THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# CONSTRUCTING ISLAMIC MODERNITY: POWER, RELIGION, AND MASCULINITY IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

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Dedicated to all those who dream of a better, freer future, and who fight to make it a reality in the present.

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### Notes on Transliteration

The research for this dissertation took place in Persian, Arabic, and Urdu, besides English. The words and concepts I reference span these different linguistic geographies. In my transliteration, I have tried to stay as close and as faithful to colloquial pronunciation as possible to avoid unnecessary confusion. While transliterating Persian, I have followed a simplified version of the *Iranian Studies* transliteration system throughout this dissertation, while for Arabic, I have tried to stay as close to the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* guidelines as possible. To avoid exoticizing words, I have tried to use as few diacritics as possible and I always keep proper names and place names that are known in English written in their most common form.

## Note

In order to protect the security and privacy of my interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms throughout the dissertation, except when referring to publicly-known individuals and figures.

### Introduction

The seeds of this dissertation were planted as I walked down a quiet residential street in central Tehran on a summer day in 2010. Protests had raged across Iran over the preceding year following President Ahmadinejad's disputed victory in the 2009 elections. His opponent, Mir Hossein Mousavi, claimed the vote was rigged – and millions had taken to the streets in the largest protests Iran had seen since the 1979 Revolution. While visiting that spring, I had been inspired by Mousavi's campaign promises of a freer and more socially just Iran and the surge of youthful activism it inspired. I attended jubilant rallies that drew thousands of young Iranians, enjoying the atmosphere of relative social and political freedom that accompanies the lead-up to Iran's presidential elections. Across north Tehran, I joined hundreds who played buoyant Persian pop songs celebrating Mousavi's campaign as they danced and passed out flyers, creating the Iran they wished to see on the capital's streetcorners. It was this same energy that fuelled the protest movement after the elections, with massive rallies under the slogan: "Where is my vote?" After a few weeks of tolerating protests, Iran's authorities began cracking down, putting the leaders of what became known as the Green Movement under house arrest and unleashing paramilitary forces that detained thousands.

A year after the election, activists had called for a protest at *Enqelāb* (Revolution) Square. I had been outside of the country since the 2009 election, but I returned in summer 2010 to take a Persian language course at the University of Tehran. Curious to see if the battered movement could still rally support, I took the subway downtown. On the sidewalks, policemen stood around urging people to keep walking, physically preventing crowds from forming. As the knots of people became tighter, plainclothes Basiji paramilitaries on motorcycles began driving quickly between them, yelling at people not to stand still and pulling away individuals wearing green, the movement's signature color. Sensing that the situation could turn violent, I walked away from the crowds and ended up on a quiet alley. As I slowed my pace, trying to figure out where the closest subway stop was, three men ran past me. Seconds later, I was grabbed from behind, and against my panicked pleas, a man with the telltale look of a Basiji – a plain collared shirt and cropped beard – pushed me into a waiting car that had pulled up out of nowhere, alongside two other men around my age he had just seized off the street. We were driven back up to Revolution Square, where I could see that protestors were taking over the street while Basijis fought them, and we were forced into a small door leading to a mosque courtyard. There, dozens of young men were assembled, some dressed in military fatigues, jeering loudly as we entered. I was blindfolded and handcuffed, and over the next few hours, I was moved from place to place, squeezed between two Basijis on a motorcycle and later piled into a minivan with other detainees. As I was subjected to repeated interrogations, I heard other detainees slapped, beaten, and tased around me, catching glimpses of the scene through strategic glances from beneath a loosely-tied blindfold.

As the minutes of captivity turned to hours, my initial terror turned to edgy boredom and finally curiosity. As I sat on my knees in a room that I had identified as the repurposed basement of an elementary school, the brightly-colored cartoon children with "Welcome!" signs a clear give away, I listened to interrogators question the dozens of detainees sitting on the floor around me. As I heard their questions – the details they refused to believe, those they accepted, the stories that enraged them and those they listened to patiently – I began to wonder who the interrogators really were. When my turn came, I gave the answers I thought could get me released (which were, thankfully, the truth), but as I listened to their questions, I tried to understand what worldview motivated these men to do what they were doing. My interrogators

often asked questions that seemed irrelevant to the topic at hand; at times I could see their genuine curiosity, especially when they realized that the Iranian sitting in front of them was actually an Iranian-American, as well as their attempts to explain their political positions when they felt my answers demonstrated an inadequate understanding of the Iranian government's official ideology. Even through the blindfold, I found my interrogators' idealism unexpectedly familiar; it reminded me of the certainty that I used to have in my adolescence when I briefly flirted with evangelical Christianity. My interrogators' suspicion of US foreign policy was also a view I knew well, as the 2003 US invasion of Iraq – and the violent chaos it unleashed across the Middle East – was central to my own political education.

I feared and hated my interrogators. But I was also fascinated by them.

As the hours in captivity dragged on, I paid closer attention to the detainees around me. Initially, we were afraid and isolated, aware of each others' presence from our guards' barking orders but unable to see or communicate. As I slowly discovered the gaps in my blindfolds from which I could catch glimpses of the detainees around me, I noticed that some of them seemed to have found the gaps as well. I could see them, and they could see me – if only barely. But there was something reassuring about our being able to silently defy our captors and getting a sense of those with whom I was sharing this terrifying experience. Later that night, we were all gathered and stuffed into a small minivan. Around 25 detainees, still blindfolded and handcuffed, were pushed into 10 seats. With each seat piled two or three men high, some of the detainees began making jokes, teasing our captors for not having secured an extra minivan, mocking their incompetence in this, their one task. The rest of us began laughing, hesitantly at first, but soon in unison, our bodies shaking each other as we collectively took in the hilarity of our plight. After hours of isolation, we were finally able to express our shared experience, the existence of a

collective of detainees confronting our guards. Even as our captors yelled at us, threatening us with tasers from the front seat, we continued laughing, revolting against their calls for order and silence with our guffaws.

