

Martyrdom and Masculinity in Warring Iran

The Karbala Paradigm, the Heroic, and the Personal Dimensions of War

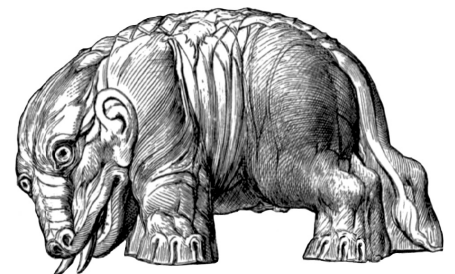
Olmo Gözl

Abstract

During the Islamic Revolution (1978/79) and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) the cult of the martyr in Iran has had a lasting impact on the dynamics of revolution and war. As a powerful mode of boundary construction, the figure of the martyr represented a culturally idealised catalogue of norms and thus contributed crucial elements to the establishment and maintenance of the Islamic Republic's political system. In this article martyrdom is conceptualised as a radicalisation of these modes of boundary construction, and thus as an extreme form of heroism, since the underlying discourses not only determine the sacred centre of the martyr's society, but rather define opposing entities and 'wrong behaviour' in polar terms. Furthermore, I argue that martyrdom is to be determined as a dominant discourse influencing hegemonic masculinity in Iran in the late 70s and 80s. Accordingly, the cult of the martyr is to be understood to affect all aspects of gender relations in warring Iran. In his paper I shall show how the Islamist discourse on martyrdom has been forged and fostered through references to the Karbala narrative of early Islam and its modern reinterpretation as a heroic narrative which distinctively calls for the self-sacrifice of the true believer when facing tyranny and injustice. In effect, via the exaltation of martyrdom as a radicalised mode of boundary construction, everyone's contribution to the war became a personal obligation.

Keywords: Iran, martyrdom, Karbala paradigm, heroic self-sacrifice, Islamic Revolution, Iran-Iraq war, hegemonic masculinity, militarised masculinities

Olmo Gözl is a research fellow at the collaborative research center SFB 948 "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms" at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany. He has a PhD in Islamic and Iranian Studies from the same university. Currently, he works on the dynamics of the heroic in the Iran-Iraq war. **E-Mail:** olmo.goelz@sfb948.uni-freiburg.de



Introduction

We must sacrifice ourselves! This was the central message Ayatollah Khomeini sent from exile in Neauphle-le-Château near Paris to the Iranian people in November 1978. In reference to the teaching example of the martyred grandson of the Prophet and third Imam of Shi'a Islam, Hosayn b. Ali (d. 680), Khomeini stated:

The leader of the Muslims taught us that if a tyrant rules despotically over the Muslims in any age, we must rise up against him and denounce him, however unequal our forces may be, and that if we see the very existence of Islam in danger, we must sacrifice ourselves and be prepared to shed our blood. (Khomeini 1981b, 242)

This statement served as a prelude to some of the largest demonstrations in Iran during the revolutionary process of 1978/79 (Axworthy 2013, 121), as well as the return of the Ayatollah to Iran on February 1, 1979, which in many aspects marked the dramaturgic climax of the Islamic Revolution. In addition, the statement also indicates the completion of a discursive transformation regarding notions of martyrdom in Shi'a Islam. Specifically, Khomeini's speech marks the culmination of a process, which shifted a primarily soteriological understanding of the founding narratives of the Shi'a belief system into an explicit call for action. Accordingly, the pivotal martyrdom of Hosayn b. Ali during the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE is not only presented as an episode of the time-transcending struggle of *good* against *evil*, *righteousness* against *injustice*, or *believers* against *infidels*, it is also exalted to become a sacred act, which obligates the descendants of the early Muslim community to emulate the Imam's example, if not to re-enact his martyrdom in modern times. Thus, Khomeini's call decisively asks the devout Muslim to stand up against tyranny and oppression, just as the "leader of the Muslims taught us" by the example of his own self-sacrifice.

The fact that in the person of Ayatollah Khomeini the leading revolutionary personally praises and advertises the cult of the martyr in Iran, is certainly sufficient to ascertain the significance of martyrdom during the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War, as has been shown by Haggay Ram in his seminal monograph *Myth and Mobilization in Revolutionary Iran* (Ram 1994) and in his essay on the *Mythology of Rage* (Ram 1996) as well as by Saskia Gieling in her study on the sacralisation of the war in Iran (Gieling 1998). However, the topic of martyrdom is also of tremendous theoretical importance beyond the Iranian case because the concept of the (here *male*) martyr connects the individual with his community, its values and virtues, and its sacred centre in a unique way. Through the alleged willingness to suffer and ultimately to die for his belief system, the construction of a martyr demonstrates utter devotion to the community. By the same token, he represents the culturally idealised catalogue of norms in a reciprocal way. Thus, in relation to the modes of the society's boundary construction, the martyr fulfils the same functions as the charismatic hero, who has been identified by the sociologist Bernhard Giesen on the one hand as the "mediator between the

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realm of the sacred and the mundane field of human action” (Giesen 2004, 2), whereas on the other hand “the hero results from the projection of the ideal self that is in the mind of the individual persons who admire the hero” (22). What is more, martyrdom can also be seen as a radicalisation of these modes of boundary construction, and thus as an extreme form of heroism, since the underlying discourses not only determine the sacred centre of the martyr’s society, but rather define opposing entities and ‘wrong behaviour’ in polar terms. Through his alleged preparedness to die for his own belief system while facing the competing system, the martyr defines both, *good* and *evil*, i.e. the own community and the other, respectively. Therefore, the martyr is a heroised figure that creates massive boundaries between two belief systems (Cook 2007, 2) which are almost impossible to overcome.

Transferred to the case of warring Iran, the conceptualisation of martyrdom as an extreme form of heroism had a deep impact on the dynamics of mobilisation during the Iran-Iraq War. Here, I am not referring to the allegedly obvious fact that the lure of the sacred may have mass mobilising effects; I rather state that the central aspect in the propagation of the lessons of the ‘Karbala paradigm’ lies in the affirmation of martyrdom as an idealised configuration of masculinity. In anticipation of the discussion on the gender dimensions of martyrdom in this paper, I comprehend the Ayatollah’s declaration as an appeal to the *ideal man* in particular.[1] Therefore, the ideal man—how he had been conceptualised by Khomeini and other leading intellectuals of the revolution—*has to* seek martyrdom when his community is threatened; he *has to* sacrifice himself and *has to* be prepared to shed his blood. Consequently, I argue that the cult of the martyr in the period of warring Iran from 1978 to 1988 (which extends the Islamic Revolution of 1978/79 to the subsequent Iran-Iraq War from 1980–1988[2]) is seminal to the construction of the Iranian hegemonic masculinity at the time.

