran-Iraq conflict, war motivational chants and songs played a significant role in making the atmosphere heroic and motivational for the soldiers before each operation. The songs helped to ignite the flames of martyrdom inside them. They are also reliable sources for understanding the beliefs advocated by the Islamic Republic. The chants and songs usually highlighted the values of martyrdom.

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[117] Shahrīyār Khunsārī, "Naqsh 'Aks Dar Bāznamāī Ustūrih Shahādat Dar Naqqāshī Dīvārī Shahr Tehran," *Manẓar* 36, no. 8 (2016).

They were intended to develop the love of martyrdom among the people so that they would be ready for any form of self-sacrifice advocated by the religious leaders of the Islamic Republic. Karbalā and Imām Ḥusayn where common themes that appeared in most of the chants and songs. Caravans dispatching soldiers to the war zones were usually labeled '*kārwān-i karbalā*' (Karbalā caravans), that was also reflected in the chants and songs. Getting to Karbalā was one of the main motives for wearing the robe of martyrdom; the soldiers went to the war while chanting '*Yā ḥusayn*' and listening to such songs: *'We will give our lives to conquer Karbalā'*;[118] *'I have heard the sound of your call; I have chosen your path O' brother; O' caravan of Karbalā I am joining you.'*[119] *'Whoever is longing for Karbalā, Bismillāh (get ready)! Whoever has excitement, Bismillāh! If you have been yearning for martyrdom in your heart, this caravan goes to Karbalā, Bismillāh! A caravan is ready for the lovers of Ḥusayn, if you are now ready to get (blessed) Bismillāh!'*[120]

For the Iranian soldiers, as already had been highlighted by Shariati, seeking martyrdom was a response to Imām Ḥusayn's timeless call for devoted supporter: "Is there any one to help me?" They responded to that call with the chant of '*Labbayk yā ḥusayn*' (at your service, O' Ḥusayn), which was repeated in the war songs too. For them, an important purpose of the Iran-Iraq war was to avenge Imām Ḥusayn's

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[118] «از سر و جان بهر فتح نينوا بايد گذشت»

[119] «بانگ صلايت را شنيدم. راهت برادر برگزيدم. اى راهى كرب و بلا من هم رسيم.»

[120] «هركه دارد هوس كرب و بـــلا بـــســـم الله. هركه دارد به سرش شور و نوا بسم الله. گركه درسينه خود شوق شـــهـــادت دارى. رود اين قافله تا كرب و بـــــلا بسم الله. كاروانى شده آماده عشاق حسين. گر كنون پاى طلب هست تو را بسم الله.»

blood; something that since the later period of the Imams traditionally had been reserved for al-Mahdī, the Hidden Twelfth Imām. Hence, the Iranian army envisioned itself similar to the army of the Hidden Imām, as it was evident from a famous war-time song: 'O army of the master of time (the Hidden Imām) Get ready! Get ready! For a war without mercy! Get ready! Get ready!'[121]

This messianic interpretation of the war has had a deeper root in the Islamic revolution as the whole country is thought to belong to Imām Mahdī; hence, the *walī-i faqīh* has been the acting ruler of Iran and will remain so until the Imām's return at the end of time. In 1981, soon after the revolution, in a speech to the state officials, Ayatollah Khomeini maintained that Iran's master was no one but the Hidden Imām: "You should be engaged with your work in a big heart, without fearing any of these problems [referring to the wave of assassinations of Iran's president and prime minister, Muhammad-'Alī Rajai and Muhammad-Jawād Bāhunar, and some other high ranking officials of the Islamic Republic in 1981], as Islam is your stronghold, God is your support and the owner of this country is the Imām of the time."[122] This was, in fact, meant to reaffirm that anyone killed for the cause of the Islamic revolution would be a martyr. Traditionally, martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm was defined as giving up life in the service of the Prophet or the infallible Imām. The logical conclusion for this line of thought is that as the acting owner of the country, the deputy of the Hidden Imām

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121 «ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش آماده باش. بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش»

122 Khomeini, 15: 193.

and the holder of the *walī-i faqīh's* office (Ayatollah Khomeini and today Ayatollah Khamenei) defines righteousness; and therefore, martyrdom will be defined by sacrificing one's life in accordance with the *walī-i faqīh's* intentions (better known in the political literature of the Islamic Republic as "*manwīyāt-i rahbari*"). Hence, the war songs picked up this idea and put Khomeini in the Hidden Imām's position: "Whoever says *labbayk* to Khomeini's orders, swear to God he goes in the Ḥusayn's way. Whoever obeys the Spirit of God's *orders (Khomeini's orders), bismillah (get ready for the war)! [123] Whoever is longing for Karbalā, bismillah!"[124]* Another famous song reads: "*You soldiers ready to give your lives; Now is the time of courage. O the army of the God's Spirit [Khomeini], the hour of martyrdom has arrived. O the army of the God's Spirit, the hour of bravery has arrived. See how the forces of Islam stretch to infinity. To throw back the enemy, get ready! Get ready!"*[125] Similarly, the chants of '*Labbayk yā khomeini*' came along with the chants of '*Labbayk yā ḥusayn*' and '*Labbayk yā mahdi.*'

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[123] 'Spirit of God' is the literal meaning of Ayatollah Khomeini's first name, Ruhollah.

[124] «هر که لبیک به فرمان خمینی گوید، به خداوند قسم راه حسینی پوید. هر که فرمان برد از روح خدا بسم الله. هرکه دارد هوس کرب وبلا بسم الله.»

[125] «رزمندگان جان به کف، روز شجاعت آمده. ای لشکر روح خدا، گاه شهادت آمده ای لشگر روح خدا، گاه شهامت آمده این نیروی اسلامیان، تا بی نهایت آمده از بهر دفع دشمنان، آماده باش، آماده باش»

AFTER MARTYDOM: THE POST-WAR STATE OF MARTYRDOM IN THE TWELVER SHĪʿĪ IRAN

The war with Iraq changed Iran's cultural and political scene forever. Apart from the high costs that were forced upon the country and its people during the long and bloody conflict, ultimately, the war was a blessing in terms of the revolutionary Islamic ideology. The war exposed the power of the institutionalized culture of martyrdom in holding back an enemy that was "armed to the teeth."[126] The current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has been determined to make sure the memories and values of the martyrs of the revolution and the war period (i.e., deep faith, strong devotion, and determination) stay alive and be transmitted to the next generation.[127] In his speeches, Khamenei sees martyrs as "role models" who should be introduced to the youth.[128] He also called war-disabled veterans (known in Persian as *jānbāz*, literally meaning one who has given up life) "living martyrs" who "bear witness to the glorious struggle and great endeavors of the Iranian nation."[129]

In Khamenei's view (which defines the strategy of the Islamic Republic), the veneration of martyrs and the values of martyrdom are necessary to counteract the

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[126] Ayatollah Khamenei's speech to the IRGC Ground Forces servicemen: http://english.khamenei.ir/news/97/Leader-s-Speech-to-the-IRGC-Ground-Forces-Servicemen (accessed on 30-06-2017).

[127] Ibid.

[128] Leader's address to the officials of the Kohgiluyeh Boyer-Ahmad and North Khorasan Martyrs Commemoration Congress. <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4206/The-Enemy-Wants-to-Make-the-People-Indifferent-Towards-Ideals> (accessed on 30-06-2017).

[129] Leader's Address to War-Disabled Veterans < http://english.khamenei.ir/news/74/Leader-s-Address-to-War-Disabled-Veteran> (accessed on 30-06-2017).

waves of cultural attacks coming from the West, where martyrdom is depicted in a negative way as a dogmatic residue of the intolerant traditions of the past. He maintains that values of jihad and resistance against the "bullies of the world" and the "global arrogance" are coming from the culture of martyrdom, which should be transferred to the new generation.[130] In particular, he has backed the program of the *Rāhīyān-i nūr's* caravans as one of the best ways to cultivate the culture of martyrdom and expose its values.[131] Martyrdom essentially has become the cornerstone of the revolutionary ideology and a source of power in the Islamic Republic. In Khamenei's words, martyrdom is the concept that reveals "the greatness of the revolution."[132] He maintains that the concept of martyrdom in the Muslim world was boosted by the "miracle of the Islamic revolution"; at the same time, Islam and the revolution's future and success depend on the willingness of the people to embrace martyrdom if necessary.[133]

All the state propaganda around the value of martyrdom shows how much it has evolved from being a purely religious phenomenon to a largely political concept.

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[130] In Khamenei's words, particularly the US, the UK, and Israel are the bullies and the global arrogance. See for example: Our problems with America are not solved by negotiations: Ayatollah Khamenei, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4052/Our-problems-with-America-are-not-solved-by-negotiations-Ayatollah.> (accessed on 07-07-2017).

[131] Cultural Attacks By the Enemy Are More Dangerous than Military Attacks <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4695/Cultural-Attacks-By-the-Enemy-Are-More-Dangerous-than-Military.> (accessed on 30-06-2017).

[132] Leader's speech in meeting with families of the martyrs of 7th of Tir <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2089/Leader-s-speech-in-meeting-with-families-of-the-martyrs-of-7th> (accessed on 30-06-2017).

[133] Leader's speech in meeting with a group of martyr's children <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2166.> (accessed on 07-07-2017).

Martyrdom in Iran is now a state-sponsored title used in any sort of death occurring due to one's participation in the 1979 revolution or the so-called 'imposed war' with Iraq, acts of terrorism, assassination, or any fatal incident involving a public servant on duty. However, the key criterion here for any death (either violently or due to an accident) to be labeled martyrdom in the post-revolutionary political literature is that the person's life and career should have served the interests of the Islamic Republic. The most notable martyrs not related to the war (passive form of martyrdom) have been the assassinated high-ranking political or military officials of the Islamic Republic and other victims of terrorist attacks in Iran or abroad; they have martyred mostly at the hands of the People's Mujāhidīn Organization of Iran (*Mujāhidīn-i Khalq)*, better known in the State propaganda as *munāfiqīn* (hypocrites), or by Sunni extremists and Salafī groups based in neighboring countries. Martyrs of the scientific community (mostly nuclear scientists) are among the recently emerged cases of martyrdom. Those so-called "nuclear martyrs" were scientists involved in Iran's nuclear program and assassinated separately from 2009 to 2011. Given the sensitivity and importance of the nuclear program for Iran's leaders, the nuclear martyrs have been vibrantly pictured alongside the martyrs of the eight-year war with Iraq. Ayatollah Khamenei sanctioned them as martyrs of high status: "Iranian scientists were martyred in the way of God ... their martyrdom prepares the ground for the progress of Islam."[134] According to Sādiq Zībākalām, a Tehran University professor

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[134] Leader Visits Families of Assassinated Scientists <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1576/Leader-Visits-Families-of-Assassinated-Scientists>(accessed on 30-06-2017).

and a mostly tolerated outspoken critic of the Islamic Republic's policies, the highlighting of the nuclear martyrs is in line with the state sponsorship of resistance against the Western powers: "The state wants to glorify those heroic struggles against the western powers to show that we have been through much trouble and misery, and we did not give in."[135]

Much like the early Islam after the period of Muslim conquests, the state-sponsored concept of martyrdom was expanded to include non-violent ways of dying following the Iran-Iraq war; many sorts of passive, non-war related cases of martyrdom have been celebrated by state leaders. Examples include martyrs of the press (*shuhadā-ye aṣḥāb-i risānih*), such as the casualties of the crash of a military transport aircraft of the Iranian Air Force on December 6, 2005, in which 39 journalists from state-run media outlets lost their lives en route to cover the news of a series of military exercises in south Iran. The journalists' death was widely described in the state media as martyrdom. Another more recent case of much-publicized claim of martyrdom occurred during the Plasco building incident in Tehran on January 19, 2017, where 16 firefighters died while trying to control a fire that eventually caused the collapse of the building. The immediate reaction to the loss of the firefighters was that they were martyrs. Ayatollah Khamenei praised the firefighters and officially called them 'martyrs:' "In one way this incident is tragic, yet

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[135] Bullet-riddled cars and lush gardens: Iran's memorial to its 'nuclear martyrs' <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/02/iran-memorial-museum-nuclear-martyrs.> (accessed on 30-06-2017).

in another way, it is a source of pride and those individuals are the martyrs of the path

of difficult services and hazardous responsibilities and they will never be forgotten,

God willing."[136] This expanded understanding of martyrdom was best delineated by

Khamenei as he pushed the country to make development in every possible way

following the destructive war with Iraq. In a public speech, Khamenei tried to present

a more inclusive definition of martyrdom suitable for peace periods.

> The culture of martyrdom means the culture of making efforts with one's own resources for the sake of furthering those long-term goals which are shared by all people. Of course, in our case, these goals are not particular to the people of Iran. Rather, these are goals for the entire world of Islam and the entire humanity. If this culture is firmly established in society, it will become the exact opposite of western individualism which is based on selfishness.[137]

Ayatollah Khamenei's effort to encourage his people to work harder at every level

with the religious language of martyrdom more than anything else shows how the

deeply-religious Iranian society is obsessed with the concept of martyrdom so that

values of the society need to be explained in this way. For a Shī'ite nation that

constantly lives with the vibrant and always-fresh memories of the martyrs of Karbalā

and other religious leaders who sacrificed themselves for the glory of the tradition

and the good of the community, martyrdom is synonymous with greatness and good

deeds. Since the end of the war, martyrdom, in essence, has become something like

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[136] Ayatollah Khamenei's Message in Praise of the Firefighters Martyred in the Plasco Incident <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4600/Ayatollah-Khamenei-s-Message-in-Praise-of-the-Firefighters-Martyred.> (accessed on 30-06-2017).