It was precisely these interactions that could make us feel human again; that reminded us that resistance was possible, even if our hands were still tied behind our backs. After hours of hearing screams as our captors beat and tased nameless, faceless bodies around us, at last we could see each other as human again. It was in our recognition of a collective experience and a shared discourse to express it – in this case, our laughter – that we felt alive again, after hours perched on death's precipice. Our giggles may not have overthrown our oppressors, but it created a sense of solidarity among us – one that could potentially be later activated.

A few minutes later, our captors began ejecting us from the van one by one, taking off our blindfolds at the last second while holding a taser against our necks and saying: "Hand over your phone, and if you dare look back, we'll come pick you up again." It was around 4 AM. When my turn came, I jumped out and walked into the dark night, wandering through a neighborhood I'd never seen before, until I saw a man in a ripped shirt down the block. He looked me, and I at him, and we immediately recognized each other as fellow detainees, instantly trusting each other and walking together until we managed to flag down a cab to get home.

After I was released, I became driven by a curiosity to understand the internal dynamics of Iran's "revolutionary" political system, as well as how opposition continued to circulate both above and beneath the surface. I became interested in how its supporters – our captors, and those who justified their work – understood and explained their actions, and how those who dissented and pushed back, whether as part of legal political movements like Mousavi's campaign or smaller gestures like our shared laughter in detention, kept the flame of resistance alive.

Many of the explanations I heard for how the Iranian system maintained power analyzed the situation as a government of mullahs imposing their will on a non-religious people; a "religious" state ruling "secular" citizens. But the 2009 Green Movement protests I had participated in – alongside millions of Iranians, many of whom paid a far a greater price than I did – was defined by religious symbols and slogans that had been creatively reinterpreted, including "Yā Hossein! Mir Hossein!" which linked the fate of the Green Movement's detained leader to the injustice suffered by Imam Hossein, the archetypal martyr of Shia Islam and a central figure in the Islamic Republic's political ideology. Wearing green - the color associated with the Prophet Muhammad's descendants adopted as a campaign color by Mousavi, himself one of the Prophet's descendants – protestors made their voices heard in rallies at mosques following Friday prayers. Others decried the state's monopolization of religious rhetoric by holding protests during the Ashura processions commemorating Imam Hossein's martyrdom, just as the revolutionaries in the 1978-9 uprising did against the Shah decades before. The question of what role religion should play in the public sphere was certainly a part of the debate in Iran, but what was happening on the ground – and the modes that resistance took to state domination – was far from reducible to that binary.

In the years that followed, I paid more attention to the Basiji paramilitary members, committed volunteers who are widely considered to be the regime's day-to-day enforcers. I visited religious shrines in Tehran where they held rituals and ceremonies, listened to their members speak on state TV, and attended book fairs and cultural events where they propounded their views on the events of Iranian history that shaped them. I visited places like the Holy Defense Museum and the Martyrs Museum in Tehran, which recounted the group's narrative of the 1979 Revolution and the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, as well as Ebrat Museum, where Basijis and

former political prisoners from the pre-1979 era served as guides to explain tortures past (while avoiding mention of tortures present). When I was stopped by Basijis at checkpoints or during raids as they looked for alcohol, unrelated couples, and "improper" clothing, I looked closely at the men and women I saw, noting the excitement, seriousness, and sense of self-importance that came along with their participation in "revolutionary" duties. As I spent more time in Iran, I also spent more time in spaces of dissent, talking with intellectuals and artists, former detainees and political leaders, to understand the nuances of resistance in a system where the state asserted such an intense hegemony over what was publicly allowed and restricted. I began to notice the contradictions in the ruling system and how they were exploited by those who dreamed up and imagined alternatives, even if they had to keep public criticisms subtle as a tool of survival.

As I pored over the existing academic research, I noticed that while historical accounts of modern Iran tended to focus on big men – the politicians and religious leaders who appeared as distant patriarchs on news broadcasts and in documentaries – studies on everyday life were rare.<sup>1</sup> While numerous scholars examined how the 1979 Revolution had changed Iranian society, the dramatic and meaningful changes over the decades since were largely absent. The way that Iranians experienced daily life, as well as how the "revolutionary" government had reshaped the society and cities in which they lived over the four decades in which it held power – how "the Revolution" had unfolded in practice – was largely absent. And the ordinary men who signed up to work as the state's enforcers – by far the most visible aspect of popular support for the Islamic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In the decade prior to my research in Iran, a trickle of ethnographic accounts of everyday life in Iran began to be published. By the mid-2010s, these had grown into a rapidly-flowing river, with a growing number of well-researched and riveting accounts being published. I am deeply indebted to these works, which nourished my curiosity and pushed me to understand how to frame my own work.