In Raewyn Connells understanding, ‘masculinity’ is “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (Connell 2005, 71). By contrast, ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is to be understood as “the culturally idealized form of masculinity in a given historical and social setting”, which is honoured and glorified (Messerschmidt 2005, 198; Cf. Connell 2005; Cf. Connell/Messerschmidt 2005). As will be shown in this paper, in the case of revolutionary Iran seeking martyrdom was propagated by the revolutionaries as part of a protest masculinity that after the revolution claimed hegemonic status. Accordingly, if we determine martyrdom as a dominant discourse influencing hegemonic masculinity in Iran in the late 70s and 80s, the cult of the martyr is to be understood to affect all aspects of gender relations.[3] Thus, in the period investigated here (which expands only on revolution and war so that developments of the post-war period are beyond the scope of this paper), discourses on martyrdom must have had a profound impact on the living, i.e. on the men and women who, at the time, had not yet become martyrs, or never would. As will be shown in this paper, the connection of martyrdom and masculinity had an apparently anachronistic effect on modern warfare: Since the war against Iraq

[1] For Khomeini’s search for the meaning of human perfection see Moin (1994, 64): “Khomeini’s world view is [...] coloured by his mystical vision of the ‘Perfect Man’ and his missionary zeal seems to have been influenced by seeing himself as the ‘Perfector of Man’.” Here, Moin refers to Khomeini’s remarks on the *ensan kamel*, thus, the ideal person. Insofar one might argue that no gendered meaning is transported in the term ‘Perfector of Man’. Although this might be linguistically correct, I’d like to propose a different reading: Khomeini saw himself as the ‘perfector of both genders’, men and women. He repeatedly took an unequivocal stand on the ideal behaviour of the devote Muslim and his or her obligations regarding one’s gender role.

[2] Note: In the Iranian perspective the War against Iraq (1980–1988) is presented as part of the revolution itself. I follow this understanding of the historical processes and define the years from 1978 to 1988 as the revolutionary decade in Iran. Cf. Takeyh (2010, 367): “In the clerical cosmology, the defense of the nation and the propagation of the revolution were seen as part of the same continuum. Again, Iran in this conception was transformed from a mere country into an agent of revolutionary zeal. [...] The Iranian narrative of the war clearly identified Saddam as an aggressor, but suggested that his aggression was on behalf of a larger imperial conspiracy. For Khomeini the most important task was the spread of the Islamic revolution - the downfall of the Shah was the first step in a longer journey.”

[3] See Torab (2007, 139) for a different approach on the gendered aspects of martyrdom. He is interested in “how in various contexts of death and martyrdom, men assert their maleness as procreators and regenerators of life through procreative metaphors, in particular the trope of blood, as a key marker of gender and power. The trope of blood is an alternative to the conceptions of societal regeneration that women promote.”

is presented to the individual as an opportunity to stand up against injustice and tyranny, to seek martyrdom, and consequentially as the only thinkable way to become an *ideal man*, the war itself—seen from the standpoint of the individual—expands to become a form of “personal vengeance of men for their honor”, a phrase that has been coined by Shahin Gerami (2003, 267). Thus, discourses on martyrdom in warring Iran and their impact on notions of masculinity in that context helped to galvanise the people’s commitment to the war, since the invocation of the underlying myth’s gendered aspects alluded to the personal dimensions of war, i.e. to the perceptions of war duties as obligation for the individual beyond discourses on excellent contributions to the service for community. Via the exaltation of martyrdom as a radicalised mode of boundary construction, *everyone’s*—men and women, young and old—contribution to the war became a personal obligation beyond issues of conscription, draft systems, the organisation of the home front, or other technical questions consistently raised in warring societies.

Martyrdom as a Culture: The Karbala Paradigm and the Heroic

Notwithstanding the fact that the conjunction of martyrdom, masculinity and the personal dimensions of war presented here might also be applicable to comparable cases in world history (an important and doubtlessly fruitful comparative perspective could focus on Iraq during the same war [4]), Iran provides a paradigmatic example for determining the corresponding processes. Compared to other historic examples where the call for martyrdom might have been a reaction to the course of war, the cult of the martyr in Iran is unique since it had been formulated and emplaced beforehand. Admittedly, wars are first and foremost fought for interests, in this case the regimes consolidation and survival. However, since the regime itself built its foundation and legitimation significantly on the myth of martyrdom, it is the same myth that had to be kept alive in the formative period of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, although initially imposed by Iraq, the length of the war can also be seen as an effect of the underlying discursive transformations regarding notions of martyrdom—at least after the summer of 1982, when the fortunes of war turned towards Iran, and her regime deliberately decided to prolong the war and later to attack Iraq.

As early as the late 1960s, pre-revolutionary Iran witnessed a radical transformation of a predominantly soteriological understanding of the Shi’a founding myth on the martyred heroes of early Islam towards a perception of martyrdom as the defining element of Iranian culture. Actually, according to Ali Shariati (1933–1977), the leading Islamic intellectual in Iran at the time, martyrdom *became a culture*. In his lecture *Shahadat* (“Martyrdom”) on February 24, 1972,[5] Shariati claims:

Martyrdom, in one word, is not an incident, it is an involvement. It is an imposed death on a hero, it is a tragedy, and in our culture it is life, it is a medal of honor. It is not a means, it is an end. It is genuine and elevating. It is a bridge to new

[4] In her analysis of martyrdom in Iraq, Dina Khoury (2013, 9) states for example: “The war experience and its meaning became the cornerstone of the Iraqi state’s attempts to transform the Iraqi self, particularly the male self. Attempts at shaping the public culture of heroism and manliness and of death and mourning were regulated by incorporating war celebrations with commemoration rituals under the purview of neighborhood party officials.”