[137] Leader's Speech to Members of Commemoration Congresses for Artist, Students and Education Martyrs <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2018/Leader-s-Speech-to-Members-of-Commemoration-Congresses-for-Artist.> (accessed on 06-07-2017).

the highest medal of honour, a title given to honour outstanding services to the community.

The use of the title of 'martyr' is so widespread in Shīʿite Iran that even secular groups have no objection to using the term. It is part of the spoken vocabulary which does not necessarily connote a dogmatic meaning for non-religious people. It is becoming like another common Islamic expression '*inshā allāh'* (if Allāh wills it) which is now used virtually by everyone in Muslim societies (religious or secular), meaning 'hopefully.' Martyrdom has a very positive connotation; hence, similar to the sectarian martyrdom discussed before, when the ideological *wilāyat-i faqīh*-based Iranian state appropriates the term to describe its heroes, rivals (including adherents of other forms of Twelver Shīʿīsm which do not approve of the *wilāyat-i faqīh*) highlight their own fallen heroes as the real martyrs. The most recent case of such contrasting claims of martyrdom occurred during the civil unrests following the disputed 2009 presidential election. The opposition so-called Green Movement's propaganda and reformist news sites called those protesters who died in the notorious (now closed) Kahrīzak detention centre south of Tehran or during the street protests martyrs of the Green Movement.[138] Of all casualties of the Green Movement, Neda Āqā-Sultān, a 26-year-old philosophy student from Tehran who was shot dead during a street protest, became a symbol of the Green martyrs as the haunting 90-second footage of

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[138] Martyrs of the Green Movement <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/06/martyrs-of-the-green-movement.html> (accessed on 04-07-2017).

her death was uploaded on the Internet and shared extensively on Facebook and Twitter, causing quite a stir.[139] The so-called Green Movement martyrs were perhaps the first cases of so-called martyrdom in recent years that defied the Islamic Republic's definition of martyrdom, namely, dying for the cause of *wilāyat-i faqīh*-based Islam.

In response to the followers of the Green Movement, the pro-government propaganda dismissed the opposition groups' martyrdom claims by comparing them to the murder of the third Sunni Caliph, 'Uthman ibn Affan, in 656, which gave Mu'āwīyah a pretext to launch a revolt against the rule of the reigning Caliph and first Shī'a Imām, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Mu'āwīyah reportedly used 'Uthman's bloody shirt to gain popular support for his mission under the rubric of avenging the blood of 'Uthman from 'Alī and his followers.[140] Accordingly, in 2009, many of the pro-government news websites and weblogs accused the opposition groups of plotting the martyr-like death of Nidā Āqā-Sultān. Similar to what Mu'āwīyah did against 'Alī with his allegedly false accusation regarding the death of 'Uthman, they argued that the foreigners supported layers of the Green Movement by calling Āqā-Sultān and other victims of the unrests martyrs and they intended to hurt "the

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[139] Caspian Makan: 'I cannot believe it yet. I still think I will see Neda again' <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/15/iran-neda-caspian-makan-interview> (accessed on 04-07-2017).

[140] Abū Muhammad 'Abdullāh ibn Muslim ibn Qutaybah, *Al-Imāmat Wa Al-Siyāsah*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwā', 1990), 1: 99.

'Alī of the time" (referring to Ali Khamenei who, to his followers, resembles Imām ʿAlī in many ways).[141]

As for the appropriation of the title of martyrdom after the Iran-Iraq war, a recent trend has been that of love and extreme affection toward the supreme leader (*'ishq bi rahbar*). Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is increasingly called 'Imām Khamenei' by his devout followers (similar to the way Ayatollah Khomeini has been called 'Imām'); and because of his resemblance to Imām ʿAlī, seeking martyrdom for the sake of '*Imām Khamenei*', is now a trend among passionate *Basījīs/Ḥizbullāhis*.[142] It seems that the dynamic of Khomeini-Khamenei for the followers of the *wilāyat-i faqīh* is similar to that of the Prophet and Imām ʿAlī for the Shīʿa. While the Prophet's leadership was indisputable among his people, the Caliphate/Imamate of ʿAlī was disputed and challenged. This caused ʿAlī's reputation in Shīʿī resources as the oppressed (*maẓlūm*) Imām. In a similar way, while the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini was essentially the undisputed leader of the revolution and subsequently the Islamic Republic until his death in 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei had a rough path to assert his authority over the Iranian people with varying tastes of religiosities and political inclinations. Hence, in their inner discussion, ardent devotees of the Ayatollah often blame segments of the Iranian population and some of the state officials and political elites derogatorily called "*khawāṣṣ-i bī baṣīrāṭ*" (ignorant members of the elite) for disrespecting the

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[141] <http://alef.ir/vdciqvazqt1auu2.cbct.html?108066> (accessed on 04-07-2017); <https://goo.gl/Ysx2Hv> (accessed on 04-07-2017)

[142] *Ḥizbullāhi* in today's Iran is now a general term referring to the strict followers and advocates of *wilāyat-i faqīh* and the values of the Islamic Revolution. It is with the term *Basījī.*

walī-i faqīh and making Khamenei oppressed and alone by disregarding his rule and guidance. As a result, perhaps more pronounced than the *Basījīs*' zeal in seeking martyrdom for the love of Khomeini, ultra-devoted followers of Khamenei are entirely ready to sacrifice themselves for him; so chants like "*jānam fadāyi rahbar*" (I will sacrifice my soul for my leader) are routinely heard in government-sponsored political gatherings and demonstrations.

Another popular chant by the devotees of *walī-i faqīh* in support of Khamenei makes a reference to Imām ʿAlī and his loneliness even among his followers in Kūfa: "*Mā ahl-i kūfih nīstīm ʿalī tanhā bimānad*" (We are not like the people of Kūfa to let ʿAlī becomes alone). This allegory aims to convey a menacing message to the deniers and enemies of the *walī-i faqīh*: unlike the people of Kūfa who betrayed Imām ʿAlī (by failing him in his war with Muʿāwīyah) and his sons, namely the Imams Ḥasan (by forcing him into a truce with Muʿāwīyah) and Ḥusayn (by failing to support him in the tragedy of Karbalā), they are eager to sacrifice themselves in support of Ayatollah ʿAlī Khamenei (the ʿAlī of the time, as they call him). A symbolic and extreme way to show their support of the *walī-i faqīh* until their last drop of blood has been to show up in demonstrations and political rallies wearing white burial sheets while chanting "*khuni ki dar rag-i mast, hadiyyih be rahbar-i mast*" (the blood in our vessel is a gift to our leader). This readiness to martyrdom has been already demanded by Ayatollah Khamenei himself years ago in 2000 by implicitly putting himself in Imām Ḥusayn's position. In a speech to a large group of the youth, Khamenei said: "Thanks to the great Islamic revolution, neither America nor any superior power (if emerged) can force on

the Islamic world something like the incident of the Imām Ḥasan's peace treaty. Here if the enemy put too much pressure, the Karbalā incident will be repeated."[143]

The sensitivity towards things that are considered 'principle' has undergone a metamorphosis in the past decades in Iran. It is now actually a common trait in most of the Islamic world as Muslims usually do not forbear from showing their strong resentment or anger towards anything that seems an insult to the Islamic principles. The controversies surrounding Salman Rushdie's novel, or the Danish and French cartoons of the Prophet are among the most famous examples of Muslims' uncompromising attitude towards things that are considered sacred in Islam. In Iran, shaped around the so-called 'principle' of *wilāyat-i faqīh* goes even further because of the added political sensitivity attached to it. For the zealot revolutionaries and younger generations sympathetic to the ideals of Imām Khomeini and the Islamic revolution, any violation of core principles derived from those ideals cannot be tolerated.[144] In these circumstances, possible death would not be a deterrent for the faithful to launch an uncompromising resistance to put an end to the practice of a wrongdoing; and anyone died in this path is a martyr. These martyrs are called 'martyrs of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong' (*shahīd-i 'amr-i bi ma'rūf wa nahy-i az munkar*). The prohibition of wrongdoings can be in its basic form

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[143] Leader's speech in meeting with the youth in the great mosque of Tehran, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3003> (accessed on 04-07-2017).

[144] William Beeman, "Martyrdom, Shi'a Islam, Ta'ziya: Political Symbolism in Shi'a Islam," in *Martyrdom and Sacrifice in Islam: Theological, Political and Social Contexts*, ed. Meir Hatina, and Meir Litvak (London: IB Tauris, 2016), 242.

(that is, going against moral sins) as it was the case with a much-publicized injury incident and later 'martyrdom' of a *Basījī* ('Alī Khalīlī) in 2011 in which he was victim of a knife attack after allegedly trying to prohibit the attackers from publicly listening to un-Islamic music and sexual harassment of two women. His martyrdom caused a significant outrage among religious segments of the society, resulting in the passing of a law in Iran's Islamic Consultative Assembly which made it unlawful to stop someone from performing the duty of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong; and accordingly; an offender would be sentenced to imprisonment or probation without a chance of parole.[145]

As Shī'ite faith and the state politics have become intertwined in Iran through the agency of the *wilāyat-i faqīh*, the application of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong has gone beyond the prohibition of simple moral sins and encompassed the political sphere in the form of the preservation of the system (*hifḍ-i niẓām*). Ayatollah Khomeini set the tone early after the revolution and requested absolute diligence to make sure the system remains in place at any cost: "The question of preserving the Islamic Republic system in this era … is among the most important rational and religious obligations which nothing can hamper."[146] The preservation of the system of the *wilāyat-i faqīh* is such an important religio-political duty that not only military forces of the country protect the frontiers in their capacity as the "*armies*

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[145] <https://crcms.ir/ghanoon/2393> (accessed on 08-07-2017)

[146] Khomeini, 19: 146-61.

of the Hidden Imām," the intelligence ministry's operatives, which anonymously and quietly protect the system are understood as *'sarbāzan-i gumnām-i imam-i zamān'* (nameless soldiers of the Hidden Imām). Hence, exactly like martyrs of the military forces, fallen intelligence operatives are considered martyrs, though in a state of anonymity. The martyrs of the intelligence community are counted by the Islamic Republic leaders among the 'oppressed martyrs' (*shahīdān-i maẓlūm*) due to their anonymous status, which deprives them from having proper public burials like other martyrs;[147] also because, the term 'nameless soldiers of the Hidden Imām' has gained a bad press in the opposition media, often referring to repressive undercover forces responsible for torturing and killing dissidents.[148] Ayatollah Khamenei, in response to the opposition's cynical reference to the intelligence ministry's operatives, described their work as '*mujāhidat-i khāmūsh*' (silent sincere effort), emphasizing the holy qualities required from anyone who is involved in jihad, hence their status as martyrs in case of death on duty: "The silent and sincere efforts on the part of the Ministry of Intelligence requires fighting carnal desires, paying attention to God, and strengthening the sense of abstinence and piety."[149]

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[147] <https://goo.gl/6ZfU6s> (accessed on 08-07-2017)

[148] Hamid Dabashi, *Iran, the Green Movement and the USA: The Fox and the Paradox* (New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2013), 202.

[149] Leader Meets with Officials of Ministry of Intelligence, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/861/Leader-Meets-with-Officials-of-Ministry-of-Intelligence> (accessed on 08-07-2017).

MARTYRDOM OUT OF THE BORDERS: NEW JIHAD FRONTS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

The end of the Iran-Iraq war left the lovers of martyrdom among the *Basīj* and *Ḥizbullāhi* forces heartbroken as it meant there was no further opportunity for getting martyred. The feeling of having missed the caravan of the martyrs has been a common regret of many among war veterans. A much-recited long poem with a very sad and somber tone (performed by the renowned *rawḍa khwān* of the war, Sādiq Āhangarān) best describes this feeling of regret for missing martyrdom. I translated sections of the poem here:

> The light-winged [martyrs] flaunted and passed away; they called me hapless and passed away…. don't close the gates of the garden of martyrdom; [you the martyrs!] don't laugh at us from the other side [heaven]…. martyrdom was heaven's ladder; martyrdom was a ladder for heaven; why they took away that ladder? why they blocked the path to heaven?... you ascended, I'm still on the earth; brother, I'm shamefaced, I'm ashamed; I once had a white horse; martyrdom once was the prospect…. tell me who stole my white horse? who stole my hope?... they prayed for me to remain in prison; they prayed for me to remain astray; I don't have the patience to stay; I don't have the patience for agony.[150]

Even though after the war, martyrdom was not completely out of reach for its seekers (as mentioned above), nothing for them was like rolling in the blood in a true jihad in the path of God. Hence, those desperate for martyrdom looked elsewhere to participate in regional conflicts with Islamic/Shī'a interests to protect. Lebanon had been a point of interest since the early years of the Islamic Republic. After the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon in 1982, Ḥizbullāh (party of Allāh) was formed following

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[150] <https://goo.gl/f3thw4> (accessed on 24/06/2017)

the reorientation of former Lebanese Shīʿa groups under the spiritual leadership of Shaykh Mohammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh (d. 2010) and with the support of Iran. With the formation of Ḥizbullāh, the Shīʿites of Lebanon commenced a vigorous and successful resistance against Israel and the presence of Western forces in Lebanon. Ḥizbullāh started life as a resistance movement against foreign occupiers in Lebanon, but it later tried to champion the Palestinian cause on behalf of Iran. The formation of Ḥizbullāh as Iran's protégé fitted into Ayatollah Khomeini's mission to export the Islamic revolution to other Muslim countries in the Middle East, and it opened up a real opportunity for the Iranian Shīʿa to partake in jihad-like activities outside Iran.[151]

The Israeli invasion happened just after the liberation of Khurramshahr, which was a turning point in the Iran-Iraq War and put Iraq on the defensive for the rest of the war. This led many in Iran's revolutionary Guard to turn their attention to Lebanon as a genuine front for the jihad against the enemies of Islam by sending 1,000 to 3,000 trained revolutionary Guards to fight Israel.[152] However, Ayatollah Khomeini soon opposed the idea of sending Iranian troops to Lebanon by calling it a trap and a Western conspiracy to turn Iran's attention away from Saddam Ḥusayn's invasion so as to let him gain a victory over Iran.[153] Hence the famous chant "the road to

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[151] Marius Deeb, "Shia Movements in Lebanon: Their Formation, Ideology, Social Basis, and Links with Iran and Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1988).