Republic and its ideology, whether on university campuses, in shrine rituals, or at paramilitary checkpoints – were invisible, except as brainwashed boogeymen.<sup>2</sup>

The more nuanced portrayals I found tended to focus on the 1980s, when the state's ideology was crystallizing on the warfront with Iraq. But whereas that period was characterized by intense state repression against all and any opponents – reaching its peak in the 1988 prison massacres – in the decades since, political and social dynamics in Iran had changed dramatically. Beginning in the 1990s, the Reformist movement pushed for elections to become freer and fairer, and they took advantage of the new environment to challenge restrictions on freedom of speech and social liberties with a discourse of Islamic democracy and human rights.<sup>3</sup> In the 2000s and 2010s, vibrant political, cultural, artistic, and social currents emerged in Iranian society that pushed the limits on acceptable public discourse and conduct in every direction. While self-styled "revolutionary" forces in Iranian society pushed back – including in the aftermath of the 2009 elections that I described above – there was a broader shift from brute repression toward techniques of governance that sought to explain and convince the population of the righteousness of the state's ideology blending religious and political leadership, known as *Velāyat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In the years since, this has changed. See for example: Bajoghli, Narges. *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Stanford University Press, 2019; Moradi, Ahmad. "The Basij of Neighbourhood: Techniques of Government and Local Sociality in Bandar Abbas." *Urban Neighbourhood Formations*, 2020, pp. 237–256; Thurfjell, David. *Living Shi'ism: Instances of Ritualisation among Islamist Men in Contemporary Iran*. Brill, 2006; Wellman, Rose. *Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic*. University of California Press, 2021.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For more on this, see: Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 2008; Rivetti, Paola. *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*. Springer, 2021; Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform*. I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Eskandar. *Revolution and Its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> That being said, coercive and violent repression was never too far away, even as the state took on a more bureaucratic and conciliatory tone and public image.

Iran's was not just a society held hostage by a government, but a society deeply imbricated with the government and riven by diverse views on how the state should define itself and function, with these perspectives actively debated in newspapers, magazines, student debates, and local and national elections. There were strict limits on allowable speech and act, but these were always shifting in response to public pressure, including by those who wished for the constantly-expanding array of freedoms to be reined in. And among those who styled themselves as supporters of "the Revolution," the term widely used to refer not just to the uprising of 1979 but to the political regime that it instituted, there was a plethora of dynamics and contestation that were far from reducible to the "brainwashing" that many observers outside credited for their beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Despite decades of predictions that the Islamic Republic of Iran was on its last legs, the state weathered storm after storm. And against analyses that imagined a "regime of mullahs" opposed to "the masses," it was clear that millions of Iranians supported "the Revolution" in some way, shape, or form. It was also clear there was a very active and continuing struggle to define what shape the resulting state should have and how it should relate to society, including by those who identified with the Revolution as well as the many who were increasingly discontented with both "the conservatives" and the internal opposition ("the reformists"). It was these initial observations, and my attempt to understand them, that led to this dissertation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This terminology is common in many post-revolutionary states, for whom "the Revolution" often comes to stand in not for the political transition but the regime that emerged as a result (See for example: Gold, Marina. *People and State in Socialist Cuba: Ideas and Practices of Revolution*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Holbraad, Martin. "I Have Been Formed in This Revolution': Revolution as Infrastructure, and the People It Creates in Cuba." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2018, pp. 478–495; Montoya, Rosario. *Gendered Scenarios of Revolution: Making New Men and New Women in Nicaragua, 1975-2000*. University of Arizona Press, 2012. At the same time, this framing serves to erase the plural genealogies of the revolutionary events themselves, which in Iran included leftist, liberal, and other participants representing many different political currents. Today, however, in Iranian Persian "enqelābi" (revolutionary) signals someone who identifies as a supporter of the post-1979 regime and its values. It also includes many who consider themselves discontented with the current status quo but see this as a result of "the Revolution" having lost its way.

My dissertation is an ethnography of the Iranian state and specifically the state's cultural project over recent decades to build the nation into a *tamadon-e novin-e eslāmi*: a "modern Islamic civilization." I trace how the state has sought to reshape the national landscape and urban environment in order to build new people and subjectivities that befit this civilizational project, focused around Shia Muslim shrines called *haram* and imamzadeh. In doing so, I attempt to understand the workings of power, religion, and urban space under the revolutionary regime in power since 1979. I pay close attention to this project's successes as well as how ordinary people build horizontal connections to dissent, resist, and contest the project's aims.

### Why Shrines?

In order to tell this story, I focus on religious shrines. Shrines are a ubiquitous presence across Iranian cities, villages, and the countryside in between them. Many cities have large urban shrine complexes (*haram*) dedicated to holy figures, especially descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, that occupy central parts of the urban fabric, such as Fatemeh Masumeh in Qom, Shah Abdol-Azim in Rey (southern Tehran), Shah Cheragh in Shiraz, and Imam Reza in Mashhad.<sup>6</sup> Beside these, there are thousands of smaller shrines and sites of worship scattered across the country, ranging from small tombs to niches filled with candles to ancient trees beside sacred rivers to mountain top sanctuaries. These are generally called imamzadeh (المامزاده), meaning "descendant of the Imam[s]," but such sites in fact encompass a wide variety of holy figures, some of whom trace their fame to a direct connection to the Prophet through the imams

revered by Shia Muslims while others acquire their holiness and renown from different sources.<sup>7</sup> A key facet that links these holy spaces is that they are *mojarrab* – that visitors to these shrines feel that their prayers are answered and their vows to God through saints are successful.