[5] The speech *Shahadat* from 5 *Esfand* 1350 [February 24, 1972] is available online as an audio file: <http://www.shariati.com/audio/shahadat.html> (16/04/2019). The English translation used here follows the translation of Manochehr Dorraj.

heights. It is a great responsibility, it is a short-cut to elevate oneself above mankind. And it is a culture. (Shariati 1972, quoted in Dorraj 1997, 513)

Seen in this light, as Manochehr Dorraj states, martyrdom is “a sacred end; it is the most dramatic statement about the power of faith” (512). Similarly, it can be seen as a form of “self-aggrandizement that enables individuals to transcend time and be placed on the highest summit of history” (ibid.). However, these perceptions on martyrdom as a self-elevating force and even a sacred end itself raise questions on the specificity of the Iranian case and how it became possible that in the years that followed Ali Shariati’s lecture in 1972, the cult of the martyr helped to shape Iran’s society on her way to the Islamic Revolution. Moreover, we have to determine how the same cult became seminal in mobilising the people during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. In other words, how could it become possible to build up a perception of martyrdom *as a culture* in modern Iran?

In order to answer this question, we once again turn to the declaration of Ayatollah Khomeini in which he claims “we must sacrifice ourselves”. Khomeini issued his declaration on November 23, 1978, one week before the month of *Muharram* according to the Islamic calendar. He explains:

With the approach of Muharram, we are about to begin the month of epic heroism and self-sacrifice—the month in which blood triumphed over the sword, the month in which truth condemned falsehood for all eternity and branded the mark of disgrace upon the forehead of all oppressors and satanic governments; the month that has taught successive generations throughout history the path of victory over the bayonet; the month that proves the superpowers may be defeated by the word of truth; the month in which the leader of the Muslims taught us how to struggle against all the tyrants of history, showed us how the clenched fists of those who seek freedom, desire independence, and proclaim the truth may triumph over tanks, machine guns, and the armies of Satan, how the word of truth may obliterate falsehood. (Khomeini 1981b, 242)

Here, Ayatollah Khomeini refers to the Battle of Karbala during the month of *Muharram*, 61 AH (680 CE), in the course of which the third Imam of the Shi’a faith, Hosayn b. Ali (626–680), and his entire retinue suffered a crushing defeat and were killed by the superior force of his rival. Stories about the battle focus on the heroic deeds and subsequent martyrdom of each individual member of Hosayn’s retinue, the demonizing depiction of their opponents’ atrocities, and the suffering of the children and women in Hosayn’s circle who are portrayed as innocent victims. By invoking the references to this event of early Islam in his declaration in November 1978, Ayatollah Khomeini made use of the symbolic powers of a phenomenon in Shi’a Islam which has been termed the ‘Karbala paradigm’.

The anthropologist Michael Fischer in his 1983 monograph *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* coined the term ‘Karbala paradigm’ (Fischer 2003, 13ff.). There he noted that the story of Hosayn b. Ali’s martyrdom was

not only a subject and a point of reference for the most emotional sermons delivered in the context of Shi'a Islam, but that, thanks to its detailed account of the historical circumstances, the individuals involved and the political situation, it also has great power in contemporary politics. In particular, the narrative's focus on Hosayn's hopeless but steadfast fight against corrupt and oppressive tyranny and his devoted advocacy for morality and decency offer a latent, reliable projection field for political disobedience in all historical contexts. According to Fischer, the Karbala paradigm's authoritative reference to the battle's heroised protagonists provides Shi'ites with life models and norms of behaviour (21). He contends that the commemoration of the Battle of Karbala must be seen as a paradigm, since the view of history that it conveys claims to provide a self-contained cosmology applicable to all aspects of life. In addition, the contrastive portrayal of the values and norms exemplified in the paradigm serves to differentiate Shi'a Islam from other religious groups. Another factor that should be taken into consideration is that the narrative demands a high emotional investment, (27) both in the daily religious ritual of the individual believer and in moments of collective remembrance and ritualised re-enactment of the drama in annual passion plays during *Muharram*. (Gölz 2018a, 2)

The genesis of Shi'a Islam is rooted in the idea that the charismatic and politico-religious authority possessed by the prophet Muhammad was transferred to his biological descendants after his death in 632 CE (Dabashi 2011, 43f.). The resulting claim to the rightful leadership of the Muslim community (the *ummah*) was thus supposed to pass, in the form of the *Imamate*, to the descendants of Muhammad's daughter Fatima (606–632) and her husband Ali b. Abi Talib (600–661). Yet the political reality in the decades after the Prophet's death diverged from that vision. In Damascus, Muawiya b. Abi Sufyan of the Umayyad family built up considerable power and ultimately took the title of caliph (that is "representative"—in competition with the concept of the imam, who must descend from the Prophet). Rather than on the basis of genealogical descent, he justified his claim to leadership with his services to Islam as well as with the reality of the political and military situation. At the time of the Battle of Karbala, the hopes of the Alid (proto-Shi'a) faction lay with the third imam and grandson of the Prophet, Hosayn b. Ali, who lived in Medina and later in Mecca, whereas in Damascus Yazid b. Muawiya laid claim to the title of caliph after his father's death in 680 CE (Gölz 2018a, 3).

In the Shi'a tradition, the political dispute between Hosayn and Yazid is depicted as follows: In 680 CE, the grandson of the Prophet responded to an appeal from Kufa, a city that had once been a military camp and that served as the nucleus of the Alid resistance to the caliphate in Damascus. Leaving his home in Mecca, Hosayn headed to Kufa with 72 faithful followers and his family to lead the resistance movement there. The army of the caliph Yazid, however, intercepted the group and pushed them north into the desert not far from the Euphrates River. On October 1 (1 *Muharram* 61 AH), Hosayn reached the desert region around Karbala, where he and his followers were cut off from access to water by the caliph's army. However, Hosayn remained steadfast and refused to negotiate an oath of allegiance to Yazid (Halm 1988,

19; Fischer 2003, 19). The story of the ten days until the final confrontation between the adversaries on 10 *Muharram* is part of the cultural memory of Shi'a communities. There are reports of various clashes, attempts to break out in order to get water, failed negotiations and fateful decisions and meetings between prominent individuals on both sides (Gölz 2018a, 4). In the final act of the battle, after the subsequent martyrdoms of almost all male members of his retinue, the Prophet's grandson himself is killed and his body defiled: "The body of Husayn was trampled in the mud and his head was taken to Damascus, where the caliph Yazid is said to have beaten it with a stick in a vain attempt to keep it from reciting the Qur'an." (Fischer 2003, 20)

Accordingly, nearly the entire Alid line (and thus the line of the Prophet) met with death during the Battle of Karbala, with the unwavering Hosayn b. Ali finally undergoing martyrdom in the dramaturgical denouement—the source of his epithet 'Prince of Martyrs' (*sayyed al-shohada*) (Aghaie 2004, 92). The details of this soteriologically infused battle make up the conceptual world of a defining story of suffering that is told in the Shi'a context (Fischer 2003, 19). In this regard, the Karbala paradigm becomes a living reality "believed to have once happened in primeval times (the dawn of Islam), and continuing ever since to influence the Shi'a and its human destinies" (Ram 1996, 70).