[152] Ibid.

[153] The Syrian government also was not happy with the military presence of Iran in Southern Lebanon as it would undermine the Syrian influence in Lebanon. It is reported that the Iran's withdrawal of most of its troops from Lebanon in part was to satisfy Syria because Iran needed Syrian support in the war

Jerusalem goes through Karbalā" (*Rāh-i quds az karbalā mīgudharad*) became Iran's strategy for the rest of the war. In a speech to the Friday Prayer leaders, Khomeini expands on his thought about focusing mainly on the war with Iraq until a decisive victory: "We want to liberate Quds, but without delivering Iraq from this sinister party, we cannot do it. We consider Lebanon to be part and parcel of us, yet liberation of Iraq is a prelude to the liberation of Lebanon. We should not abandon the preliminary steps and trace the main question, devoting everything to it, while Iraq finds the respite to strengthen its foothold."[154]

Ḥizbullāh's declaration of existence basically came through some 36 suicide attacks (called 'martyrdom operation,' inspired by the tales of the Iranian soldiers' self-sacrifices during the ongoing war), which caused the death of 659 foreign troops between 1981 and 1986.[155] The attacks were effective in forcing the US and French troops out of Beirut. With the same strategy, Ḥizbullāh succeeded in forcing Israel to finally withdraw its troops from Southern Lebanon in 2000.[156] The suicide attacks were supported by the majority of the Lebanon population as defensive measures. Moreover, the suicide attackers were well received as martyrs by the Lebanese Shī'a

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with Iraq. Shireen T Hunter, "Iran and the Spread of Revolutionary Islam," *Third World Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1988).

[154] Khomeini, 16: 343-57.

[155] Pape, 129.

[156] Simon Haddad, "A Comparative Study of Lebanese and Palestinian Perceptions of Suicide Bombings: The Role of Militant Islam and Socio-Economic Status," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 45, no. 5 (2004).

community. The community's support for martyrdom (following the Islamic revolution in Iran) was instrumental in the willingness of would-be suicide bombers to shed their blood for a higher purpose.[157] This particular form of martyrdom, where the attackers blow themselves up to hurt the enemy, mostly diminished among the Shī'a both in Iran and Ḥizbullāh. However, the Sunni Hamas organization appropriated the idea from Ḥizbullāh fighters and has used it extensively since the beginning of the Palestinian Intifada (particularly since the second Intifada in 2000) before Al-Qaeda took the suicide bombing specialist crown in a spectacular fashion through the 9/11 attacks.[158]

Unlike its Sunni version, of all the suicide attacks performed by Lebanese Shī'ī groups, few have targeted civilians because prominent Shī'ite jurists have been reluctant to issue a fatwa regarding the permissibility of killing non-combatant civilians in 'martyrdom operations.' However, most classic Shī'a jurists permitted killing innocent civilians in jihad if the enemy used them as a shield and the victory over the enemy had to be achieved by killing the civilians first.[159] Regarding the issue of the Palestinian resistance against Israel in particular, a few jurists have sanctioned killing Israeli civilians in martyrdom operations with some reservations. In his fatwa,

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[157] Pape, 132.

[158] Haddad.

[159] See for example: Ḥasan ibn Yūsuf Al-Ḥillī, *Tabsirat Al-Muta'allimīn Fī Aḥkām Al-Dīn*, ed. Muhammad Ḥādī Yūsufi Gharawī (Tehran: Chāpp wa Nashr, 1990), 88.; Muhammad Ḥasan al-Najafī, *Jawāhir Al-Kalām*, ed. 'Abbās Quchānī, 43 vols., vol. 21 (Beirut: Dār 'ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1983), 70.; Muhammad Muṣṭafā Al-Zaḥilī and Aḥmad Mu'az Al-Khātīb, *Al-'Amaliyyāt Al-"Istishhādīyah Fī Al-Mīzān Al-Fiqhī* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), 89.

the Iranian Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Fāḍel Lankarānī (1931-2007), for instance, implicitly permitted killing Israeli citizens through martyrdom operations. His reasoning was that Palestinians were defending themselves: "The issue of Palestine is an issue of defence, and self-defence and the defence of the essence of Islam by any means are permissible [even through killing civilians if needed]." [160] He later expanded on his reasoning by saying that: "If a thief tries to rob your home, you will fight with him even if he brings his wife and children... In fact, the Israeli occupiers have martyred Palestinian children on their mothers' laps and destroyed their homes... But based on the Islamic thought, it is necessary that Palestinian fighters [*mujāhids*] perform jihad and fight with the Israeli army and civilians who support the Zionists."[161] Nevertheless, when it comes to fighting the hostile Sunni Salafīsts, the Shī'a jurists generally prohibit killing innocent civilians by martyrdom operations.

With the escalation of sectarian conflicts, especially in the wake of the collapse of Saddam's regime in 2003, however, the Shī'ites (mostly civilians) became the main target of suicide attacks; the victims have been hailed as martyrs. With the beginning of the Syrian civil war and subsequently the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), things changed in the dynamic of martyrdom operations. While the overwhelming majority of martyrdom operations in Iraq and Syria were still conducted by Sunni

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[160] Mashru'iyyat-i 'Amaliyat Esteshhadi az Didgah-i Fuqahaye Mu'aser Shī'ah va Sunni, in *hawzah.net*, https://goo.gl/5Akky9. (accessed on 12/07/2017).

[161] Ibid.

Salafī groups against Shīʻa militias and civilians, in December 2013, Al-Monitor reported that Shīʻa suicide bombings have been on the rise though they avoided targeting civilians as much as possible.[162] This has to do with a fresh opportunity that the Syrian conflict has brought for the devout Shīʻa in the Middle East to achieve martyrdom. A reported saying of Iran's Supreme Leader best explains this new situation for the Shīʻa. According to Al-monitor's interview with a Ḥizbullāh commander, before officially announcing Ḥizbullāh's participation in the Syrian war in 2013, its leader (Ḥasan Naṣrallāh) visited Ayatollah Khamenei in Tehran. Reportedly, Khamenei declared that: "Syria is the second Karbalā. This means that we must sacrifice our lives for this cause, as did Imām Ḥusayn in Karbalā."[163]

Syria has played a significant role in history of Shīʻīsm since ʻAlī assumed the Caliphate and faced his Syrian-based rival Muʻāwīyah. In 680, it was Yazīd, the second Umayyad Caliph, that put Syria at the centre of a big controversy by being responsible for the long-lasting and emotion-packed tragedy of Karbalā that changed history and made martyrdom a cornerstone and defining factor of Shīʻīsm. If one fast-forwards, since 2011, Syria has been in the spotlight, again, becoming a Karbalā-like conflict zone, this time around Ḥusayn's sister: the heroine and messenger of the

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[162] The definition of 'civilian,' though, turned out to be very subjective as the Shīʻa coalition involved in Syria has never conceded killing civilians in their attack against the ISIS and other Salafī militias while the Syrian opposition front believe the otherwise. See this report on December 15, 2016 from Middle East Institute: Civilians Massacred in Aleppo by Iranian Backed Militia. http://www.mei.edu/content/is/civilians-massacred-aleppo-iranian-backed-militia (accessed on 12/07/2017).

[163] http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/suicide-bombing-increase-shiite.html (accessed on 12/07/2017)

martyrs of Karbalā, Sayyida Zaynab, whose shrine is in Damascus. In the recent case, however, the players have changed roles as the Syrian government, affiliated with Alawites (distant cousins of Twelver Shī'ites), is now assuming the position of defending *Ahlul-bayt*. Meanwhile, among the armed opposition groups, or the so-called rebels, there are powerful factions (Salafī jihadists) who consider Shī'īsm and Sufism deviations in Islamic history and their practice of revering their "holy" figures as a severe case of shirk (idolatry).

The Syrian crisis started in 2011 during the so-called Arab Spring and turned violent when the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, refused to recognize the opposition's peaceful demonstration and began to crack down on any resistance to his government. The rest is history. What really caused the brutality and complexity of the Syrian civil conflict, compared with other Arab countries that have experienced popular uprisings since 2011, is that the conflict in Syria has escalated into a full-fledged proxy war involving many countries and various Islamist groups. Each of these has its own regional and ideological interests to protect through the war: Russia, Iran, and Ḥizbullāh are playing as pro-government forces, while the USA, Saudi Arabia (and other Arab Gulf states), Israel, ISIS, *Jabhat Fatḥ al-Shām*, nationalist jihadis, the Free Syrian Army, and Turkey are fighting more or less against Assad's government. [164] The result has been devastating for the people of Syria and

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[164] This duality of pro and anti-government countries and groups is not entirely accurate since their stance on the issue of the Syrian civil war depends on their interests. This means we cannot depict a black and white picture of the two opposing sides. For example, Turkey started with strong anti-

has brought mass destruction to the country with some half a million people having reportedly been killed so far.[165]

The Shīʿa coalition involved in the Syrian war is centred around Iran which has a clear political interest in taking sides with the al-Assad regime. Iran and Syria have been strategic allies since the Islamic revolution (despite having some conflicts of interest regarding Lebanon). Iran needed Syria's support against the Baʿathist regime of Saddam during the war and afterward as a buffer against Israel, as an ally against the US interests in the Middle East, and as a base among the Arab countries for its ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia for regional influence.[166] In return, the Assad family, coming from the minority Alawites, needed Iran's support as a powerful Shīʿa state in the region to maintain its rule over the majority Sunni population in Syria, and to deal with neighboring Sunni countries in the Arab world. And now with the civil war growing from different dimensions, the Syrian government relies more on Iran's support to maintain its grip over the country. Ḥizbullāh's survival also depends on Iran as the militia gains its military equipment from Iran which comes through Syria. Iran in return relies on Ḥizbullāh forces to influence the region without directly

Russian and anti-Assad rhetoric, but now its position against them has become softer because the real factor behind Turkey's involvement in Syria is the issue of the Kurdish groups. Moreover, the US since the Trump administration has had an ambivalence stance regarding Syria's Assad and the Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict.

[165] 'Syrian Observatory says war has killed more than half a million', Reuters, 12 March 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-observatory-says-war-has-killed-more-than-half-a-million-idUSKCN1GO13M, (accessed 30 August 2018).

[166] Saleem A Salih Al-Dulaimi, Mohammad Kamal, and Dalal Mahmoud Elsayed, "The Impact of Sectarian Conflict in Syria on Iran-Gulf Relations," *Asian Social Science* 13, no. 7 (2017).

sending troops overseas. Hence, Iran in its propaganda calls this alliance between Iran, Syria, and Ḥizbullāh the axis of resistance against the US and Israel.[167]

The deep political interests of Iran and Ḥizbullāh in their struggle to keep al-Assad in power in the current Syrian crisis aside, the compelling Shī‘a-specific religious motive for one to walk in the path of jihad in Syria and Iraq is what is relevant to our discussion of martyrdom in Twelver Shī‘īsm: defending the holy sites of the Shī‘a in Syria and Iraq. In summary, fighting the Salafīsts and getting martyred in Syria and Iraq is now all the rage for the lovers of martyrdom among the devout Shī‘a in Iran and elsewhere. By surfing online forums and social media, one can easily see that for those *Basījīs* and *Ḥizbullāhis* who missed the caravan of martyrdom in the eight-year war with Iraq and for their younger counterparts who have not experienced the war, the opportunity for martyrdom in Syria and Iraq is a dream come true. The new martyrs may not be seen by Iranians as oppressed as those martyred in the fight with Iraq; as then Iran had been cornered by an international coalition supporting Saddam's regime, and Iran needed to sacrifice many lives to gain tangible progress in the dynamic of the war. However, in terms of virtue and greatness, the newly crowned martyrs enjoy the same public recognition and respect as the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war.

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[167] Edward Wastnidge, "Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 2 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12275.; Emile El-Hokayem, "Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship," *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2007).

Briefly, the current state of bloody sectarian conflict in Syria and Iraq has its roots in the mayhem following the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that resulted in the collapse of Saddam's regime. The *de-facto* power vacuum in the country coupled with the regional (Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Syria) and world powers' (US and Britain) conflicts of interest helped destabilize the country.[168] The Shīʿa majority population of Iraq after several decades of Sunni rule found themselves at the helm of the country. The new arrangement angered Sunni Islamists; and some discriminatory policies of the Shīʿī government of Nūri al-Māliki (2006-2014) toward Sunnis added to the miseries of the Sunnis and paved the way for violent sectarian tensions.[169] This has resulted in numerous suicide bombing attacks mostly against the Shīʿa population and especially Shīʿī pilgrims to the shrines of the Imams ʿAlī, Ḥusayn, Mūsā al-Kāẓim, Muhammad al-Jawād, ʿAlī al-Hādī, and Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī in Najaf, Karbalā, Baghdad, and Samarra. Regardless of the part that Iran and Iraq's Shīʿī governments have played in the escalation of the recent sectarian violence in post-Saddam Iraq, the whole Shīʿa community in the region has since felt threatened by the rise of Sunni extremists (derogatorily called "*Takfīrīs*" by the Shīʿa community).