Whereas mosques have generally been associated with power and male presence, shrines have historically drawn worshippers from across Iranian society. This is also reflected in their geographic positioning: while mosques tend to be centrally located, shrines are often scattered across the city at the edge of the historic urban fabric. They are especially popular among women and socially-marginalized groups.<sup>8</sup> They attract people not just for worship, but to spend time, picnic, and enjoy each others' company. The constant stream of pilgrims passing out food and drink to visitors, a way to fulfill a vow (*nazr*) that has been granted by a saint, creates an easy and friendly sociality among pilgrims. In Iranian popular culture, shrines are renown not only for their spiritual powers but also for the unexpected and (even romantic) connections that can emerge between strangers.<sup>9</sup> Major shrines have historically operated as a kind of public sphere, even hosting protests.<sup>10</sup>

Because of their popularity, shrines have always attracted patronage from both locals and rulers. As sites that attract large numbers of pilgrims, they are perfect places for donations intended to impress the public with piety. Their activities are managed through religious

<sup>8</sup> For more on Iranian women's relationship to shrines, see: Betteridge, Anne H. "Muslim Women and Shrines in Shiraz" in *Mormons and Muslims: Spiritual Foundations and Modern Manifestations*, ed. Palmer, Spencer J., et al. Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 2002, pp. 183–194; Honarpisheh, Donna. "Women in Pilgrimage: Senses, Places, Embodiment, and Agency. Experiencing Ziyarat in Shiraz." *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2013, pp. 383–410.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> A point I argue in Chapter 1 is that the official designation of all of these sites as imamzadeh is connected to a state project of homogenizing their origins and bringing them into line with the state's conception of correct Shia Muslim practice and history in Iran.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> While Iranian state programming since 1979 has focused on the religious meaning of shrines, numerous songs, films, and books from before the Revolution explored the playful interactions and romantic liaisons that could unfold there. Two examples of these songs include "*Shab-e Jom*'eh" by Parviz Khosravi and "*Ziārat*" by Abbas Ghaderi, both of which focus on flirtation and trysts that happen during shrine pilgrimages.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The 1936 Gowharshad massacre and the protests that preceded them are likely the most well-known.

endowments (*waqf*), which provide for expenses as well as pilgrims' needs. As institutions with large capital funds, shrines have also been centers of innovation, with the first trainlines in Iran running between Tehran and the Shah Abdol-Azim shrine south of the city, for example, and the country's first modern hospital being based at Imam Reza in Mashhad.<sup>11</sup> Shrines were powerful places to narrate this history, linking past and present, Islam and Iran, in an unparalleled way. Drawing on the power of the saints to attract pilgrims and patrons as well as to structure ordinary citizens' feelings and allegiances by producing their connection to historical, national, and religious narratives, the state transformed shrines into "monuments."

In this dissertation, I argue that shrines were at the heart of the Iranian state's postrevolutionary project to construct a modern Islamic civilization, in large part due to the combination of popular piety and social and economic institutions that they contain. Beginning in the 1990s, the post-revolutionary Iranian state began expanding and renovating major shrines across the country, bulldozing large swathes of historic urban cores to make room for massive, costly projects. They included not just the holy sites themselves but the gentrification of the areas around them through construction of malls, parking, and hotel complexes oriented toward visitors and linked to state-managed or parastatal companies. The shrine modernization project gradually reached local shrines too, albeit on a small scaler, hitting fever pitch in the late 2000s and 2010s. Thousands of religious sites across the country were renovated, expanded, or in some cases, bulldozed and rebuilt from scratch. During the same period, Iranian authorities began carrying out renovations and expansions of Shia Muslim shrines in Iraq as well under the aegis of *Setād-e Bāzsāzy-e `Atabāt-e `Āliyāt* (The Headquarters for the Reconstruction of the Holy

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Koyagi, Mikiya. Iran in Motion Mobility, Space, and the Trans-Iranian Railway. Stanford University Press, 2021; Afkhami, Amir. A Modern Contagion: Imperialism and Public Health in Iran's Age of Cholera. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

Thresholds, Setād for short). Today, plans exist for expansions and renovations in other countries as well, including Syria and Pakistan. This process has entailed both physical renovations, including adding amenities like lights, signs, gates, guards, restrooms, giftshops, and air conditioning and heating, as well as 'modernization' through the authentication of the lineages of holy figures buried in the shrines and the 'correction' of incorrect ritual practices, including through the standardization of gender segregation around holy tombs through constructions of barriers evenly dividing them into men and women's areas. These projects have been largely carried out by state and parastatal companies tied to the Revolutionary Guards, which since the early 1990s has taken an increasingly powerful role in the national economy.<sup>12</sup> Inside Iran, the project has also entailed transforming the shrines' bureaucratic structure by integrating them into a national network directly responsible to the state and building offices inside the shrines for the Revolutionary Guards-linked Basiji paramilitary force, which became tasked with leading religious rituals as well as organizing youth camps and classes. In the process, they also became the sites for articulating visions of ideal revolutionary citizens' subjectivity and, as I explore in this dissertation, masculinity in particular. In this dissertation, I refer to this broad process as the "shrine modernization project" and I link it to the wider state aim of developing a "modern Islamic civilization" (tamadon-e novin-e eslāmi).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> For more on the emergence of the Revolutionary Guards as a powerful economic player, see: Erami, Narges and Keshavarzian, Arang. "When ties don't bind: smuggling effects, bazaars and regulatory regimes in postrevolutionary Iran," *Economy and Strategy*, 44:1, 2015, pp.110-119; Harris, Kevan, "A Martyrs' Welfare State and Its Contradictions: Regime Resilience and Limits through the Lens of Social Policy in Iran," S. Heydemann and R. Leenders (eds.) *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, Stanford University Press, 2013, pp.61-80; Harris, Kevan, "The Rise of the Subcontractor State: Politics of Pseudo- Privatization in the Islamic Republic of Iran", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45, 2013, pp.45-70; Ostovar, Afshon. *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*. Oxford University Press, 2018; Engin, Sune. "The Role of Para-Governmental and Paramilitary Organizations in the International Political Economy of Iran." *Gazi Akademik Bakuş*, vol. 12, no. 24, summer 2019, pp. 45–66.