Thus, the Battle of Karbala is *the* central historical event to which the collective identities of Shi'a Muslim communities refer (Nakash 1993, 161), and the Karbala paradigm provides a reservoir of model figures presented as ideal types. This includes not only archetypal heroes but also perpetrator and victim types, as well as tragic protagonists and ambiguous figures. Thus, the notion of perceiving the Battle of Karbala as a paradigm is compatible with what the sociologist Bernhard Giesen says about the heroic functions in the construction of collective identity (Giesen 2004, 18). In addition to the ideal type of the victorious hero, he identifies the tragic hero, the perpetrator and the victim as liminal figures of the same kind. This results in a typological field of the heroic in which the various historical individuals are positioned and receive a specific place in memory (Gölz 2018b, 1).^[6]

Accordingly, the Karbala paradigm defines the typological field of the heroic within Shi'a Islam (Gölz 2018a, 2) in which the heroic narrative focuses on the stories of Hosayn and his half-brother Abbas b. Ali (647–680): "[They] are the archetypal heroes and martyrs of the narrative. They are portrayed as brave, noble, and willing to sacrifice everything in the struggle against injustice and oppression" (Halverson et al. 2011, 87). All of the members of the group are honoured as martyrs, but since each act of martyrdom takes place at the hand of an individual opponent, the Karbala paradigm's catalogue of demons is as full as that of its heroes (Gölz 2018a, 5). Nevertheless, Hosayn's martyrdom is described in especially heroic terms.^[7]

In short, the Karbala paradigm operates by means of reference to prominent individuals in early Islamic history, deploying them as ideal types to exemplify *good* and *evil* as well as *justice* and *injustice*. In this way, the battle commemorated in the Karbala paradigm becomes more than a politically formative moment of the Shi'a faith within Islam. It also defines the theological origin of the Shi'a martyr ethos, and it provides members of the denomination with a catalogue

[6] Giesen (2004, 7): „The distinction between the archetypes of victorious heroes and tragic heroes, perpetrators and victims, can be considered as an ideal typological field. The positions of historical persons within this field are not fixed and immutable—triumphant heroes can become tragic ones, heroes can be turned into perpetrators, and victims can, later on, get the sacral aura that before was the mark of heroes.“

[7] The embellishment of Husayn's martyrdom increases in succeeding versions of the story over time. Whereas the death of the "Prince of Martyrs" is simply related in detail by Abū Miḥnaf (d. 774) in his *Kitāb maqālat al-Ḥusayn*, later depictions include symbolic embellishment of the events. See Halverson et al. (2011, 87): "With all the male members of Husayn's party killed, except for his son 'Ali Zayn al-Abidin (who was too ill to fight), he rode out to make his heroic last stand in the climactic event of the master narrative. According to the richly detailed and dramatic account of Kashefi, Husayn wore the turban of the Prophet Muhammad, carried the shield of Hamza, wielded the famous two-pointed sword of his father 'Ali (Dhul-Fiqar), and rode atop the legendary white horse, Dhul-Janah. The horse Dhul-Janah is commonly depicted in Shi'ite iconography, often bloodied and mourning for Husayn. According to tradition, the horse was originally owned by the Prophet Muhammad, but that would make the horse *at least* forty-nine years old by the time of the Battle of Karbala (horses usually live for around twenty years). Amidst the ensuing battle, Husayn faced the entire army alone and killed hundreds of soldiers in one-by-one combat. The treacherous Umayyads finally resorted to dishonorable tactics and stormed him from all sides. After sustaining numerous bloody wounds, Husayn was finally decapitated by Shimr, the commander of Yazid's army."

of heroic norms whose impact is still felt today. In this regard, martyrdom not only theoretically “affirms the time-honored tradition of the community” (Dorraj 1997, 490) as a radical act of boundary work, but it explicitly quotes the founding myth of Shi’a Islam in which the topic of martyrdom itself is discussed and exalted as a commendable way of living—so to say, of staying alive in the collective memory of the community as a result of self-sacrifice. Therefore, the demand for loyalty and the willingness to sacrifice is at the centre of the directives on action exemplified in the Karbala paradigm. The underlying assumption here is that, from the Shi’a Muslims point of view, the events at Karbala were divinely ordained, and that Hosayn b. Ali as an infallible Imam was perfectly aware of his imminent martyrdom. He knowingly and willingly met his death, sacrificing himself on the moral plane of the struggle between justice and injustice (Halverson et al. 2011, 87). Thus he serves both as an example of the willingness to self-sacrifice and as a call to individual courage in the face of immorality and tyranny.

Against this background, Ayatollah Khomeini’s declaration a week before *Muharram* in 1978, “the month of epic heroism and self-sacrifice” (Khomeini 1981b, 242), can be seen as a defining moment. Here, Khomeini precisely defines a set of norms as exemplary, which has a profound effect on the place of masculinities in gender relations: In addition to ostensibly gender-neutral topics defining the ideal behavior of a Muslim in terms of loyalty, moral lifestyle, and devotion, the Karbala paradigm also explicitly covers gender-specific attributes, since “leadership, fighting, and martyrdom are specifically male activities”, whereas the women at Karbala are associated with the act of mourning and are presented as the “supporters of men and children and subservient to the authority of men” (Aghaie 2004, 118). Additionally, the fact that nearly all the men in Hosayn’s entourage met with death at Karbala means that the women in the paradigm are presented as witnesses to the battle and its martyrs. In this context, special significance is ascribed to Zaynab bint Ali (625–682), the sister of the ‘Prince of Martyrs’, who according to the Shi’ite tradition, initiated the mourning observances of weeping, chanting, self-flagellation, reciting martyrdom stories and passion plays after the events of Karbala (Hegland 1995, 66). Thus, Zaynab serves as an example of ideal behaviour for all those who are not allowed to prove their loyalty through self-sacrifice (as is the case for all women) or who do not have the opportunity to do so. According to this interpretation, it is especially the principle of gender segregation itself that is inscribed in the Karbala paradigm and is presented as ideal and morally appropriate. [8] In effect, “men were actors in the story, while women were mostly acted upon. Throughout these narratives, both space and activities were characterized by gender difference or gender segregation” (Aghaie 2004, 118).