The first major sectarian incident happened just three months after the fall of Saddam. Mohammad Bāqir al-Ḥakīm, a top Shia cleric and the leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic revolution in Iraq, was assassinated in Imām ʿAlī's shrine together

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[168] Al-Dulaimi, Kamal, and Elsayed.

[169] Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 60.

with some 84 Shīʻa worshipers on August 29, 2003 by a massive car-bomb explosion allegedly planned by the al-Qaeda of Iraq. Al-Ḥakīm then became arguably the most high-profile 'martyr' in post-war Iraq, on par with the late influential Shīʻa cleric and jurist, Muhammad Bāqir al-Sadr, who had been martyred by Saddam in 1980. Nevertheless, of all attacks against the Shīʻa of Iraq and their revered places, it was the destruction of the holy shrines of Imams ʻAlī al-Hādī and Ḥasan al-ʻAskarī in Samarra by two suicide bombers on February 22, 2006 that sparked widespread hatred among the Shīʻa worldwide towards the so-called Sunni *Takfīrīs*. Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the top Shīʻa jurist residing in Najaf, and Iran's Supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei,[170] condemned the attack yet forbade their followers to launch retaliation attacks against Sunnis.[171] In fact, both Shīʻa and Sunni leading figures called for unity between Sunni and Shīʻa instead of more bloodshed and blamed the Iraq occupiers

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[170] Ayatollah Khamenei in his message on the day of the attack to the Samarra shrine wrote: "I express my condolence over this tragic incident to the holy Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him and his infallible household) and to his holiness Imām of the age - may our souls be sacrificed for his sake - and also to all the Shīʻas throughout the world and to all devoted and vigilant Muslims and the adherents of the holy Prophet's immaculate household (greetings be upon them), and I declare a week of public mourning in the country. I deem it necessary to emphatically ask the mournful people in Iran and Iraq and other parts of the world to strictly avoid any action that is likely to foment conflict and hostility among Muslim brethren. Surely certain hands are at work trying to incite Shīʻa Muslims to attack the mosques and other sites revered by Sunni Muslims. Any action in this direction will help to further the goals of the enemies of Islam and the enemies of Muslim nations and is religiously prohibited." Leader's Message on Desecration of holy ʻAskarīya Shrine in Samarra, https://goo.gl/ZaZqVR . (accessed 16 July 2017).

[171] The US president, and his ambassador in Iraq, and British Foreign secretary along with Iraqi officials were quick to condemn the attack and tried to calm down both sides in fear of a new wave of sectarian conflict and possibly a civil war. In response to the attack, "U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and the top American commander in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, called the bombing a deliberate attempt to foment sectarian strife, and warned it was a critical moment for Iraq". Robert F. Worth, 'Blast destroys shrine in Iraq, setting off sectarian fury', New York Times, 23 February 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/23/world/middleeast/blast-at-shiite-shrine-sets-off-sectarian-fury-in-iraq.html, (accessed 30 August 2018).

(American troops) for failing to provide security in Iraq. Some also called the Samarra attack a US and Israeli conspiracy to ignite the flame of sectarian war in Muslim countries.[172] Thanks principally to Iran, the shrine was restored to its original form with a new shiny golden dome;[173] however, deep down in the minds of devout Shī'ites, the damage had already been done, and it was not something they would forget or forgive. Since then, the anniversary of the attack has been commemorated every year in Iran and Iraq, and mournful followers of the Imams take the attack as an assault on the family of the Prophet. The commemorations painfully remind them of the permanent demolition of the tombs of the Imams al-Ḥasan, al-Sajjād, al-Bāqir, and al-Ṣādiq located in historic Medina's *al-Baqī'* cemetery in 1926 by Saudi Wahhabis, hence their nickname as the "oppressed Imams of *al-Baqī'*" (*al-a'immat maẓlūm al-baqī'*).

As it is always the case when the subject is related to the so-called "infallible Imams," the destruction of the Samarra shrine was an extremely shocking and emotional tragedy for the Shī'ites. Despite the calls for unity and peace, some retaliation attacks against Sunni mosques in Iraq and angry demonstrations around the Shī'a world occurred immediately following the Samarra incident.*[174]* From my

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[172] Dahr Jamail and Arkan Hamed, "In Iraq, Mosque Outrage Also Brings Solidarity," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 25, no. 3 (2006). Muqtada al-Sadr, a leading cleric and (now former) militia in Iraq echoed this unity strategy and blamed the Americans for the attack: "It was not the Sunnis who attacked the shrine of Imām al-Hadi, God's peace be upon him, but rather the occupation [forces] and Ba'athists...God damn them. We should not attack Sunni mosques. I have ordered the al-Mahdī Army to protect both Shi'i and Sunni shrines." .

[173] Lucian Harris, "Conservation: Iran Takes the Lead in Restoration of Samarra Mosque," *The art newspaper* 15, no. 168 (2006).

[174] Worth.

understanding, the Samarra attack was a turning point in the awakening of broader segments of the Shī'a community regarding the grave threat that Sunni extremists (*Takfīrīs*) can pose to their holy sites and the urgent need for sacrifice to ensure that they are kept away from harm and desecration (*hatk-i ḥurmat-i muqaddasāt*). A consequence of the Samarra attack has been a new wave of zealotry, which was reinforced with the escalation of the war in Syria, especially since 2013 with the growing threat of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. There has been a growing number of volunteer martyrdom seekers, organized by Iran, Iraq, and Ḥizbullāh, aiming to protect Shī'a holy shrines in Syria and Iraq from any threat and desecration with a special focus on protecting the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus. They gradually became known as "the shrine defenders" (*mudāfi'an-i ḥaram*).

While Shī'a militia had been involved in the sectarian conflicts to counter the threats of their Sunni counterparts in Iraq and Syria against the Shī'a holy sites, the official formation of the guards of the shrine defenders was revealed in March 2013 after a series of attacks aimed at the graves of some of the respected Shī'a and Sufi figures, including a car explosion outside the Sayyida Zainab's shrine which had wounded several civilians.[175] There was later a more serious incident in which the then al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front successfully demolished the gravesite of Ḥujr ibn 'Adī, a revered Shī'a martyr and companion of the Prophet and Imām 'Alī, on May

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[175] Mariam Karouny, "Shiite Fighters Rally to Defend Damascus Shrine," *Reuters*, March 3, 2013, https://goo.gl/efCrNe. (accessed on 17/07/2017).

2, 2013 in Syria.[176] The footages of the destruction and desecration of his remains were widely shared in Shīʿite circles on social media and, once again, sparked widespread contempt and angry reactions. Those attacks had justified the formation of an organized group of the shrine defenders. Interestingly, on April 30, two days before the attack on Ḥujr ibn ʿAdī's grave, Ḥizbullāh's Ḥasan Naṣrallāh spoke live on television to officially announce Ḥizbullāh's involvement in the Syrian civil war. The reason he gave for this foreign intervention was to defend Lebanese citizens living close to Syria's border in the northeast corner of Lebanon. He then declared that the religious motive that forced Ḥizbullāh to deploy armed forces to Syria was to defend the Shrine of Sayyida Zaynab. He painted a real threat facing the shrine by saying, "[The armed groups] belonged to the *Takfīrīs* school of thought, they sent a clear message and they threatened, even on the Internet. They said that if we enter and control this area [where Zaynab's shrine is located], we will destroy this shrine."[177]

Starting in mid-2013, news of Iran's direct military involvement in Syria broke out when IRGC (Islamic revolutionary Guard Corps) gradually lost some of its commanders and soldiers in Syria and their bodies were returned to Iran hailed as 'martyred shrine defenders'. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Iran had

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[176] Erdbrink, Thomas (6 May 2013). "Iran Warns Syrian Rebels After Report of Shrine Desecration". *New York Times*. (accessed on 16/07/2017).

[177] Zafer Kızılkaya, "Hizbullah's Moral Justification of Its Military Intervention in the Syrian Civil War," *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 2 (2017). Watch full Naṣrallāh's speech with live English translation on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFXbliX3h5w.

conceded only its advisory role for the Syrian army, but with a rising number of martyrs coming from Syria, there was no point in hiding the truth on Iran's actual military presence outside its borders. Despite this, the main combat roles were done by Iran's proxy forces of Ḥizbullāh and other Shīʻa militia. [178] Likewise, among the volunteers sent to fight in Syria were many Afghani refugees.[179] For the Islamic Republic's leaders, losing al-Assad meant *Salafists* would capture Syria, and this not only would endanger the holy sites in Syria but also cause national security problems for Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.[180] Like Ḥizbullāh, Iran's leaders have given sectarian reasons to justify Iran's direct support for the al-Assad regime and aimed to convince Iranian society that they should be proud of those martyred in this conflict. The martyrs officially have been declared heroes as they sacrificed themselves for the holiest cause possible, guarding and protecting the sanctuaries of 'the holy Prophet's family.' Moreover, the Iranian martyrs in Syria and Iraq have been praised in the same way as the legendary martyrs of the eight-year so-called 'holy defence;' as Ayatollah Khamenei put it, the claimed rationale was that if it had not been for their sacrifice

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[178] "Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention", *The Washington Institute*, https://goo.gl/Kn8NX6. (accessed on 18/07/2017).

[179] "Iran Aims to Boost Prestige of Beleaguered Afghan Proxy Force in Syria", *Radio Free Europe*, https://goo.gl/GLYYyp. (accessed on 18/07/2017).

[180] Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy 2015), 8.

and martyrdom, Iran would have fought Salafīsts and the IS in its own cities and in the streets of Tehran.[181]

As mentioned before, the Iranian public directly engaged with the Syrian crisis when the bodies of 'martyred shrine defenders' (in Persian called *shahīdān-i mudāfī'-ī ḥaram*) were returned to the country for the public and televised funeral services. The funeral processions have since attracted large crowds, much like the martyrs of the war with Iraq. The memorials and the buzz around them in the state-run media have worked very effectively as a propaganda tool to justify IRGC's involvement in Syria. Consequently, Qasem Soleimani, Iran's top commander involved in Syria and Iraq, has since enjoyed a superstar and celebrity status and become a national champion for many sections of the Iranian society (particularly after the *de-facto* defeat of ISIS in November 2017).[182] The funerals are also seen as a recruiting platform for martyrdom-ready volunteers to join the so-called 'jihad against the enemies of *Ahlul-bayt.*' While Iran has "geostrategic and ideological" motives and reasons "to protect its ally in Damascus and project power within Syria, Iraq, and across the Middle East," highlighting the religious goals for the military intervention and riding on the wave of public zeal and enthusiasm for sacrificing for the sake of the family of the Prophet have proved to be a winning recipe.[183] The genuine enthusiasm

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[181] 'Leader's speech in the meeting with the families of martyrs of the borders and shrine defenders', Khmenei.ir: http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=36894. (accessed on 18/07/2017).

[182] Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "General Qasem Soleimani: Iran's Rising Star," *BBC Persian* (2015).
[183] Smyth, 1.

for becoming a shrine defender martyr has been very high especially among young *Basījīs* and *Hizbullāhahīs*. Reportedly, there were many Iranian volunteers ready for martyrdom in Syria who registered in mosques and *Basīj* offices throughout the country or online through dedicated recruiting websites. As a result, officials asked those who would like to volunteer for the 'jihad in Syria' to financially support the cause instead.[184]

Ayatollah Khamenei has played a very influential role in promoting the idea of jihad and martyrdom for defending the Shī'ī shrines. He has led the praise for those who put their lives on the line to participate in jihad in Syria. For instance, in a meeting with several families of martyred shrine defenders in October 2016, Khamenei pointed to the "exceptional characteristics" of the new martyrs. First, he praised the "invaluable trait" of the martyrs for their determination to defend the sanctuary of *Ahlul-bayt*, something that he believed should be cultivated inside every believer. He then proudly quoted remarks of a martyr's mother toward Zaynab in a complimentary manner: "I gave my Muhammad Ḥusayn [her son's name] to you, O' Zaynab!" Khamenei then went on to describe the newly-found joy of martyrdom lovers and their impatience to get to Syria for a chance at martyrdom:

> Another trait of them [martyred shrine defenders] is their enthusiasm for martyrdom. After the [eight-year] imposed war [with Iraq], we who were involved in the matter felt that a wide highway had been closed, the road to martyrdom, like closing a door on you! Back then, those lovers of jihad and martyrdom deeply saddened. Your offspring [martyred shrine defenders],

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[184] <http://dnws.ir/67744> (accessed on 18/07/2017); <https://goo.gl/MbfzzV> (accessed on 18/07/2017).

most did not experience that period [immediately after the war]. They also had that enthusiasm for martyrdom so that they left for that. Now too, [the youth] send me letters, of course I won't respond to their letters, they constantly send me letters from all over the country, they beg me as if I should give permission or interfere, [they say to me:] sir, let us go to Syria for jihad. This is eagerness for martyrdom and it is very important. And if in a nation or group there is the power of foregoing life, that nation will not fail.[185]

Much like the Iran-Iraq war period, there have been extensive state-sponsored campaigns for cultivating the culture of martyrdom (particularly among the youth) and depicting the Syrian conflict as a genuine holy jihad. Many television programs such as a TV show called "*mulāzimān-i ḥaram*" (Shrine Companions), which is a documentary program for introducing the martyrs to the public, and other cultural products have been produced and dedicated to the subject of shrine defenders. One interesting case was a video-music, which was broadcast on national television and spread in social media targeting young students. As the text of this song follows, it is dedicated to the teenage son of one of the martyred shrine defenders. The song sends a powerful and epic message, and depicts children who volunteer to console the son (for the loss of his father) by pledging to continue and finish his father's task in defending the shrine and destroying the enemies of *Ahlul-bayt*:

Dedicated to Amir Ḥusayn (son of Martyr Taqī Arghawānī): Since childhood I am the servant of his dignified clan. I am a defender of the holy shrine like Ḥabīb ibn Maẓāhir.[186] With the intention to preserve the sanctum of the shrine. I have risen marching besides the lovers of Imām Ḥusayn. If the sanctity of the shrine is severed; or if the road to Karbalā is barred. I will strike the usurper of Syria and Iraq; such that their existence is annihilated. I have been

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[185] 'Leader's speech in the meeting with the families of martyred shrine defenders, http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=35136. (accessed on 18/07/2017).