By the mid-2010s, when I was beginning fieldwork in Iran, shrines were more visible than ever before. Adorned with brand new glittering domes and towering minarets, shrines and their fame reached wider audiences through religious programming and documentaries on state TV. During the term of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-13), large budgets were poured into religious shrines alongside his efforts to promote Maktab-e Irāni Eslāmi, the "Iranian Islamic school," which emphasized the particularities of Islam as practiced in Iran, especially practices like visitation to local shrines (*ziārat*). This in turn made shrines a major topic of public debate, with investigative reports increasingly examining the financial practices of the government Islamic Endowments organization (Sāzmān-e Awqāf va `Omur-e Kheyrieh) tasked with administering the shrines, satellite channels abroad accusing Iranian authorities of promoting superstition by renovating religious sites of dubious origin, and social media memes widely mocking the appearance and seemingly inexorable spread of "holy" places. Humor about shrines even found its way onto Iranian state TV programming, with widely-watched comedies like  $P\bar{a}ytakht$  lampooning the boom of dome and minaret construction that the nation-wide renovation of shrines effected.

This dissertation is the first analysis of the shrine modernization project as a coordinated nationwide and regional process. Until now, it has escaped the notice of academics and journalists, though aspects of the modernization projects in specific cities have been analyzed by Iranian architects and urban planners.<sup>13</sup> I became aware of the project only gradually, as I visited

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> These have generally taken the form of open letters and petitions by those concerned with historical preservation in their specific urban context. To my knowledge, only one full-length documentary entitled *Nesyān (Forgetting)* has been produced on the topic, examining how the project has transformed the city of Mashhad. None of these critiques, however, engage the project on a nationwide or regional level, perhaps because of a lack of awareness that these plans are unfolding in so many places at once. Additionally, due to the fact that minor local shrines tend to be overlooked in studies of religious sites in Iran and are rarely visited by non-locals, many may be unaware that the changes they witness at major sites of pilgrimage are being carried out on a much smaller scale at other sites. See: Ākhundpur, Hossein, director. *Nesyān*. Pazhuheshkadeh-ye Sāmen, 2017.

shrines across the country and began to realize that the type and scale of changes at holy sites were unprecedented and clearly linked.<sup>14</sup> The more time I spent at these shrines, and discussing them with others, I began to recognize how historically-situated these sites were within Iran's contemporary religious and political landscape – as well as why they provoked controversy. As often happens during fieldwork, this realization emerged little by little.

One summer afternoon in 2016 I visited Imamzadeh Saleh, a shrine in a busy neighborhood of north Tehran. Its giant blue dome and golden minarets were for me an iconic image of Tehran, towering over the Tajrish roundabout beside it. During Ramadan, the shrine attracts large crowds who take advantage of the carpets laid out in the courtyard to rest, nap, and break their fast after sunset. Many visit the saint's tomb inside the shrine and then pause in the courtyard, where some pilgrims pass out *nazri*, blessed food distributed in recognition of a vow granted by God through the saint, and children zigzag between sleeping couples and friends as they enjoy the rare pedestrian public space in a city otherwise dominated by cars and buses. I brought my father, who was visiting Tehran at the time, to enjoy the shrine's tranquility. My father often complained that after the 1979 Revolution – when he left Iran – Tehran had become an ugly, congested city. Decades later, he was able to return, and I enjoyed taking him to what I considered the city's beautiful places. As we sat in the courtyard, its marble tiles glimmering in the late afternoon sun, I turned to him and asked: "Isn't this place beautiful?" He agreed, smiling.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Initially, I experienced these holy sites as a natural and rooted part of the urban landscape. This was in part because the official historical narratives about these shrines available on site and on the internet largely derive from information distributed by the Islamic Endowments organization, which describe sites according to the purported date of the saint's death without reference to the construction of the physical building itself. This is the case at sites where the Islamic Endowments organization is the sole responsible party; in the far smaller number of sites in which heritage conservation authorities from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts are involved, aspects of historical architecture considered noteworthy are labelled as well. These descriptions tend to focus on the oldest components of the building while newer additions are largely ignored. For more on Imamzadeh Saleh, see: Mokhtāri, Reza. Emāmzādeh Sāleh 'Aleih Salām: Negāhi Pazhuheshi va Tasviri beh Boqā'-e Motabarakeh-ye Emāmzādehhā-ye Tehrān [*Imamzadeh Saleh, Peace Be Upon Him: A Research and Visual Look at the Blessed Tombs of the Imamzadehs of Tehran*], Mu'saseh-ye Nashr-e Shahr. 1392 [2013].

I continued, "Do you remember this shrine from when you were young? Did you used to come here?" Looking around, my father answered:

I remember coming here. But it was nothing like this before. This was a corner of the bazaar, with a little alley and a small shrine. There were a few dervishes who would ask for money, and a big, old tree that's no longer here. Sometimes we'd pass by. But this building - none of this existed. It was a small place without this much decoration. The tree was the biggest thing here.

