

## **Martyrdom in Shi'a Islam during the Iran-Iraq War**

### **I. Introduction**

Thesis: The use of children to clear mine fields during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) was justified by the Iranian Revolutionary government in terms of the value of martyrdom in Shi'ite tradition. The concept of martyrdom had changed, however, from the time of the martyrdom of Shi'a Islam's fourth imam, Hussein, at Karbala; in the wake of colonial and western domination, martyrdom began to be advocated even for children in school textbooks and in military conscription in order to "restore" society to Islamic principles.

### **II. Martyrdom in Shi'ite Tradition**

Main point of this section: In this section, I will offer the background of martyrdom in the Qur'an and Shi'ite tradition, in order to have a touchstone against which to compare later Shi'ite interpretation in Iran. The seventh-century ummah (the area under Muslim control) is one of my two global regions, so this is where I will describe that in order to set up later comparisons.

#### **A. Martyrdom in the Qur'an**

1. The ultimate witness (*shahadah*)
  - 3:140
2. The promise of eternal life
  - The martyrs live (2:154; 3:168-170)
  - This disproves naysayers who take their death as proof of movement's failure (3:168-70)
  - This also proves that Allah has not abandoned them, but rather rewards those willing to sacrifice all (3:195; 9:111; 22:58-59; 47:4-6)

#### **B. Hussein and the Battle of Karbala**

1. General historical background
  - Disputes over the succession and the origins of the partisans (Shi'i) of Ali
  - Hussein's dispute with the emerging Sunni caliphate
2. The Battle of Karbala
  - Story
  - Symbols
3. The subsequent role of martyrdom in Shi'ite polity and ritual
  - Imamate and occultation
  - The intercessory role of Hussein
  - Muharram rituals

III. Empire, Colonialism, and the Reinterpretation of Martyrdom in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Iran  
Main point of this section: This section begins to discuss my second global region—20<sup>th</sup>-century Iran. I look at the external pressures of the most recent century to trace how these contributed to a redefinition of martyrdom in Shi'ite Iran well before the Iran-Iraq War.

A. Colonialism and Its Impacts

1. Ottoman Empire

- history (*here, you would break this down even further*)
- impact on indigenous traditions (*break down further*)

2. British/French conquest

- history (*break down further*)
- impact on indigenous traditions (*break down further*)

B. A surreptitious empire

1. Iranian “independence”

- rise of Shah
- support from British and Americans

2. Reinterpretations of martyrdom (*break down further*)

- restoring the essence of Islam
- sacrifice of many for the restoration
- comparisons and contrasts to the seventh-century ummah

IV. Martyrdom in the Iranian Revolution and Iran-Iraq War

Main point of this section: In this section, I focus in on the period from 1979–1988, which covers both the Iranian Revolution when Shi'ite clerics wrested control from the American-supported Shah of Iran and instituted a theocracy, and the Iran-Iraq War which consumed most of the next decade (1980–1988). I examine how the concept of martyrdom became such a vaunted cultural ideal that it even was encouraged for children in textbooks and in the practice of the war.

A. Iranian Revolution

1. Promotion of martyrdom during the revolution itself (*break down further*)

2. Subsequent integration of “martyrdom” in service of political consolidation

- extension of concept to many forms of sacrifice
- extension of concept to children
- comparisons and contrasts to the seventh-century ummah

B. Iran-Iraq War

1. Background of War (*break down further*)

2. Need for mass mobilization of entire society (*break down further*)

3. Deployment of children to clear mine fields (*break down further*)

- practice

- integration of martyrdom traditions in propaganda around their conscription and funerals
3. Comparisons and contrasts to the seventh-century ummah(*break down further*)

## V. Conclusion

*In this outline, the comparisons and contrasts between the religious belief/practice in two geographic regions are embedded into several sections of the paper. Another strategy would be to have a section right before the conclusion that covers these comparisons and contrasts.*

A. A weak Pilate is not a depoliticized Pilate

Carter thinks that a depoliticized Pilate implies that Matthew ignores history and blames the Jews unduly, but this is not necessarily true.

1. It's common for the subaltern to imagine a reversal of fortune and write it into their literature of the past (add some examples/analogies)
2. In the colonial encounter, there is not simply Rome and the subaltern; Rome works with the local elites, and they work with Rome, while others conform or rebel depending on the situation.
3. Thus the equation: if Pilate is blamed, the Jews are not or, vice versa, if the Jews are blamed then Rome is not, do not hold. Rome and its allies may both incur blame, but those allies are not "all" the Jewish people.

B. Now that there is no need for a ruthless Pilate acting alone, we can examine the story for evidence of an emasculated Rome

1. Matthew's "weak" presentation of Pilate
  - Can't decide, even while sitting on the judgment seat (27:11-26)
  - The Jewish elites, not Pilate, are the center of agency (if not action; 27:1-2, 12-13, 17-18, 21-24)
  - Pilate relinquished power to determine life and death to the crowd (he saw that he could do nothing; text even makes it sound like he *has* no power; 27:24)
  - His knowledge that the Jewish leaders turn Jesus over because of jealousy (27:18) and his claim to be innocent of Jesus' blood (27:24) point to knowledge of Jesus' innocence rather than intentional manipulation of the crowd
  - He executes the man who is not a danger to Rome and frees the one who is, thus making Rome vulnerable (27:15-23)
  - His wife is right; she's privy to revelation and has a firm conviction, while he has no access to "omens" and waffles (27:19)
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2. Almost all the other Gentiles in Matthew know more than the governor (magi – Matthew 2, centurion – Matthew 8:5-13, Canaanite woman – Matthew 15:21-28)
3. Why we would expect this in a subaltern text
  - Bhabha on the mockery inherent in colonial ambivalence
  - Kim on the anxieties of the subaltern male
  - Biblical precedents and analogies
    - Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2-4
    - King Belshazzar in Daniel 5
    - Haman in Esther
    - "Whore Babylon" (Rome) in Revelation

V. Conclusion