[186] Habib ibn Mazahir was one of the most famous companions of Imām Ḥusayn. He was martyred in Karbalā in old age.

summoned to safeguard the Shrine from *Shāh-i najaf* (Imām ʿAlī). With the command of my leader [Ayatollah Khamenei] I am ready to take my life in my own hands. My goal is not just the liberation of Iraq and Syria. Journey is through Aleppo and aim is towards Quds [Jerusalem]. I am not grieved by the separation from my loved ones and my country. With the command of Almighty and absolute conviction of my heart. I have shroud on my body. Escaping from the cage does not require wings, I have wings of LOVE to fly. My lips chant O' Zaynab! My heart is free from fear. I desire nothing but the *zīyārat* (pilgrimage) of Imām Ḥusayn, son of Fāṭimah. Lord forbids that I get separated from this door [of *Ahlul-bayt*]. I don't have an end without serving at this door. Red lines encircling the shrine is with my blood. I am like a lake, my death is same as my calmness. I will go walking from Mashhad of Imām Riḍā to Syria. My restlessness resembles that of the pigeons of the Shrine of Imām Riḍā. [187]

In some ways, one could argue that the martyred shrine defenders brought more sympathy among the religious population in Iran than previous martyrs. The Iran-Iraq war, especially since Iran repelled the Iraqi forces from its territories, drew many concerns. Liberals and like-minded political activists such as the Iran's Freedom Movement (*nihḍat-i āzādī-i īrān*) had issues with the continuation of the war, thinking that it would hurt Iran domestically and internationally. Moreover, ultra traditionalists among the Shīʿa jurists (in Iran and Iraq) fundamentally questioned the legitimacy of waging war in the absence of the Twelfth Imām, as they already had problems with Ayatollah Khomeini's idea of an Islamic revolution and his theory of *wilāyat-i faqīh*. For them, martyrs of the war at best were not comparable with the martyrs of the formative period of Shīʿīsm, and at worst they wasted their lives for political ambitions of the Islamic Republic's leaders.[188] In the case of the martyred

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[187] See the video here:
www.islamicideology.net/view_video.php?viewkey=158969548&page=&viewtype=&category=.

[188] Muhammad Reza Akhgarī, *Wilāyatī-Hāyi Bī Wilāyat* (Tehran: Akhgarī, 1988), 79.; Zia'uddin Ulyanasab and Salman Alavi Nik, *Jaryanshenasi Anjoman Hujjatiyyih* (Tehran: Zulal kuthar, 2008), 175.

shrine defenders, while liberal minds and opposition groups again have negative views on Iran's military adventure in Syria and Iraq, the ruling pro-*wilāyat-i faqīh* faction of the Islamic Republic enjoys the unlikely ally of some usually reluctant ultra traditionalists like Grand Ayatollah Wahīd Khurāsānī (residing in Qum). The point of convergence comes from the ultra traditionalists' firm and uncompromised sectarian beliefs and their abhorrence of Salafīsts and Wahhabis as 'the sworn enemies of the Prophet's family,' hence their support and readiness for 'martyrdom' in the way of defending the shrines from what they count as the ill-intention of the armed Salafīsts in the region.

The question of gaining permission for waging any kind of jihad from proper religious authorities is an important issue in Twelver Shīʿīsm (see chapter three). Otherwise, those who have sacrificed themselves would not be considered 'martyrs.' While Ayatollah Khamenei as the *walī-i faqīh* has legitimized the campaign for defending the shrines in Iraq and Syria and the fight against the Salafīst groups, especially ISIS, followers of other *marjaʿs* (source of emulation) elsewhere also had to get the permission from their respected *marjaʿ* too. Currently, the most prominent jurist outside Iran is the Iraq-based Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a rather quietist *marjaʿ* with minimal involvement in politics. While he has been reluctant to issue a written fatwa for the Iraqi Shīʿites to fight against the Salafīsts in Syria, with the rapid advance of ISIS in Iraq in 2014, Sistani reportedly called for the Iraqis to expel this group from Iraq (though he still did not issue a written fatwa; rather, his representative

announced the Ayatollah's views on the fight with ISIS).[189] It is also reported that

Sistani's son joined a group of volunteers defending the Shrine of Samarra in Iraq.[190]

Before the implicit spoken fatwa by Sistani in legitimizing the fight with ISIS and other

Salafī groups in Iraq, the organizers of the Shrine-Defending campaign were

desperate to depict the legitimacy of the Shī'ite fighters' war with the Salafīsts in Syria

for all Shī'ites in the region. The Popular Committee for the Mobilization to Defend

Sayyida Zaynab (*Lijna al-ta'bi'at al-sha'biyah li-difa' an al-sayyida zaynab*) issued a

statement in December 2013 making an argument that the consent of the *walī-i faqīh*

in Iran is sufficient and binding for all Shī'ites to support the fight with the Salafīsts

and shrine defence:

> It is obvious that the goal of going to Syria is to defend the Shī'ites and the sect
> of [*Ahlul-bayt*] and Islamic shrines and the resistance because the *takfiri*
> groups in Syria have been targeting our sect and our shrines in a clear and
> direct way. We also confirm that our goal is not just restricted to Syria but also
> extends to our presence in Iraq, especially in Najaf. And we are going to defend
> and fight assailants who are coming to fight us, just like the prophet came out
> of Medina to face the *mushrikīn* [idolaters] when he was informed that they
> were heading to Medina to destroy Islam. Thus, this is a defensive war and
> defensive wars do not require permission from anyone… Despite the issue not
> requiring anyone's permission, [the jihad in Syria] has been overseen by a
> legitimate ruler who is the *walī-i faqīh* [Ayatollah Khamenei]…Based on this,
> there is no doubt about the legitimacy of the figures who are abiding by the
> [leadership of absolute] *wilāyat-i faqīh*. There is a dispute that some are
> bringing up, which is that some religious figures are saying: "I do not see any
> interest in going [to war]." Regarding these statements, they do not harm the
> legitimacy of those who go to fight under the emblem of obligatory interest
> [duty to go to war]…and this is something *walī-i faqīh* supports and is

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[189] "Grand Ayatolah Sistani Calls on 'Everyone' in Iraq to Expel Takfīrīs", *ABNA24*, https://goo.gl/TMtd7Y. (accessed on 23/07/2017).

[190] "Grand Ayatollah Sistani's son join volunteers to defend holy shrines against ISIL militants in Iraq", *ABNA24*, https://goo.gl/LYzZzr. (accessed on 23/07/2017).

convinced about. Not seeing the interest [in going] andlabeling going as illegitimate activity are two different matters. The higher religious figures support the leadership of *walī-i faqīh* and acknowledge [his] capability. [This is] why there is no doubt about the legitimacy of going to fight and fighting takfiri groups to defend the Shī'ites of Syria and (Sayyida) Zaynab and also to defend ourselves and our existence in Iraq, because the *Takfīrīs* are targeting the existence of the sect and its followers.[191]

The term 'shrine defenders', as mentioned before, refers to the Shī'ite fighters who are bound to sacrifice themselves for the protection of 'the holy sanctuaries' revered by the Shī'a in the war affected zones in Iraq and Syria; but there is something more than its literal meaning that is hidden in the term. We know that it is the Sayyida Zaynab's Shrine that symbolically matters the most for the shrine defenders.[192] This is evident from the primary chant that shrine defenders have used and is written on their headbands: *Labbayk yā Zaynab* (at your service, O' Zaynab). This chant is also the theme for a few propaganda songs which Ḥizbullāh created to highlight its role in defending the shrines.[193] Moreover, in social media (such as Facebook), "*Labbayk yā Zaynab*" is like a banner for identifying those pages in favour of the shrine defenders. A simple search for this term on Facebook brings many pages created with the title of *Labbayk yā Zaynab.*

Besides the fact that Zaynab's Shrine is at the centre of a vicious civil war and has been under threat from the Salafīst fighters, there is something in the figure of

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[191] Smyth, 15-16.

[192] Ibid., 9.

[193] See for example these YouTube videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUPkvUJ7g50; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuS-bf_FK6g>.

Zaynab and her significance in the Shīʿī concept of martyrdom that has put her shrine at the forefront of the shrine defenders' agenda. First of all, females among the family of the Prophet traditionally draw extreme emotion from devout Shīʿa as they are thought to be the embodiment of the suffering of *Ahlul-bayt*; in particular, Fāṭimat al-Zahrā, the daughter of the Prophet and a highly important figure in Shīʿīsm (known for the Shīʿa as the best woman of the world, as discussed in chapter three), is at the centre of lamentations for the sufferings of the Imams.[194] Zaynab, Fāṭimah's daughter, inherited her mother's nature as the receiver of all the sorrows of *Ahlul-bayt*. She had to suffer from the loss/martyrdom of her grandfather (Muhammad), her father (ʿAlī), her mother (Fāṭimah), her brother (Ḥasan), and above all, the unbearable sorrow and grief of the martyrdom of her brother, Ḥusayn, the last remaining member of 'the People of the Cloak,' along with her children and nephews and other martyrs of Karbalā.[195] Zaynab has become a cornerstone of the concept of martyrdom and the tragedy of Āshūrā in Twelver Shīʿīsm. As Syed Akbar Hyder has written in his extensive study of Zaynab's position in Twelver Shīʿīsm, "Ḥusayn and ʿAbbās are the masculine faces of martyrdom; Zaynab is its feminine face."[196] In Karbalā, Zaynab was at the centre of Ḥusayn's harem, the chief witness of Imām Ḥusayn's ordeal and

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[194] Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*, 16.

[195] The People of the Cloak (*ahlul-kisaʾ*), in accordance with a long and famous tradition, refers to Muhammad, ʿAlī, Fāṭimah, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn.

[196] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95.

martyrdom. A much-recited salutatory prayer to Zaynab (which is part of the liturgy used in pilgrimages to her shrine) best describes the suffering of Zaynab in Karbalā and then as a captive of Yazīd:

> Peace be upon you, O' the representative of the infallible Imām. Peace and Allāh's mercy and blessings be upon you, O' you who were tested through patience against misfortunes, like that of al-Ḥusayn the oppressed. Peace be upon you who are far away from your home. Peace be upon you who were wandered as captive in cities. Peace be upon you when you were bewildered in that ruined place in Syria. Peace be upon you when you were bewildered as you stood by the (severed) body of the master of martyrs and called at your grandfather; the Messenger of Allāh, may Allāh bless him and his family, saying, "O' Muhammad! May the angels in heaven bless you! This is Ḥusayn under the open sky! His turban and his clothes are stripped! His limbs are severed! And your daughters are taken captives! Complaining (about this) is only to Allāh."[197]

Here comes the prominence of another mythical figure in Twelver Shī'īsm: Ḥusayn and Zaynab's half-brother, 'Abbās ibn 'Alī, himself the greatest martyr of Karbalā after Ḥusayn and the standard-bearer of his army. 'Abbās is also the epitome of loyalty as he always put Ḥusayn and Zaynab and their children ahead of himself. Moreover, 'Abbās is a symbol of *ghīrah* (a sense of protectiveness a Muslim man should show towards his female relatives) as in the traditional storytelling of Karbalā, he was the one on whom the women in Ḥusayn's camp, especially Zaynab and the daughters of Ḥusayn, relied for protection and help. 'Abbās was the protector of the harem, and his martyrdom in the afternoon of Āshūrā was felt as the fatal blow to Imām Ḥusayn's camp and the harbinger of misery and captivity for the women of

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[197] *Ziyārat Mufjiʻa of Bībī Zaynab*

Karbalā. ʿAbbās was such a towering figure for the *Ahlul-bayt* in Karbalā that after the martyrdom of ʿAbbās, it is said that people heard Ḥusayn whispering "now my back has broken, and my options are few."[198]

In the above-mentioned salutatory prayer, the faithful recite Zaynab's heartfelt words to ʿAbbās after the day of Āshūrā (while she was captive) which best depict the prominent position of ʿAbbās as the protector of the harem of the *Ahlul-bayt*: "Peace be upon her [Zaynab] who had to ride a saddleless camel and then called on her brother Abul-Faḍl (ʿAbbās), saying, 'O' brother! O' Abal-Faḍl! It was you who helped me ride on a camel when I left Medina.'"[199] Hence, there is a perpetual sense of guilt and shame among devout Shīʿa, similar to that of the *Tawwābūn*, that Zaynab, who had been taken care of with utmost respect by ʿAbbās and other youth of the Prophet's clan (*Banī hāshim*), had to wander from Karbalā to Yazīd's court in Damascus as a prisoner and in pitiful situation since the community of the Shīʿa failed to support the family of the Prophet.

The shrine defenders feel the obligation to undertake the daunting task of filling the shoes of ʿAbbās in protecting the harem of the *Ahlul-bayt*, especially the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, who suffered the most during the course of events since the

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[198] Muwaffaq b. Aḥmad al-Khwārazmī, *Maqtal Al-Ḥusayn (by Al-Khwārazmī)*, 2 vols. (Qum: Anwār al-Ḥudā, 2002), 2:34.