I was stunned by his answer. The ornate blue tiles, the glittering mirrorwork, the shining minarets – I had assumed that these architectural and aesthetic features had a historical significance, since they closely resembled the Qajar- and Safavid-era architectural elements that defined traditional Iranian architecture in the public imagination. Imamzadeh Saleh had until now encapsulated for me the naturalness and rootedness of Islam in Iran's urban landscape. But after my father's comment, I began researching, and was stunned to realize that what I had seen as Imamzadeh Saleh's "historic" architecture was in fact a creation of the mid-1990s, when the old shrine was pulled down and the present building erected. Whereas an ancient sycamore tree watered by a local stream had once towered over the shrine, providing shade to pilgrims, today the tree was long gone – and it was the shrine that towered over the landscape. The result was a shrine far more visible and accessible in the urban landscape than ever before – indeed, a bus terminal had been built immediately in front of it, and a subway line passed nearby – that visually rooted Tehran, a city built mostly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in an ancient Islamic past.

It wasn't just the aesthetic of the shrine that had changed. The entire site had been transformed: cleaned up, regulated, and policed. No longer was the site managed by a local caretaker; in his place were government employees who policed pilgrims' clothes, especially women, handing them long *chādor* robes if they were not "properly" covered, and who ensured gates were closed by a certain hour and that religious rituals that Iranian authorities considered

incorrect, like self-flagellation or circumambulation of the tomb, were not performed. No longer did the courtyard host wandering Sufi dervishes with liver-shaped kashkul bags who lived off pilgrims' alms, as my father remembered, or had mystical experiences in the sanctuary; they had been expelled from the site, as Sufis were considered too religiously suspect to linger at Shia holy shrines. No longer did men and women mix as they sought to touch the grill of the saint's tomb in the holy chamber; instead, they were separated by a gender barrier, and guards with feathered batons urged them to move along if they paused too long or became too emotional in their supplications. No longer did locals from the neighborhood lead religious rituals on holy days; instead, government-paid *maddāh* chanters led worship, which was recorded and sometimes broadcast on state TV, and speakers were government employees giving sermons preapproved by authorities. In the corner was a gift shop, filled with photos and messages of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and military figures like Qassem Soleimani alongside diaries and last testaments of commanders and soldiers from the Iran-Iraq war; in the center of its courtyard stood several tombs to state-affiliated "martyrs": an Iranian nuclear scientist probably assassinated by Mossad (one of the "nuclear martyrs," shohadā-ye hasteh-yi) and Iranian volunteers who had died fighting in Syria alongside the troops of Bashar al-Assad. Guards policed people and practices, and an office of the Basiji paramilitary had been established as well. The shrine was less a refuge than a base for authorities and their vision of reformed Islam; a setting to construct a "modern Islamic civilization" and the citizens, men and women, who would carry it out.

Imamzadeh Saleh was still a shrine; but the meaning and function of the shrine had changed dramatically. In the name of modernization and renovation, a completely new building and social space had been created – one defined not by horizontal networks of relations between

neighbors and devotees, but by a hierarchical relation between the state and its citizens. Indeed, even the money that pilgrims put in the saint's tomb as vows and alms were circulated back up to the budget of the Islamic Endowments organization, which reports directly to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, with the saint serving as a conduit to the state-controlled religious bureaucracy. What I had taken as a sign of Islam's rootedness in the urban landscape was a completely new creation, intended to draw worshippers and redefine Tehran's landscape in line with a particular vision of the role of religion in society. It was emblematic of Iranian authorities' desire to build a modern religious public sphere, drawing upon a pre-existing devotional landscape but displacing and destroying it to create a geography of sites constructed and controlled by state authorities. On every level, the shrine came to embody the state's vision of Iran's ideal religious, social, and political economic order.

In this dissertation, I argue that the shrine modernization project was a key element of the state's goal to build a new kind of Islamic revolutionary society and self. Imamzadeh Saleh was among the first wave of shrines subjected to this process; although it was originally a small site, its location in leafy north Tehran – home to the capital's wealthiest and most politically-connected families – meant that it was renovated at the same time as larger and more prominent sites. It even became connected to circuits of transnational pilgrimage, as religious tourism tours bringing pilgrims from Pakistan, India, Iraq, and elsewhere began to include it on the itinerary, turning what was once an eminently local site known only to Tehranis into a place of transnational significance for millions of Muslims elsewhere. But the changes at Imamzadeh Saleh presaged transformations at small, local shrines across the country, as thousands of imamzadeh – as these diverse holy sites were mostly categorized by the Islamic Endowments

organization, through a process of religious authentication – into bureaucratic recipients of state largesse (and surveillance).

Management of shrines across the country was transferred from local caretakers to government employees, who organized rituals to occur at the same time across the country, including for political events such as the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution (labeled the "Islamic Revolution") as well as for newly-invented holidays like the Week of Religious Endowments or Imamzadeh Day. They ensured worshipers expressed their devotion in Islamically-appropriate, 'modern' ways, such as preventing them from engaging in self-flagellation or other kinds of self-harm on mourning holidays and instead directing them to blood donation centers, in line with Ayatollah Khamenei's 1994 directive to ban religious practices linked to self-harm and instead promote the public good.<sup>15</sup> And they organized religious classes and Quran reading programs to instill proper hobbies and morals in young people, as well as allowing the Basij to base themselves there to organize teenagers and twenty-somethings into religious youth groups, volunteer camps, and, at times, morality police.