Following Khomeini’s argumentation amidst the historical processes of the revolutionary period, while facing tyranny and oppression, the devout Muslim man has the opportunity and the obligation to imitate the example of the glorious hero of Shi’a Islam, the martyred Imam Hosayn b. Ali, *right now*. What is more, in the historical process and during the performative spectacles of the *Muharram* rituals and demonstrations in December 1978, it is

[8] In the historical dynamics leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, for example, one can see how specific symbolic functions were ascribed to early Islamic female figures as oppositional discourses were shaping the Islamisation of Iranian society. On the one side was the state-propagated image of the emancipated woman, which was presented as a symbol of modernity by the Pahlavi regime’s modernising development programme. The opposition responded with the ideal of a woman who vouched for morality and decency, and who, in addition, could take on symbolic value in the struggle against foreign interference—precisely as the representative of the struggle against un-Islamic conceptions of morality. The Karbala paradigm provided the central background for conveying the virtue, piety, and decency of the ‘true’ Iranian woman.

possible to trace the actual practices through which men and women engaged in these idealised forms of masculinity. Here, it is not only of importance that men are the actors of the underlying stories on martyrdom, it must also be noted that Hosayn sacrificed himself for the Prophet's patriline. As Azam Torab rightly observed, the whole Shi'a idea of the *Imamate* is "essentially about the patrilineal descent on which the doctrine is founded" (Torab 2007, 141). Consequently, referring to the yearly recurring *Muharram* rituals, Torab persuasively argues that their significance cannot be reduced to political sideshows for or against the respective government. "Rather, the rituals deliberately cultivate an ideology of masculinity through the imagery of sacrificial blood as the prized source for patrilineal order on which the Shi'a doctrine is founded." (143)

In other words, and in line with the theoretical reflections of Raewyn Connell, the invocation of the Karbala paradigm (and the culture of martyrdom conveyed through it) permeates the hegemonic masculinity in the revolutionary context because it extols self-sacrifice as an ideal form of behaviour. Conversely, it defines the place of masculinities in gender relations because it culturally idealises the patriarchal logic of the founding doctrines and narratives of Shi'a Islam.

However, these observations on the significance of the Karbala paradigm in the revolutionary moment in Iran must be put in context in order to avoid an Orientalist perception of Shi'a Islam, which would present the belief system as a monolithic cultural entity, hermetically sealed off from all aspects of change or progress. The revolutionary power of Shi'a symbolism does not indicate an atemporal understanding of these categories, and thus an essentialist perception of Islam, but can rather signify the opposite. In accordance with the theoretical reflections of the ideal typological field of the heroic, the Karbala paradigm can be seen as a highly flexible cultural reservoir for Shi'ite believers, capable of adaptation to the needs of different periods, eras, and modernity^[9]—as explicitly proven by the emergence of the perceptions of martyrdom as a core concept of Iranian hegemonic masculinity in the late 70s and 80s.

Martyrdom and the Ideal Man: Shifting Paradigms

The flexibility of the cultural reservoir might best be shown by the juxtaposition of the notions of the ideal man in warring Iran in opposition to respective configurations in earlier years. Referring to the war against Iraq, Shahin Gerami rightly observed that martyrdom as a hyper-masculine symbol was a by-product of the war (Gerami 2003, 267). In addition to this, the ethos of the martyr dominantly permeated hegemonic masculinity since those propagated ideas of Iranian collective identity which have specifically been articulated in Islamic terms saw the realisation of an 'Iranian Self' as the modern embodiment of Imam Hosayn (Ram 1996, 76), as will be discussed later. Thus, the emergence and importance of this hyper-masculine by-product can only be determined against the background of the here depicted narrative of the Battle of Karbala. However, the Karbala paradigm by no means automatically calls for action and henceforth the self-sacrifice of the devote believer. On

[9] On the aspects of modernity and martyrdom, see Ram (1996, 82): "Indeed, the fluidity of the Karbala paradigm, shaped and reshaped by the Shi'ite community in response to changing historical circumstances and emerging as a dramatic catalyst for revolutionary action—in stark contrast to past, passive-accommodative Shi'ite practices—illuminates the very modernity of Islamic 'fundamentalism' in Iran and elsewhere, and not its 'archaic' nature."

the contrary, the battle and the messages conveyed in it can also be seen as a relatively adaptable ‘set of symbols’ whose interpretation changes with shifting political trends (Aghaie 2004, 112). Thus, interpretations of the paradigm over time include differing narratives of heroisation and claims to heroism that give insight into the needs of the specific collective identities that have created them—again in accordance with Giesen’s theoretical reflections on the heroic.^[10]

In fact, *there is* a monolithic core meaning of the Karbala paradigm which defines the Shi’ite cosmology: “Indeed, all human history is pictured as a continuous struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of good” (Ram 1996, 70).^[11] Interpretations of what to do with this lesson, however, differ. For many centuries, this did not mean that the invocation of the paradigm in religious discourses asked the pious believer for martyrdom, notwithstanding the fact that the centrepiece of the Battle of Karbala is built up by the exaltation of self-sacrifice. In the decades precluding the transformation of the paradigm into a distinct call for action, the martyrdom of Imam Hosayn was interpreted differently, alluding primarily to the soteriological dimensions of the Battle of Karbala.