[199] "Ziyārat Mufjiʿa of Bībī Zaynab", *Ziarat.org*, https://www.ziaraat.org/syria/zainab.php, (accessed on 20/07/2017).

day of Āshūrā. Hence, chants like "*Lan tusba Zaynab marratayn*" (Zaynab will not be captive twice), "*kunnā 'Abbāsuki yā Zaynab*" (O Zaynab, we are all your 'Abbās) appear on social media, blogs, and in songs and music videos created by pro-shrine defenders.[200] With all this, it is no coincidence that one of the main Twelver Shī'a militias involved in the defence of Sayyida Zaynab's shrine is named after 'Abbās: *Liwa Abū al-Faḍl al-'Abbās* (al-'Abbās brigade). The brigade was formed in 2012 by predominantly Iraqi Shī'ites' shrine defenders, though it is "organized and supported by the Quds Force, an elite branch of Iran's Islamic revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) led by Major General Qasem Soleimani."[201]

Finally, Zaynab is seen in Twelver Shī'īsm as the second Fāṭimat al-Zahrā.[202] Given the fact that the exact burial place of Fāṭimah is a mystery, the pilgrimage to her daughter (Zaynab)'s shrine as well as the shrine of her descendant Fāṭimat bint Mūsā (daughter of the seventh Imām, Mūsā al-Kāẓim) in Qum would substitute as the pilgrimage to the shrine of Fāṭimah.[203] This adds to the symbolic importance of protecting the Shrine of Zaynab, so martyred shrine defenders see themselves as

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[200] Smyth, 6 and 27.; also see these videos: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUPkvUJ7g50; https://goo.gl/tBLAzu.

[201] "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria," *The Washington Institute*, <https://goo.gl/d2xq97> (accessed on 22/07/2017).

[202] Hyder, 95.

[203] In the popular storytelling of the event of Karbalā, Zaynab is depicted as the spiritual heir of Fāṭimah. A particularly moving scene in Āshūrā lamentations is when Ḥusayn bid farewell to Zaynab before going to the battle for the last time. At the end of the dialogue, Zaynab stopped him to perform Fāṭimah's will by kissing his neck.

those who sacrifice themselves for Fāṭimat al-Zahrā, which is one of the greatest honours in Twelver Shīʿīsm.
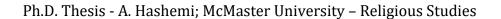
CONCLUSION

The martyrdom paradigm in Twelver Shīʿīsm has long been dominated by the narratives of Karbalā around the heroism of Imām Ḥusayn and some seventy-two (or more) of his ultra-devoted family members and followers who competed with each other to be the first to shed their blood in defence of the last remaining grandson of the Prophet, the son of ʿAlī and Fāṭimah. The tragedy of Karbalā, especially the massive shock of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, was a defining moment for Shīʿīsm and reverberated in the following decades. It fueled several Shīʿite revolts against the Umayyads and later the Abbasid rules, with varying degrees of success and intention, and inspired some celebrated Ḥusayn-like martyrdoms. However, with every Shīʿite revolt during the formative period of Twelver Shīʿīsm came the disappointing reality of defeat and the ever-growing sense of being oppressed and victimised by the fruits of the so-called "unholy coalition" of *saqīfah* that deviated from the path of Islam and deprived Muslims of being led by "the divinely guided Imams." Particularly after the disappearance of the Twelfth Imām, martyrdom became a sad tragedy that should be mourned rather than celebrated. Hence, the dominant narrative of Imām Ḥusayn's martyrdom depicted Ḥusayn's fate a divinely planned scenario that has been part of the creation story since the beginning of time. Ḥusayn was the 'great sacrifice' that was foretold to all prophets, and they all wept for the cruelty that was going to

happen.[204] Āshūrā then was the darkest scene of the history of creation, the climax of oppression, injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity. However, there has been a hope at the end of the creation trajectory; a redeemer from a descendant of Ḥusayn would rise to rescue humanity, fix all wrongdoing, and avenge the blood of the great sacrifice (Ḥusayn). The idea of al-Mahdī's triumphant return at the end of time was the divine promise that made the pain of Ḥusayn's martyrdom bearable.

The Shī'ī discourse on martyrdom changed considerably and particularly since the mid-twentieth century with the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and later, the Iran-Iraq war; Ḥusayn's movement, more and more was read through the revolutionary perspective, and the concept of martyrdom was then transformed into an empowering tool for the Shī'a. The Islamic Republic's leaders understood the importance of cultivating the culture of martyrdom among the youth as it was that culture that helped topple the Shāh's regime and pushed Iraq's forces out of Iran's borders. So martyrs of the revolution and the war were praised as national heroes who sacrificed everything for the sake of the revolution and the Islamic state under the leadership of the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shī'ī understanding of martyrdom developed more with the recent Syrian crisis and the war with ISIS and other Salafī groups in the region. The new martyrs, known as martyred shrine defenders, go beyond national heroes and act as the protectors of the legacy of the

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[204] Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*, 27-37.

Prophet's family. Unlike the martyrs of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war who are known as wronged martyrs (as they were in a fight against superior military powers), the shrine defenders have had the upper hand; they somehow act as the awaited al-Mahdī and what he is supposed to do at the end of the time, which is avenging the blood of Ḥusayn and other wronged martyrs of the Shīʻa. In other words, new martyrs die in the closest circumstances to that of the promised period of al-Mahdī's reappearance and world revolution. The martyrs die for a uniquely global Shīʻī cause to put an end to the age-old assault on the tradition of the Prophet and *Ahlul-bayt* (now represented in the figure of Zaynab). They have al-Mahdī's Shīʻī agenda in mind, united with the tragic memory of Zaynab and Ḥusayn, and march behind their respected 'Imām-like leader' from the descendants of the Prophet called "*āqā*" (master) who acts as the deputy of the Hidden Imām. The following lamentation performed by a large group of the shrine defenders in the presence of the *walī-i faqīh* (and Iran's Supreme Leader), Ayatollah ʻAlī Khamenei, best summarizes the new martyrdom paradigm in Shīʻa Islam:

> Ḥusayn my master. Are you watching the magnificent unity of the followers of Ḥusayn? Are you watching the huge force of the followers of Ḥusayn at Arbaʻīn? We will install the flag of Ḥusayn all over the world. We will finish of the last of the Yazīd [ISIS] from the earth. We will walk on foot while wearing a black suit. That black suit will be our coffin suit. O' Leader Ḥusayni [Ayatollah Khamenei]! We are waiting for your signal. Ḥusayn my master. (Remember everyone who was martyred to guard the shrine of Zaynab). For a moment watch me, watch my lamentation for Ḥusayn. See tears overflowing for Ḥusayn and wetting face, I am your servant. My heart is restless, but I am patient. How many martyred are coming home from Syria. I should also go, let my head be chopped off. I will not allow that bastard [ISIS] to come near the shrine of Zaynab. One day will come my last breath. I am a mother and I love my child.

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But I offer my youth to Lady Zaynab. Please accept my gift so he becomes a defender of your shrine. Ḥusayn my master.[205]

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[205] The full video is accessible at: https://goo.gl/VEZ3Yy.

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CONCLUSION

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This dissertation presents my understanding of the history, development, significance, and conceptual elements of martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm. In order to achieve this goal, I had to widen my perspective to see how martyrdom has been understood and practiced in the broader context of Islam. However, I first wanted to go further and explore what had led the early faithful adherents of Abrahamic traditions to come up with the idea of giving up life, their most precious possession, for a God-related cause. I argued that what in the second century found its expression (martyrdom) did not appear out of the blue; rather, it developed slowly, beginning several centuries earlier, and various factors influenced its formation along the way. So, in light of this, I studied relevant biblical and extra-biblical texts to showcase references to the formation of the concept of martyrdom (or dying for God, in its simplest definition). I argued that the beginning of martyrdom can be understood by looking at how the Hebrews dealt with the troubled relationship they had with God due to their sinful behavior. The calamities which they faced through exile and later persecutions were understood to be the direct result of their

sin; hence, for the Israelites, submission to violent death and destruction seemed the necessary price they had to pay in order to achieve atonement and win back God's trust and support.

Subsequently, I speculated that fear of God and avoiding his wrath and punishment was another rationale, elaborated in late Jewish scriptures, for sticking to God's law even to the point of death. In that sense, the faithful would endure any worldly pain, torture, and punishment by the hands of pagans in order not to violate God's covenant and thereby face his incomparable and unbearable otherworldly punishment. There was also the issue of the promised God's eschatological rewards, which compelled believers like the pious Jews mentioned in the book of Maccabees to choose death over negating God's law in the face of tyrannical rule.

I further pointed out that we see many references to the virtue of dying for God and martyrdom which revolved around the biblical commandment to love the Lord unconditionally. It seems that for Jews and Christians in the early Common Era, the love of God provided a stronger motivation and rationale for martyrdom than the fear of God. In other words, martyrdom could be best described by the martyr's absolute devotion to God and his/her commitment to love him. Hence, as discussed earlier, Clement famously considered martyrdom "the perfect work of love." [1] I also speculated that, quite similar to the love of God's commandment, we can discern the

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[1] Wilson, 146.

impact of the Christian duality of God vs. Satan or the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil on the formation of the concept of martyrdom. In other words, martyrs in this sense were soldiers of God, and eager to shed their blood as one step towards the promised kingdom of God. I argued that Christian martyrdom in its fully developed understanding, more than anything else, had to do with the combination of extreme love of God and the commitment to participate in the cosmic battle between good and bad and the eventual victory of God over Satan. This was the understanding of martyrdom that Muslims inherited from the Judo-Christian traditions. With that in mind, beginning in chapter two, I started my analysis of the effect of Islam, and Twelver Shī'īsm in particular, on our understanding of the concept of martyrdom.

As I have argued, Islam received the already rich tradition of martyrdom from its cousins Christianity and Judaism as its original creators. So, not surprisingly, Islam borrowed the terminology of martyrdom (*shahīd*, meaning witness). The full adoption of the concept of martyrdom did not occur immediately by the advent of Islam. This is evident by the lack of Qur'anic usage of the term *shahīd* in the context of martyrdom or dying for God. It was through the later *ḥadīth* literature that martyrdom in Islam got its own identity and standalone concept. Martyrdom in Islam started from where Christian martyrdom left off—that is, the Christian martyrs' conviction of being soldiers of God and their belief that their blood was proof for the eventual victory of God over Satan and the establishment of his kingdom. Though Muslims, by virtue of

having a warrior prophet, saw martyrdom as a by-product of their efforts (*jihad*) for the immediate establishment of God's rule on earth in the form of an Islamic state led by their Prophet and his successors. This meant that in the beginning, martyrdom in Islam did not get the inherent virtue and theological significance as was the case for Christian martyrdom in its latest development. I argued that this is perhaps another reason why the Qur'an did not incorporate the terminology of martyrdom and instead focused almost solely on jihad in the path of God. For the same reason, martyrdom in Islam, in its original form, had to be advertised. So, the Qur'an and more so the early ḥadīth literature devoted a lot of attention to elaborate details of the rewards of martyrs and those slain in the path of God, often with vivid references to sexual pleasures, so that the pain and suffering of possible martyrdom would not deter the early Muslims from joining jihad for the sake of God's religion and law.

Martyrdom in Sunni Islam was primarily contextualized in dying in jihad. Therefore, with the decline of early Muslim conquests there were fewer opportunities for martyrdom on the battlefield. This led to the development of a spiritual kind of martyrdom in *ḥadīth* literature so that the concept of martyrdom remained relevant. In other words, in later ḥadīth collections, we see a much broader definition of martyrdom to encompass almost all sorts of non-violent deaths outside the battlefield occurring to pious Muslims who otherwise would have missed the exceptional other-worldly rewards of martyrdom. We can argue that until the modern period when new jihadist ideologies emerged in response to Western colonialism and,

in recent decades, due to American and European military involvement in the Middle East, martyrdom in the form of violent death in the path of God lost its relevance in the Sunni world.

Martyrdom in the formative period of Twelver Shī'īsm departed from its original Sunni understanding as dying for God in jihad against the enemies of Islam. Particularly after the massacre of Karbalā, it quickly became understood as a sign of protest against the alleged usurpation of the right of the Prophet's family to be the legitimate religious and political authorities. So, it is not wrong to state that martyrdom in Twelver Shī'īsm was gradually shaped to be understood as dying in the path of the Imams; in the sense that since the Imams were thought to be infallible and divinely guided, struggling in their path and dying for their cause would be the true jihad and martyrdom for the sake of God. In other words, true martyrdom is one that occurs in accordance with the teachings and traditions of the Imams as the true heirs of the Prophet.

Martyrdom, in its sectarian form, became and remained the cornerstone of Shī'īsm, revolving around the tragedy of Karbalā and Imām Ḥusayn (master of the martyrs). His martyrdom, thanks to powerful, emotional, and spiritual narration and storytelling, has become a synonym for the ultimate love of God and, particularly in recent decades as I discussed in chapter four, cemented martyrdom in popular Shī'a piety as the love affair of the chosen pious believers. Besides this glorification of martyrdom as a clear sign of absolute devotion to God, the Shī'a identified themselves

with Ḥusayn's martyrdom by constant yearning for his vengeance and internalised deep mourning rituals for his sufferings; something which is still highly relevant and somewhat intensified among the Shīʿa community.

With the shock of Ḥusayn's martyrdom and what that has been seen as the 'shameful' and 'tragic' failure of the Shīʿa community in their defence of the family of the Prophet came the 'eternal' feeling of guilt and sin embedded in the Āshūrā mourning rituals. As started with the *Tawwābūn* (repenters), martyrdom in defence of the way and tradition of the family of the Prophet has had an element of renouncing that 'original sin' of the Shīʿa; it has been counted as a sincere effort to rectify the collective misconduct of the early Shīʿa. This is particularly evident in the modern period following the Islamic revolution in Iran, which reinforced and institutionalized this mentality of being ready for sacrifice and shedding blood if necessary to replace the memory of the historic misconduct and tragic failure of the Shīʿa of Kūfa. For the current leaders of the Shīʿa, particularly in Iran and Ḥizbullāh, cultivation of martyrdom functions as a powerful reminder to others regarding the uncompromising willingness of the awakened Shīʿa to protect the legacy of the Prophet and the Imams (now inherited by the *walī-i faqīh* in the absence of the living Imām) which had been violated in the past due to the neglect of the community.