The imamzadehs became sites for the promotion of a particular vision of how Iranians should think, behave, and worship, even as they retained their roots in local devotional practices that continued to attract worshippers and pilgrims for whom the saint remained central and who were unconcerned with, or even opposed to, the schedule of organized activities. It was the space itself that produced the legitimacy that could root what was, at its core, a modernist project of self and social transformation into the historic past, making the 'Islamic-ness' of Iranian society visually self-evident in the tombs of Muslim saints buried there. At the same time, authorities drew on scientific discourse to explain the importance of the shrines; Ayatollah Behjat, while

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> See Chapter 4 for discussion of this fatwa.

serving as the top religious leader of Tehran, explained in a speech at Imamzadeh Saleh on the occasion of Imamzadeh Day, that "Visiting imamzadehs has the benefit (*hokm*) of vitamins for people," and that, similar to vitamins, each imamzadeh can address a different ailment.<sup>16</sup>

As I began researching the shrine modernization program, it became clear that haram and imamzadeh were key to understanding the Iranian state's cultural project. At the same time, I noticed that many religious spaces persisted in Iran that pointed to a fierce contestation of this project, in ways that did not necessarily register as traditionally-recognized forms of resistance. There were communities displaced by shrine renovation projects, that kept the memories of their homes alive through visits to what remained, and who shared the stories of saints and their wonders that had been displaced from the official narratives. There were religious associations called hey'at that refused state funding and maintained independent rituals and theologies as well as pilgrimages that emerged as temporary spaces free from state control and authorities' visions of an ordered, disciplined society. I saw how people and communities that defined themselves as devout Shia Muslims resisted the state's attempts at monopolizing religious discourse and refuted Ayatollah Khamenei's claim to be Muslims' supreme religious authority, dissenting in ways public and private. These strategies were sometimes quiet, but they were also sometimes loud, like public poetic recitations that articulated opposition to state repression drawing on the same religio-political discourse the state uses to legitimize its rule. Or the masses of people who attended transnational Shia Muslim spaces like the Arbaeen pilgrimage in Iraq, which draws 5 million Iranians a year on top of 20 million locals, and which operates as a heterogenous space of alterity to government attempts to monopolize Iranians' religious practices. With outside scholars and analysts so focused on the religious-secular divide, I realized that these spaces of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> <u>https://www.mehrnews.com/news/2361758/آیت-الله-بهجت-می-فرمود-زیار ت-امامز ادگان-حکم-ویتامین-بر ای-انسانها/ https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/319760/ما-هرکدام-خاصیت-مخصوص-خود-ر ا-دار ند80%28/امامز ادگان-مانند-ویتامین/1966</u>

contestation, dissent, and defiance within Islamic spaces and idiom had been largely overlooked. And yet, the more I trained on my eyes to see it, the more I realized how pervasive it really was. The Shrine Across the Region

During the years I was engaged in my research, Iran was riven by intense conflict, both domestically and internationally.<sup>17</sup> Deep divisions over how the state should look manifested in recurring waves of protests, rallies, and bloody crackdowns. In 2019, in the middle of my fieldwork, demonstrations broke out across the country against a plan to cut subsidies on gasoline. They quickly spiralled into an expression of broader anti-government rage. Authorities cut the internet while riot police flooded the streets of central Tehran where I lived, standing masked at regular intervals to intimidate protestors. One day as I left my house, I saw a group of hundreds of Basijis on motorcycles waving their batons in the air as they drove off to suppress protests elsewhere in the city. It was only through visiting friends and families' houses that I developed a clearer picture of the violence unfolding beyond. Security forces had opened fire on crowds across the country, killing hundreds, and had arrested thousands. Just over a week later, with the protests largely crushed, a text message arrived on my cell phone from an unknown number that had until then sent unsolicited commercial advertisements. This one read:

Rise, oh comprehending and revolutionary people of Tehran, to condemn the American and Zionist disturbances and in support of the forces of national security. Our appointment: Monday 4 Azar at 14:30. Location: Revolution Square.

A few days later, I walked to Revolution Square, the same area where I had been detained nearly a decade before. Crowds were out in force, many waving banners and posters in support of Iran's Supreme Leader and condemning the "rioters" who, according to government sources, had torched hundreds of banks, gas stations, and government offices in the protests. Tens of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> They also broke out regularly in neighboring Iraq, a topic I explore in detail in chapters 3 and 5.

thousands crowded the square, an atmosphere of celebration pervading as families and groups of young people walked around waving miniature Iranian flags. Although many Iranians opposed to the government often deride the Iranians at such pro-government rallies as paid agents of the regime or as having been forced to attend by their workplaces, many Iranians showed up willingly to such events, including some people I spoke to over the course of my research.<sup>18</sup>