In this interpretation, Hosayn b. Ali is depicted as an intercessor who mediates between God and man and who is capable of granting people a place in paradise (Gielsing 1998, 119). According to this perception, the main obligation of the pious believer is to be seen in the participation of commemoration services at *Muharram*—and what is more: in stark contrast to the later revolutionary appeal of the ‘Prince of Martyrs’, the interpretation of his role as an intercessor calls for *obedience* and quietism since his example is transferred to the realms of ordinary life (120). Seen in this light, the Karbala paradigm does not automatically call for political *disobedience*, but can also be used to legitimise rulers and ruling elites. Against this background, the respective narrative “stresses the inappropriateness of active political mobilization in the face of political injustice: it is the role of the *mahdī* and not of ordinary believers to avenge Ḥusayn’s unjust death” (Aghaie 2001, 157). This soteriological understanding of the Karbala paradigm does not conflict with Hosayn’s status as the ultimate hero of Shi’a Islam. His heroism is rather interpreted as a divine, though tragic act, and the example of his failure calls for patience and perseverance. It is not martyrdom that the ideal man has to seek, but the “preservation of Ḥusayn’s message in a purely esoteric sense” (157). Haggay Ram notes accordingly:

Husayn’s heroic conduct notwithstanding, his ultimate defeat continually exemplified to his partisans the futility of immediate and concrete action to overcome their predicament. Disillusioned and, as a result of Husayn’s failure, invariably acted upon by the (Sunni) authorities, the Shi’ite Self became submerged in an all-encompassing passivity, directing its hopes for salvation to the miraculous intervention of the twelfth Hidden Imam—the Mahdi—who would reappear at an indeterminate point in the future to redeem his tormented believers. (Ram 1996, 71)

^[10] Giesen (2004, 18): “Heroes are, in fact, social constructions of particular communities, cultural imaginations of supreme individuality, collective projections of sovereign subjectivity, of the sacred on particular persons and their lives. In constructing the hero, a community overcomes not only profane and mundane contingencies, but also, most importantly, the threat of death. Thus, the construction of heroes creates a social bond that transcends the confines of individual life and the limits of strategic reasoning. For the community of followers, the hero who defies pain and disregards death achieves immortality that was the mark of Gods before.”

^[11] See also Fischer (2003, 19f.): “Husayn’s martyrdom occurred at noon on Friday the tenth of Muharram. The details heighten the significance of Yazid’s tyranny and desecration of the sacred and proper order of life and Islam. Not only had Yazid usurped the caliphate and not only was he using that office tyrannically, but he had attempted to desecrate the hajj, he had desecrated the time of communal prayer (Friday noon), and he had destroyed one by one the elements of civilized life: water, an elementary human need that by the desert code of honor is never refused to thirsty individuals, was denied not only to warrior opponents but to women and children; three sons of Husayn were slain: the infant ‘Ali Asghar, the five-year-old child Ja’far, and the twenty-five-year-old youth, ‘Ali Akbar. Destruction of family, community, government, and humanity are all themes of the Karbala story, retold and relived today in every religious gathering and reaching dramatic and emotional crescendo during the month of Muharram when the events of A.H. 61 are re-enacted, day by day.”

This esoteric reading of the Battle of Karbala—and thus the resulting question of what constitutes the ideal man—dramatically changed due to two major intellectual interventions in the late 60s and early 70s in Iran. First, in 1968 the religious scholar Nematollah Salihi Najafabadi published his revisionist version of the myth, *Shahid-e Javid* (“The Immortal Martyr”), (Salehi Najafabadi 1382 [2004]) in which he reinterpreted the Karbala paradigm in an obviously activist light (Aghaie 2001, 157), and transformed it into a worldly oriented drama (Ram 1996, 73). In his demystification of the paradigm, Salehi Najafabadi viewed Imam Hosayn “plainly as an exemplary hero who combined readiness for self-sacrifice with political wisdom. He thus sought to establish that Imam Husayn’s defeat was far less important than his heroism, which though unique—was nevertheless not above the capacity of ordinary mortals” (Ram 1996, 73).

Second, the transformation of the Twelver Shi’a narrative of the Battle of Karbala into a revolutionary manifesto can again largely be traced back to Ali Shariati (Szanto 2013, 78). It was his works, which distinctively called for an active imitation of Imam Hosayn and his fight against injustice and corrupt tyranny, that endowed the Karbala paradigm with the inherent potential to mobilise the masses. In November 1971, two months before he declared martyrdom to be a culture, Shariati gave his famous speech “On the Responsibility of Being a Shi’ite” (*Masuliyatha-ye shi’eh budan*), in which he enumerated the duties of the ‘true’ Shi’a Muslim: to stand up to and fight against injustice; to protest oppression, exploitation, and despotism; to overcome one’s own ignorance and all of one’s fears in order to ensure, at the cost of one’s own life, that the community is led by an honest and just ruler. In the same speech, Ali Shariati made effective use of the story of the Battle of Karbala, noting that Imam Hosayn, when faced with the superior numbers of his opponent and the hopelessness of the situation, actively decided to sacrifice his life in order to oppose Yazid’s rule, which embodied the reign of evil and injustice. [12] Through such analogies, as well as through his famous revolutionary slogan, “*har mah moharram, har ruz ashura, har jah kerbala*” (“every month is Muharram, every day is Ashura, every place is Karbala”) (Rahnema 1994, 236), Ali Shariati became responsible for the Battle of Karbala’s discursive transformation. This transition “from a religio-historical account, central to mainly soteriological practices, into an ongoing moral and political obligation to revolt against injustice” (Szanto 2013, 78) also portrayed the heroised martyrdoms of Hosayn b. Ali and his followers as models for revolutionary action. Thus, in a radical break with the past, the figure of Hosayn were transformed into a heroic warrior and role model to be emulated in all aspects, be it his commendable attitude towards justice, his steadfastness, or his willingness to sacrifice himself—a willingness certifiable only by martyrdom.

Leading up to the Islamic Revolution, the Karbala paradigm thus became *the* most powerful tool for rousing and mobilising the opposition to Mohammed Reza Shah. Here, the narration of the Battle of Karbala as a symbolic representation of the sacred had not just been presented in texts and images, but had also been enacted in particular social practices while its myth was mimetically

[12] Shariati, Ali: *Masuliyatha-ye shi’eh budan*, 15 Aban 1350 [November 6, 1971]. Shariati’s speech is available online as an audio file: <http://www.shariati.com/audio/shieh.html> (16/04/2019).

reproduced in rituals, as it is required for the affirmation of a typological field of the heroic (Giesen 2004, 10f.). Thus, the *Muharram* rituals gained tremendous importance as stages where the theoretical reflections of Salehi Najafabadi, Shariati and other intellectuals could be translated into practice. This is especially epitomised by the rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini, who did not just ask the ideal man to sacrifice himself in the light of tyranny, but who rather made distinct references to the mimetic reproduction of the underlying myth of the Battle of Karbala during the month of *Muharram*:

Now, with the month of Muharram here like a divine sword in the hands of the soldiers of Islam, our great religious leaders and respected preachers, and all the followers of the Lord of the Martyrs (peace and blessings be upon him), they must make the maximum use of it. Trusting in the power of God, they must tear out the remaining roots of this tree of oppression and treachery, for the month of Muharram is the month in which the forces of Yazid and the stratagems of Satan are defeated. (Khomeini 1981b, 243)

Here, Khomeini rhetorically tore down the walls of history by equating Mohammed Reza Shah with the antagonist of the ‘Prince of Martyrs,’ branding him repeatedly as the ‘Yazid of our time.’^[13] However, in contrast to the Battle of Karbala, it is suggested that if the faction of the faithful stands together, the struggle against tyranny and injustice will not just be a hopeless endeavour but could actually result in victory ‘this time.’ Accordingly, right *after* the events of *Muharram* 1978, when many protesters indeed gave their lives, Khomeini issued another statement in his French exile on January 15, 1979:

It is as if the blood of our martyrs were the continuation of the blood of the martyrs of Karbala, and as if the commemoration of our brothers were the echo of the commemoration of those brave ones who fell at Karbala. Just as their pure blood brought to an end the tyrannical rule of Yazid, the blood of our martyrs has shattered the tyrannical monarchy of the Pahlavis. (Khomeini 1981a, 249)

Thus, the conception of the ideal man who has to sacrifice himself was enforced by the Islamic revolutionary movement and, as Hamid Dabashi suggests, “the enormous arsenal of Shi’i rebellious symbolism was put to effective political use. [...] Shi’ism was in full insurrectionary posture—back in its originary form, substance, essence, and attributes” (Dabashi 2011, 314).

Martyrdom in Warring Iran: The Personal Dimensions of War

The transformation of the Karbala paradigm was also of tremendous value for the new Islamist regime during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), which followed the Islamic revolution. After Iraqi troops marched into southern Iran and occupied large parts of Khuzestan Province on September 22, 1980, the war was presented discursively on the Iranian side as *jang-e tahmili*, the ‘imposed war’, and as *defa’-e moqaddas*, the ‘holy defense’. In this way, the

[13] Beginning in 1963, Ayatollah Khomeini made regular reference to the dualism between Ḥosayn and Yazid and characterised the Shah as the ‘Yazid of our time’. The appeal to the Karbala paradigm and the related dualism between *good* and *evil* is clear, e.g. in a speech marking the anniversary of the riots during the Ashura ceremonies of 1963, in which he says: “That day [Ashura 61] Yazid and his men dugged [sic!] their own graves by their criminal hands and forever registered their own perish and buried their cruel, criminal regime. On the 15th of Khordad, 1342 (June 5, 1963) the Pahlavis and their criminal supporters dug their own graves by the hands of cruel monarchy and left behind their eternal shame and fell on account of which the brave Iranian nation, thanks be to God, with power and victory curses their damned graves.” (Imam Khomeini 2000, 42)

conflict was interpreted, in analogy with the revolution, as a struggle of the oppressed against corrupt and immoral tyranny. Since the Iraqi opponents could be presented by the regime as the henchmen of Western imperialism, the story of the Battle of Karbala provided the perfect foil to “re-create the heroism and the Islamic revolutionary identity of Imam Husayn” (Ram 1996, 76). The prominent members of the regime made use of the paradigm by noting that the war against Iraq was in defense not only of the country, but also of the values for which Hosayn had given his life at Karbala (Wellman 2015, 3; Szanto 2013, 76). Accordingly, the war had been applicated to an Islamist understanding of the Iranian Self, which was to emerge as the modern embodiment of Imam Hosayn and his retinue (Ram 1996, 76).[14]

The fact that Karbala is located in modern-day Iraq added a geographical dimension during the war to what had hitherto been the Karbala paradigm’s purely symbolic function (Gieling 1998, 120). The proximity of the holy site, which is said to be a piece of heaven where angels alighted and never left (Halverson et al. 2011, 86), intensified the paradigm’s efficacy and its potential to mobilise the people. “Time and space barriers were pulled down at last. The Iran-Iraq War was not to be a ‘second Karbala,’—but Karbala itself—the same battle that took place thirteen centuries ago.” (Ram 1994, 80) In this regard, on the one hand the attack by Iraq helped to galvanise the ‘Iranian Self’, which had been treated by the West just like the third Imam had been treated by Yazid. On the other hand, however, the same paradigm also contributed to the personal dimension, specifically the fact that discourses on martyrdom prominently shaped the hegemonic masculinity in warring Iran.

Ultimately, the regime never answered the question whether the events of the Battle of Karbala were supposed to be restaged (or continued) with a victorious end—that is, whether the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors (Cf. Gieling 1998, 100ff.) was actually supposed to be won, or if the appeal to the Karbala paradigm via reference to the proximity of the city’s geographical location was only meant to provide an intrinsic motivation for Shi’a believers. Nevertheless, the discourse commemorating the war dead is unmistakable: participation in the ‘holy defense’ would be *rewarded* with martyr status (Takeyh 2010, 366). Very early on, then, the war itself was presented as an *opportunity* to sacrifice one’s own life for Hosayn’s cause. Thus, the erection of a hegemonic masculinity which idealises martyrdom as a promising way of proving one’s manhood was now juxtaposed with a supposedly unique opportunity: First, every man had the chance to prove his devotion and his masculinity; second, this could allegedly be done in *the* actual Battle of Karbala—and only by becoming a martyr. In this way, the problem of each individual believer’s historical and geographical distance to the events of Karbala was discursively resolved. Each man was now able to take the just path and follow the model of the ‘Prince of Martyrs’.