In the final two chapters, I argued that similar to the way in which the end of the Muslim conquests resulted in widening the definition of martyrdom to include non-violent forms of dying, the occultation of the Twelfth Imām influenced

martyrdom in mainstream Shī'īsm. While the sectarian zeal to keep alive the legacy of the Imams even to the point of martyrdom more or less remained a priority, the *intiẓār* and the waiting for the return of al-Mahdī at the end of time overshadowed the value of actively seeking martyrdom. Martyrdom, for the most part, became history and chrystallized into the sad and tragic martyrdom of Ḥusayn. Hence, numerous traditions emerged in the canonical works, describing those piously waiting for the return of the Hidden Imām (the avenger of the blood of Ḥusayn) as receiving the rewards of up to a thousand martyrs. The Shī'a revival since the mid-twentieth century, especially after the Islamic revolution, resulted in the marriage of Shī'ī messianism and extreme political activism. We witnessed a change of mindset among the Shī'a worldwide. Suddenly, each drop of the martyr's blood brought the return of al-Mahdī one step closer. The Islamic Republic of Iran became the prelude to the foretold world revolution of al-Mahdī and the best alternative to his promised justice rule.

The ruling jurist has been understood by the proponent of the revolution and the Islamic Republic as the religious and political sovereign until the return of al-Mahdī. Therefore, after centuries of confusion following the occultation, the issue of defending the legacy of the Prophet and the Imams became something tangible: there is an Islamic (Shī'ī) state and it is headed by the deputy of the Imām (the ruling jurist), so dying to protect this so-called 'sacred' combination until the appearance of the Hidden Imām has become a new definition of martyrdom. The eight-year Iran-Iraq

war cemented this understanding of martyrdom in the sense of dying as a soldier of the deputy of Imām Mahdī to keep the newly founded Islamic state a reality until finally it will be handed over to its true owner, the Master of Time (al-Mahdī), who will march for the final victory of God vs satanic forces on earth.

Finally, as discussed, the recent sectarian and regional crisis in Iraq and Syria and Iran's decisive involvement in the fight between Shī'ī forces and the revived Sunni-Salafī movement marked a relatively new development for the concept of martyrdom in Shī'īsm. While previous martyrs since the revolution died more or less from defensive measures, the martyred shrine defenders have been involved in offensives to remove the long-lasting military and political threat to the Shī'ī sanctuaries, interests, and belief system posed by Sunni Salafīsts. Apart from the obvious geopolitical reasons that drew the Shī'a coalition into the current conflict, the Shī'a fighters have been obsessed with a reinforced and reinterpreted messianic agenda. Fighting and dying for the protection of the Shī'ī Shrines and sacred monuments in Iraq and Syria symbolize a new era, a kind of transition from the practice of *intiẓār* to pragmatic messianism.

Twelver Shī'īsm has always been understood as an idealistic ideology advocating an authentic Islamic government under a just ruler appointed by God, something that never happened after the Prophet. Even 'Alī's almost four-year caliphate was not ideal as his political authority was constantly challenged and weakened by rival factions. Shī'ī messianism envisioned al-Mahdī as the promised

saviour who will finally turn that idealism into a reality with his world revolution at the end of time, which will make right everything that has gone wrong. So, *intiẓār* and passively waiting for al-Mahdī's return had long been the dominant paradigm in Twelver Shīʿīsm. The Islamic revolution of 1979, under the leadership of the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini, was a turning point, a step in the direction of making that idealism a reality by hastening the return of al-Mahdī through simulating the presence of the Imams. That meant the martyrs of the war with Iraq died in circumstances closest to the martyrs of Karbalā; they held on to their Islamic ideals under the rule of their Imām Ḥusayn-like leader. So, the revolution was, in fact, a call for an active *intiẓār*.

The successful transition from the revolution to the firmly established Islamic Republic (with considerable political power and regional influence) and the full implementation of the theory of *wilāyat-i faqīh* gradually made the waiting for the return of the promised al-Mahdī less necessary as the *walī-i faqīh* practically acquired the same authority and mentality as the infallible Imām. The current ruling jurist, Ayatollah Khamenei, practically assumed the al-Mahdī like position of leading his army in jihad against what he sees as the satanic forces (orchestrated with the United States) that aim to stop the awakened Islamic *Ummah*.[1] I argued that the Iran-led Shīʿa

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[1] See for example Ayatollah Khamenei's speech during an assembly with commanders and personnel of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Army Air Force: Khamenei, A., 'The new U.S. President reveals the true nature of the United States of America', Khmenei.ir, 7 February 2017, http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4625/The-new-U-S-President-reveals-the-true-nature-of-the-United, (accessed 30 August 2018).

coalition's decisive, successful involvement in the sectarian regional conflict in Iraq and Syria (leading to the *de-facto* defeat of ISIS and their fellow Salafī jihadists) symbolizes this turning point. While the Iranian Shīʻa fighters and martyrs of the eight-year war with Iraq exemplified those who fought and martyred alongside Ḥusayn in Karbalā, the Shrine defenders see themselves more like the soldiers of al-Mahdī. [1] They act from the position of power and assume the same kind of responsibility that al-Mahdī is supposed to have with his promised return, that is avenging the blood of Ḥusayn, restoring the legacy of the Prophet and the Imams, and making the wrongs rights. With that said, martyrdom in Twelver Shīʻīsm is now fully understandable in terms of sacrifice for the sake of the already ongoing *de-facto* cosmic battle between the party of God (*Ḥizbullāh*) and the forces of 'Satan'.

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[1] As discussed in chapter four, the Iranian soldiers of the war with Iraq also in their mottos considered themselves as part of the army of al-Mahdī, aiming to avenge the blood of Ḥusayn. However, the circumstances of the war and its ending meant, in reality, they mostly set their eyes on the scene of Karbalā as inspiration for martyrdom in an 'imposed' and 'unjust war.'

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APPENDIX I

IMAMATE AND WILĀYAT IN TWELVER SHĪʿĪSM

In the Qur'an, the word "imām" has different meanings. First, it means 'perfect example' or 'prior:' "Those who pray, 'our Lord…. make us good examples [imams] to those who are aware of You'" (25:74). Moreover, in one verse, it means 'book' or "clear record:" "We keep an account of everything in a clear record [imām]" (36:12). Furthermore, in two instances, 'imām' signifies a 'guide:' "Yet the scripture of Moses was revealed before it as a guide [imām] and a mercy" (46:12). Finally, in one verse, it means a 'road' or a 'highway:' "We took retribution on them; both are still there on the highway [imām], plain for all to see" (15:79). Therefore, similar to the word 'shahīd,' in the Qur'an, the word imām has no particular theological meaning beyond its literal sense. However, we are not left totally empty-handed, as what the Shīʿa perceive about the theological concept of the word imām is seemingly attributed to some of the prophets, including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the imams of their time who guided others according to God's command:[1] "We made all of them Imams, guiding others by our command, and we inspired them to do good works, to keep up the prayer, and to give alms: they were our true worshippers" (21:73). In the case of Abraham, the Qur'an maintains that after he was tested with certain commandments,[2] which he fulfilled, God appointed Abraham as the imām of the people of that time

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[1] However, in the Qur'an the word 'imām' also is used in some cases with a negative connotation as someone who leads people to the Fire (28:41).

[2] According to the Qur'an, the most important test for Abraham was the tale of sacrificing his son Ismail (Ṭabāṭabāī, *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, 1: 268.).

(2:124). Nevertheless, when Abraham was granted the position of imām, he had already been a Prophet. Hence, according to many Shīʿī scholars, this means that imams hold higher ranks than prophets, and so, only a handful of the prophets were imams as well.[3]

In Twelver Shīʿīsm, the system of the Imamate has a very special moral and theological significance. Muhammad-Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāī (1903-1981), one of the greatest contemporary Shīʿī theologians, in his exegesis of the Qurʾan, *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, summarized the Shīʿī reading of the Qurʾanic concept of the Imamate in the following seven points:[4]

1. The Imamate is a divine status, and so, the Imām must be appointed by God directly.[5]
2. The Imām must be infallible; in other words, he must be protected by God from sins and errors. [6]

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[3] *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qurʾan*, 1: 268.

[4] *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qurʾan*, 1: 267-76.

[5] In fact, in every verse which talks about the Imamate and leadership, God attributes the appointment of the Caliph or the Imām exclusively to himself. Even in the case of Moses, when Moses wanted a deputy to help him, he did not appoint his brother, Aaron, but asked God to appoint Aaron (20:29-36): "… give me a helper from my family, my brother Aaron … God said, 'Moses, your request is granted'" (Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, *Imamate (the Vicegerency of the Holy Prophet)*, ed. Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi (Dar es Salaam: Bilal Muslim Mission of Tanzania, 2006), 22-23.)

[6] Ṭabāṭabāī argues that whenever God mentions the concept of the Imamate, immediately it comes with the word 'guidance', and this means that the Imām is one who guides people in all matters. Hence, the Imām himself must be avoided from errors to be able to guide others. In addition, in the case of Abraham when he asked God that whether the position of the Imamate would include his descendants, God answered him: "… my covenant will not include the unjust" (2:124). Ṭabāṭabāī discusses that since "the unjust" covers "everyone who might have done any injustice or sin," based on this verse, the Imām must be infallible in order not to be unjust.

3. As long as people live on earth, a rightful Imām must be alive.[7]

4. It is essential for the Imām to be supported by divine help. [8]

5. People's deeds are not hidden from the Imām. [9]

6. The Imām must have knowledge of all that is needed by the people for their good in this world and the next. [10]

7. No one can surpass the Imām in any virtue or in human excellence.[11]

Besides these theoretical definitions of the concept, in Twelver Shī'īsm, Imamate has practical consequences that are essential to our understanding of martyrdom from the viewpoint of Shī'īsm. The main aspect of Imamate is the idea of succession to the Prophet Muhammad. In Twelver Shī'īsm, the twelve Imams (all descendants of the Prophet) are seen as the only rightful religious and political successors or caliphs

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[7] Ṭabāṭabāī maintains that based on some verses of the Qur'an (21:73; 32:24) the Imām is not like a Prophet who only shows the way to guide people toward God (like giving an address to someone to find a place alone), but the guidance of the Imām entails conveying people to the final destination by the command of God (like accompanying someone to reach his/her destination instead of simply giving an address). Hence, there cannot be "a single moment," without a living Imām, who guides people. In addition, Ṭabāṭabāī argues that the existence of an Imām in every age also can be inferred from a verse of the Qur'an in which God says: "One day we shall call together all human beings with their (respective) Imams" (17:71). He further argues that since "all human beings" from beginning to end will be called with their own Imām, it proves that in every age must be a rightful Imām.

[8] Considering the Imām as a guide toward God, Ṭabāṭabāī argues, proves that he must be a person with "absolute certainty who sees the world of the kingdom" of God. However, this is impossible unless the Imām is divinely guided by God as it is emphasised in the case of Abraham: "In this way we showed Abraham [God's] mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth, so that he might be a firm believer" (6:75).

[9] Ṭabāṭabāī explains when God says "We made all of them Imams, guiding others by our command" (21:73), this means that the subject of guidance of the Imām is the "hearts and the deeds" of people, which are not hidden from the rightful Imām.

[10] Ṭabāṭabāī discusses that the prerequisite of having the ability of guiding the hearts of the people toward God is the knowledge of both ways of "happiness and bliss" as well as "unhappiness and distress."

[11] Ṭabāṭabāī concludes that based on above arguments, the Imām is the most virtuous person in every age. If someone surpasses the alleged Imām, he is actually the rightful Imām.

of the Prophet Muhammad. This succession, besides putting the Imām as the supreme head of the Islamic government, awards him absolute religious authority.[12] Moreover, in Shī'īsm, Imamate is regarded as the highest position in the Muslim community, and so, Muhammad himself was both a prophet and carried out the functions of an imām.[13] Therefore, like the text of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet, the sayings of the Imams are binding on the faithful, word for word.[14] Since after the Prophet, the Imams were the proper authority of Muslims, any action, belief, practice, that is not approved by the imams has little truth to it. The act of martyrdom, for instance, was truly martyrdom only if it happened solely in the service and support of the living Imām (or the Prophet).

The general point in the philosophy of the Imamate, from the dimension of succession to the Prophet is that like Muhammad, the Imams were able to demonstrate the true interpretation of the Qur'anic, hence their title "living Qur'an." Therefore, the Imams resolved differences and showed the true path of Islam in every age, as it should be. In other words, a Shī'a Imām's function was "to distinguish truth from falsity and to protect the religion from being distorted and corrupted by the ignorant and misguided."[15] With the Imām being a trusted authority, the unity of the

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[12] A position which, according to the Shī'a traditions, was the right of 'Alī as the first Imām after the Prophet, but the usurpation of his right by Abū-Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman, the first Sunni Caliphs (632-656), hindered the continuity of "the ideal Islamic authority" after the Prophet. (Nasr, 38.)

[13] Ṭabāṭabāī, *Shī'a*, 186.

[14] Amir-Moezzi, 23.

[15] Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam: Abū Ja'far Ibn Qiba Al-Razi and His Contribution to Imamite Shi'ite Thought* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 8-9.

teachings of the Imams becomes essential. This means that it is believed that whatever each Imām says and acts in his Imamate period are compatible with the teachings of the other Imams, and all are driven from the pure Qur'anic thought. Hence, it does not matter who is the living Imām since every one of the 12 Imams would do the same under a given circumstance. For instance, according to this idea, there was no difference in the personalities of Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī and Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī, the second and the third Imams, respectively, which resulted in two different reactions to the Umayyad Caliphate. If Ḥasan had been the third imām during the reign of Yazīd (680-683), he would have refused to pledge allegiance to Yazīd, too, and thus, he would have suffered martyrdom, like Ḥusayn did. The opposite is also correct, as Ḥusayn actually lived in peace with Muʿāwīyah (661-680), the first Umayyad Caliph, for about 10 years without seeking to revoke the peace treaty between Ḥasan and Muʿāwīyah.[16] Of course, this line of thought, as understood today, was theorized in a long process of the development of the ideology of Twelver Shīʿīsm (perhaps after the period of the Imams).[17]

The second aspect of Imamate is *wilāyah* or the spiritual guidance and absolute guardianship over all Muslims. The *wilāyah* dimension of the theory of the Imamate is the cornerstone of Twelver Shīʿīsm theology. It was said by al-Bāqir, the fifth Imām, that "Islam is built upon five things: *Ṣalat* (prayer), *Zakāt* (alms-giving), Hajj

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[16] Murtiḍā Muṭahharī, *Siyrī Dar Sīrih Aʾimmah Athār* (Tehran: Ṣadrā, 1995), 11-12.

[17] For more discussion on the historical development of the theology of Twelver Shīʿīsm see: Modarressi.

(pilgrimage), *Ṣawm* (fasting), and *Wilāyat.*" In response to the question of which was most important, the Imām said, "*wilāyah* is the most important thing in Islam, because it is the key to all of them and *walī* (the Imām) is the guide to them."[18]

Morphologically, in Arabic, *walī, wilāyah* and their other forms are from the root of *wāv-lām-yā*. In the Qur'an, it appears 124 times as a noun and 112 times as a verb. The main meaning of this word is the state of being something near something else in a way that there is no space between them, and no other thing would separate them. Hence, the word sometimes is used for relations between friends. However, in the Qur'an this word generally indicates being near and having power over something else, or in other words, it is used to imply the state of supremacy, sovereignty or guardianship.[19]

In some verses of the Qur'an, God exclusively calls himself as *walī* in its highest meaning: "... have they taken guardians [*walī*] besides him? [Say,] It is God who is the guardian [*walī*], and he revives the dead, and he has power over all things" (42:9); or "You do not have besides him any guardian [*walī*] or intercessor" (32:4). This kind of *wilāyah* is called *al-wilāyat al-takwīnīyyah* (the authority over creation) by which God manages everything and disposes the creatures. Another kind of *wilāyah* in the Qur'an is called *al-wilāyat al-tashrī'īyyah* (the authority over legislation): "God is the

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18 Al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, *Wasā'il Al-Shi'ah Ilā Tahsil Masā'il Al-Shari'ah*, 1: 13.

19 Muṭahharī 1377/1998, 13-15

Guardian [*walī*] of the faithful: he brings them out of darkness into light" (2:257); or "God is the guardian [*walī*] of the faithful" (3:68). This kind of *wilāyah* concerns the believers' religious affairs, legislation of the law, guidance, advice, help and so on.[20]

In some other verses, God extends the second kind of *wilāyah* to the Prophet Muhammad, who then has the "authority to legislate the laws, call people to it, train the *Ummah* [the community of the believers] accordingly, rule over them and decide in their affairs:"[21] "*The Prophet is more protective towards the believers than they are themselves*" (33:6); or "When God and his Messenger have decided on a matter that concerns them, it is not fitting for any believing man or woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter: whoever disobeys God and his Messenger is far astray" (33:36). However, in one verse, even it is implied that there is no difference between the *wilāyah* of God and the *wilāyah* of the Prophet: "Your guardian (*walī*) is only God, his Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakāt while bowing down" (5:55). In this occasion, the same kind of *wilāyah* which God attributes to himself, without any condition is extended to the Prophet and some others (or, according to the Shī'a, the Imams). To resolve this paradoxical situation and to connect this verse to those which prove *wilāyah* exclusively for God, the Shī'ī scholars

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[20] Ṭabāṭabāī, *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, 6: 12-13.

[21] Ibid.

suggest that the only original *walī* is God, but the Prophet and the Imams are *walī* in its complete meaning too only via God, and they are the signs of God.[22]

The problem here is that in the Qur'an, there is no straightforward verse affirming the Imamate and *wilāyah* of 'Alī as the first Shī'ī Imām, and his eleven successors. However, according to a whole series of sectarian traditions, the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams themselves have reportedly interpreted many of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an[23] as referring to the Imamate of 'Alī and the other Shī'a Imams. For instance, in a ḥadīth narrated from the Prophet through 'Alī, he stated that "one quarter of the Qur'an is about the Imams." Verse 5:55 is the most important verse, interpreted as having confirmed the *wilāyah* of 'Alī. The Shī'as narrate some traditions from the Prophet that emphasise "the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the *zakāt* while bowing down" was revealed to introduce 'Alī, who had done so during his prayer. Therefore, from this verse, the Shī'a sources conclude that the same *wilāyah* that God has over Muslims belongs to the Prophet and then to 'Alī as the first Imām.[24]

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[22] 'Abdullāh Jawādī-Āmulī, *Wilāyat-I-Faqīh*, ed. Muhammad Mihrābī (Qum: Isrā', 2009), 129.

[23] The verses of the Qur'an are divided into the verses with straight forward meaning and the verses which their meaning is not clear.

[24] Ṭabāṭabāī, *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'an*, 6: 8.

There are two other critically important verses (5:3 and 5:67)[25] which are said to have strong connotations to the Imamate and Caliphate of ʿAlī. According to Shīʿīsm, both, without any doubt are connected to the story of *Ghadīr,* which took place in 632 when the Prophet performed his last pilgrimage to Mecca, and in a place that is called *Ghadīr-Khumm* he stopped to inform people the last command from God by appointing ʿAlī as the first Imām and his successor.[26] It is reported that the Prophet said: "Of whomsoever I am lord (*mawlāh*),[27] then ʿAlī is also his lord. O God! Be thou the supporter of whoever supports ʿAlī and the enemy of whoever opposes him."[28]

Although the obligatory obedience to the Imams is the logical consequence of their believed position as *walī*, it is especially mentioned in the Shīʿa traditions. In this

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[25] "Today the disbelievers have lost all hope that you will give up your religion. Do not fear them: fear me. Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed my blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion Islam" (5:3); and "Messenger, proclaim everything that has been sent down to you from your Lord- if you do not, then you will not have communicated his message- and God will protect you from people" (5:67).

[26] However, according to the Sunni's point of view, the story is completely different. They believe not only this event was not related to the succession problem, since among Muslims no one reacted to ʿAlī, as if he had been appointed as the first Caliph by the Prophet (Shaban 1971, 16), but also the story basically is bogus. Asma Afsaruddin, "In Praise of the Caliphs: Re-Creating History from the Manāqib Literature," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no. 3 (1999).

In response, Shi'i scholars claim more than a hundred of the companions of the Prophet and eighty four of Tabi'un (the followers) have recounted this ḥadīth with different chains of transmission (Ṭabāṭabāī, *Shīʿa*, 69.). Abdul-Ḥusayn Amīnī in his comprehensive 20-volume book of al-Ghadīr, Mir-Hamed Ḥusayn in Abaqat-al-Anvar, which was a response to *Tuḥfih-i ithnā ʿasharī* of Shāh-Walīullāh Muḥaddith-Dihlawī, and Murtiḍa ʿAskarī in *Maʿālem-al-Madresateyn* provided lots of references from Sunni books that have attested to the Ghadīr tradition as the Shīʿa believe. In addition, Amīnī in al-Ghadīr collected some quotes from the companions of the Prophet in reaction to ʿAlī, for his designation, after the sermon of *Ghadīr*.

[27] In Arabic version, the word is *mawla* (a person who is *walī*).

[28] Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiʿism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985),15 Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiʿism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

way, the Shīʻa commentators put strong emphasis on this verse: "You who believe, obey God and the Messenger, and those in authority among you" (4:59), and interpret[29] the last part of the verse "as a proof-text for the obligatory obedience to the Imams."[30] This is a big difference between Sunnism and Shīʻīsm in the sense that the latter maintains obedience exclusively to the Prophet as well as the twelve Imams and dismisses other *Sahaba* (the companions of the Prophet) and the Sunni Caliphs.

However, in Shīʻīsm, the belief in the obligatory obedience to the Imams needs two prerequisites, which was mentioned earlier: *ʻiṣmah* (infallibility) and the extraordinary knowledge of the Imams. The sinlessness of the Imams is derived from the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition. According to the Qur'an, "God wishes to keep uncleanness away from you, people of the [Prophet's] House, and to purify you thoroughly" (33:33). Shīʻī scholars generally link this verse to the Imams as the household of the Prophet. In this regard, there is also a famous tradition[31] from the Prophet saying that "I, ʻAlī, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn and nine of the descendants of Ḥusayn are

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[29] In *Uṣūl al Kāfī,* there are many traditions narrated from Muhammad al-Bāqir and Jaʻfar al-Sadiq, the fifth and the sixth Imams, that are used in this issue. An example is: "We are a people whom God has made obligatory to obey... whoever recognizes us is a believer, whoever rejects us is a disbeliever, and whoever neither recognises us nor rejects us is astray." Lucas 2004, 242.

[30] For details of this issue see *Tafsīr al-Mīzān'*s discussion under the verse 4:59.

[31] Another famous ḥadīth from the Prophet says "I verily am leaving with you two precious things, the book of God and my progeny, the Imams of the *Ahlul-bayt* [People of the House]; for as long as you cling to these two, you will never go astray; and truly they will not be parted from each other until they join me at the *hawḍ* [a pool of paradise], identified with *al-Kawthar.*" Jaʻfar Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shiʻi Islam: A Compendium of Imami Beliefs and Practices*, trans. Reza Shah-Kazemi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 103. Based on this tradition, Shiʻi scholars argue that since the Imams "ranged alongside the Qur'an," just like the Qur'an, which is "immune against all types of error, so are the Imams immune from all mental and volitional sin" (Ibid, 112).

pure and sinless."[32] As the logic for considering such a characteristic for the Imām, who guides people toward God, it is said that "if the Imām is not infallible (*maʿṣūm*) he would be liable to err and also deceive others."[33]

The extraordinary knowledge of the Imām is another factor that makes the obligatory obedience logical in the Shīʿa thought.[34] This knowledge is divided into three categories, including general knowledge, "knowledge concerning the externals of the religion (such as the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, principles of jurisprudence, etc.) and esoteric knowledge, which includes the allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an and mystical knowledge."[35] However, it is one of the most controversial issues in the theory of the Imamate among the Shīʿa themselves. The debates on this topic revolve around the limits and sources of the Imām's knowledge; is the Imams' knowledge limitless and does it include that of the unseen (*ʿilm al-ghayb*) "through divine grace", are the Imams "simply virtuous learned men (*ʿulamāʾ al-abrār*)," or is it something between these two extremes?[36]

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[32] Momen, 155.

[33] Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, *Imamate (the Viceregency of the Holy Prophet)*, ed. Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi (Dar es Salaam: Bilāl Muslim Mission of Tanzania, 2006), 20.

[34] It is generally believed by many Shi'i scholars that the living Imām is "the exclusively authoritative source of knowledge in religious matters, and thus, without his guidance no one can keep to the right path." Jafri, 291.

[35] Momen, 155-156.

[36] Modarressi, 11-29

Regarding the source of knowledge, based on different views, the Imām could acquire his knowledge through the following two ways. The first one, which also has the consensus of nearly all the Shīʻa scholars, is the transmission of knowledge during the process of designation (*naṣṣ*)[37] from the Prophet Muhammad (in the case of ʻAlī) or the previous Imām.[38] In other words, the Imams receive their knowledge from God through the Prophet.[39] This knowledge consists of "the Qur'an and its interpretation with the Qur'an being envisaged as a complete and perfect source."[40]

The second way is inspiration (*ilḥām*) from God. It is generally believed that "the Imams possessed a divine blessing that had been bestowed on the family of the Prophet," and thus, they had such an ability to receive clear inspiration from God.[41] However, some scholars have argued that "some lesser form of *waḥy* [revelation]," like that which came to Mary (Qur'an, 3:45) and the mother of Moses (Qur'an, 28:7) also came to the Imams.[42] They discuss that during the revelation, the Imām "hears

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[37] Nass is a key concept in the theory of the Imamate, and it means that "the Imamate is a prerogative bestowed by God upon a chosen person, from the family of the Prophet, who before his death and with the guidance of God, transfers the Imamate to another by an explicit designation." Jafri, 290.

[38] However, there is a disagreement that whether the knowledge miraculously transfers to the next Imām, or he normally learns it from his predecessor. Momen, 157.

[39] Karl-Heinrich Gobel, "Imamate," in *Expectation of the Millennium: Shīʻīsm in History*, ed. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 5.

[40] Tamima Bayhom-Daou, "The Imām's Knowledge and the Quran According to Al-Fadl B. Shādhān Al-Nīsābūrī (D. 260 Ah/874 Ad)," Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 64, no. 2 (2001).

[41] Modarressi, 38.

[42] Momen, 149

but does not see the angel."[43] A notable occurrence of such a revelation is said to occur every year during the night of the decree (*Laylat al-qadr*), during which the imām receives "information concerning the events that will take place during the year between one night of the decree and another, and then the deep meaning (*ma'ānīn*) and the detailed explanation (*tafsīr*) of what the Imām already knows in a 'condensed' form (*mujmal*)."[44]

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[43] Amir-Moezzi, 71

[44] Ibid.