Certainly, the ‘imposed war’ helped to consolidate the new regime’s policies in all aspects, including the implementation of new modes of gender relations (Afary 2009, 265). However, the war had also clearly been fuelled by the gender-related discourses of the preceding decade in which perceptions of the ideal man centred around notions of activism and which thus made the

[14] Ram (1996, 76): “Repeatedly harassed by ‘the West’, the Islamic government was quick to invoke the Karbala paradigm in its attempt to arouse the public to re-create the heroism and the Islamic revolutionary identity of Imam Husayn. In this collective remembrance of things past as things present, in this extension of the reconstructed ‘sacred history’ into contemporary realities, the Iranian Self was obliged to maintain its battle against the Other, the ‘neo-Yazid(s)’. If the Iranian Self was to reassert and revitalize its identity it was also to persist in its endeavour to take vengeance against ‘the West’ by re-creating the heroism, sacrifice and activist commitment which Imam Husayn had displayed thirteen centuries ago in Karbala. In short, the Iranian Self was to emerge as the modern embodiment of Imam Husayn par excellence.”

war relevant for the personal dimensions of life. In effect, the propaganda of the Islamic Republic could present the war as a gift and an “opportunity to confirm their faith through deed” (Takeyh 2010, 366). Hence, the regime specifically encouraged Iranian men to relive the struggle of Hosayn and to experience martyrdom. Accordingly, the whole country celebrated the cult of the martyr and the memory of the dead who became immortalised in street names and other public places (Afary 2009, 300).[15] In every corner of the country, the martyred warriors were being extolled, and by dint of this extolment, the regime created the impression that the war belonged to the people and pointed to its personal dimension. This also fits very well with Islamic perceptions of *jihad* (Gerami 2005, 452), in which the intrinsic, personal devotion to the cause is an important factor.

Conclusion: The Radicalisation of Boundary Work

In conclusion, the symbolic power of martyrdom over the personal dimensions of war and gender relations might best be described by references to ideal-type images of martyrs in warring Iran. Shahin Gerami describes the typical depiction as follows:

In the visual culture that flourished after the revolution, a new genre appeared devoted to the war efforts and the martyrs. The martyr is a young, unmarried (virgin, innocent) man, fearless and strong. He is depicted with eyes cast forward to jihad and the blessed state of martyrdom. His hair is dark and held back with a bandana with Qur’anic inscriptions. If depicted in full figure, he wears white, the color of a coffin, while holding a gun. Sometimes he is depicted in the foreground, leading a group of women and older male martyrs, or he is depicted in the foreground of fully veiled women and young girls, protecting them and the country’s honor. (Gerami 2003, 267)

This ideal-type image shows that in the discourses on martyrdom, the dimension transported is not an ‘all-male’ one. On the contrary, it has been used to constantly remind women of their obligation to provide for their male relatives and kinsmen. In this regard, the cult of the martyr had disciplining effects on all members of society, urging them to honour the innocent martyrs through their self-restraint. Women in particular were “singled out to honor martyrs’ blood by their adherence to the strictest codes. As official slogans and graffiti everywhere read, ‘My sister, your hijab is your martyrdom’” (268). Here again, the Karbala paradigm provided the central background for conveying the virtue, piety, and decency of the ‘true’ Iranian woman (Aghaie 2004, 114f.). Therefore, whereas the image of the pure martyr lured many men to seek martyrdom and to volunteer for military service, the same discourses also had consequences for women, who had to show their individual commitment by offering their children for the cause. Hence, the greatest contribution of women was to provide martyrs for the war, though Khomeini reminded them that, as women, they were not themselves required to volunteer for death (Afary 2009, 297). Consequently, if we ask for the significance of discourses

[15] See also Razoux (2015, 314): “Meanwhile, the Iranian regime relied on the cult of the martyr. A ‘fountain of blood’ was erected on Tehran’s central square to remind everyone of the sacrifice of the combatants fallen on the front. Streets, squares, and schools were renamed for the martyrs who died heroes’ deaths and whose photos decorated walls. Newspapers overflowed with tales of their sacrifices. The general tone was aimed at making people feel guilty in order to incite as many combatants as possible to emulate the fallen. Iranian television constantly broadcast news pieces showing valiant Iranian fighters posing before the bodies of Iraqi soldiers. Processions of bearded Pasdaran stamped on huge American and Israeli flags draped over the capital’s main avenues. Illustrated booklets narrating the exploits of martyrs fallen at the front were given away in schools and public buildings. The universities were closed and the students enrolled in the armed forces.”

on martyrdom for the gender order, we have to provide a twofold answer: First, since martyrdom dominantly alluded to hegemonic masculinity in Iran, and by the same token women are exempted from becoming martyrs, the sublimated place of men in gender relations is affirmed. Second, because the ideal man is presented as the innocent martyr, the ordinary man—stigmatised due to the fact that he is alive—has to either seek martyrdom, or live his life in self-restraint to honour the role model of the martyred ideal man.

To close, the hypothesis of martyrdom as a radicalisation of boundary work, as presented in this article, is not only evident in relation to the external enemy but also in relation to the structure of society itself. In this regard, the symbolic power of martyrdom has radicalising effects on all layers of meanings and levels of society. It shapes the friend-foe dichotomy, defines *good* and *evil*, and separates *justice* from *injustice*. Consequently, the cult of the martyr, mediated through the narration of the Battle of Karbala and triggered by the fact that Karbala played an actual and geographic role in the war, solidified the boundary between the conflict parties. However, beyond the effects on the friend-foe dichotomy, the cult of the martyr also had radicalising effects on the gender order and on the individual itself: Farhad Khosrokhavar observed that the constant reaffirmation of the discourses on martyrdom produces a deeply pessimistic version of it. In effect, the discourse generates ‘martyropaths’ who are—in contrast to the theoretical and symbolic power of discourses on martyrdom—explicitly *not* interested in the community and who “are no longer concerned with life on earth. To be more accurate, they want to die and to take with them as many as possible of those they see as the enemy” (Khosrokhavar 2005, 49). Here, the notion of the ‘radicalisation of boundary work’ takes on a different significance. Khosrokhavar regards Shi’i radicalisation and its articulation through means of martyrdom as an effect of the war between Iran and Iraq. Thus, he differentiates between the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution and the ‘martyropaths’ who were radicalised through the discourses on martyrdom in the Iran-Iraq War (49f.). In his fundamental statement on radicalisation, he argues:

Martyrdom, just like heroism, means sacrificing one’s life for an ideal that is more important than life. To that extent, martyrdom is no more irrational than other types of devotion and, in the eyes of its actors, the martyr’s demands cannot be described as pathological. Martyropathy is the result of an inversion born of resentment. The goal is no longer to realise an ideal, but to take leave of life by destroying the enemy in an apocalyptic vision that will put an end to life. Acceptance of the logic of martyrdom subordinates the death of both martyr and enemy to the realisation of a goal that will put an end to injustice, establish fairness and bring happiness to the whole world (or community). There is no fascination with death, no luxuriating in death and no quest for happiness in and through death. Martyropathy begins with a change of meaning: a deadly logic takes over from the logic governing the struggle for life and the pursuit of a frustrated ideal. (60)

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