Although it is impossible to ascertain exact numbers, the sense I often had was that around 20-30% of the population were either diehard supporters of the Islamic Republic or generally favorable toward it, 20-30% were deeply opposed to it, and the remaining half of the country was *qeshr-e khākesary*, the "gray class" of Iranians who sat somewhere in the middle.<sup>19</sup> Events like the rally I attended were intended to shore up support among loyalists and convince more people to come to their side by publicizing the state's narrative of events and project the confidence of visible, mass support. Central to this narrative is the idea that Iran is at constant risk of attack from abroad, and that the Islamic Republic is the only force that can protect the nation from dismemberment, chaos, and war. This narrative is given credence through regular Israeli bombings of military sites in Iran, which became a common occurrence over the course of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Government ministries and offices also directly facilitate their employees' attendance by giving time off to attend, organizing transport, or otherwise incentivizing attendance, as well as sometimes penalizing those who fail to attend. <sup>19</sup> These kinds of statistical guesses are deeply unreliable and difficult to measure. Pro-government sources would point to 70-80% voter turnout in presidential elections as an indicator of popular support for the Islamic Republic, while Gallup polling firm in 2020 said around half of Iranians have "confidence" in their national government. Saudi-funded opposition channel Iran International, meanwhile, frequently says 10-15% of Iranians are strong supporters of their government. In general, it should be said that it is extremely difficult to understand what is being measured through such survey questions - for example, whether respondents think of their government as "the country of Iran," or "the Islamic Republic," or the currently-sitting president's administration. I offer these figures less to offer an exact statistic of Iranians' views, and more to offer a broad sense of the fact that Iranians have many different views about their government. See: Crabtree, Steve. "Iranian Confidence in Government under 50% for First Time." Gallup.com, 27 Dec. 2022, www.news.gallup.com/poll/323231/iranian-confidence-government-firsttime.aspx; de Bellaigue, Christopher. "Iran's Moment of Truth: What Will It Take for the People to Topple the Regime?" The Guardian, 6 Dec. 2022, www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/06/irans-moment-of-truth-what-willit-take-for-the-people-to-topple-the-regime; "Opinion Survey Reveals Overwhelming Majority Rejecting Iran's Regime." Iran International, 4 Feb. 2023, www.iranintl.com/en/202302036145.

my research, as well as US economic and political pressure.<sup>20</sup> US sanctions, commenced after the Revolution, strengthened under President Obama and escalated under President Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, dramatically impoverished ordinary Iranians to an unprecedented degree. Since sanctions came into effect, rural poverty has doubled and millions of Iranians have fallen out of the middle class.<sup>21</sup> Whereas the 1990s and 2000s were a time of economic expansion and rising incomes fueled by high oil prices, the 2010s were a period of economic contraction and mass impoverishment.<sup>22</sup> Sanctions disproportionately affected the middle class, which had played a key role in the 2009 protests, and broadly undermined Iranian independent civil society and private businesses as they found themselves cut off from the outside world, especially by US sanctions on financial transfers and use of technology. But it was not only US pressure on Iran that affected how Iranians understood their situation; events beyond their borders were a crucial backdrop to the events and processes I describe in this dissertation. And within this, shrines played a central role.

In Iranian state discourse, shrines became increasingly important, not only as a space, but as a symbol. During my research, images of shrines abroad began to cover Tehran's walls, especially that of Sayyidah Zeinab in Syria. These images were inextricable from political events across the region, particularly the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian civil war beginning in 2011. Both triggered attacks by Wahhabi militants against shrines, part of a wave of terror that struck Shia Muslim places of worship and holy sites across the region (but rarely inside Iran). This, in turn, triggered increasing Iranian government and military intervention across the region,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Hubbard, Ben, et al. "Iran Rattled as Israel Repeatedly Strikes Key Targets." *The New York Times*, 20 Apr. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/world/middleeast/iran-israeli-attacks.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Salehi-Isfahani, Djavad. "The Impact of Sanctions on Household Welfare and Employment in Iran." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 29 Oct. 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> These were made worse by policies of economic liberalization that involved the sell-off of state entities to parastatal actors and increasing cuts in subsidies that undermined welfare state protections.

spurred on not only by the violence unleashed by US invasions but also the actions of its allies, like Saudi Arabia and Israel, and the sense in Iran that the only way to avoid a future US "regime change" war was to build Iran's defenses far beyond its borders (in parallel with increasing domestic preparation for future conflict, called *padāfand-e gheyr-e `āmel*). Iran increasingly saw Shia Muslim communities across the region – many of whom were beleaguered by growing repression and discrimination in their own contexts – as key to this effort. After 2017, when ISIS attacked Tehran directly, Iranian military interventions across the region since the early 2000s became retroactively labelled as the "Defense of the Shrines," identifying Iran's military interests with a broader struggle to protect Shia Muslim holy sites. In doing so, Iranian political interests in the region became defined so nebulously that they increasingly came to resemble the endless horizons of the US War on Terror – with the ensuing security state "affects" increasingly bringing terror into Iranians' homes.<sup>23</sup>

This process reflected and reproduced the broader sectarianization of the political landscape across the Middle East that has grown amid the violence unleashed by the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.<sup>24</sup> This has increasingly cast Iranians as part of a Shia Muslim regional minority, despite living in state dominated by Shia Muslim discourse, ritual, and identity. Whereas for decades the Iranian state had downplayed sectarian difference and portrayed itself as generically Muslim, in the late 2010s, the sense of particularistic Shia Muslim identity emerged as uniquely visible in state discourse – and sought to recruit Iranians as loyal subjects in a battlefield that was increasingly identified in sectarian terms. Fuelling this fear through television programming and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Masco, Joseph. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Duke Univ. Press, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> In using this term, I follow the work of scholars on religion in the Middle East who view sectarian identities not as primordial categories, but as being produced and mobilized due to specific political circumstances. I discuss this more extensively in Chapter 3. See Haddad, Fanar. *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*. Oxford University Press, 2014; Hashemi, Nader & Danny Postel (editors). *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., London, 2017.

public messaging – such as the heavy coverage given to funerals of Iranian fighters who died in Syria on state TV – was central to mobilizing Iranians as state loyalists.

At one such funeral I attended in south Tehran in 2019, over 1,000 people marched to bury a fighter, while dozens of TV cameras and social media journalists ensured the images reached hundreds of thousands more, through state media as well as social media channels such as on Telegram and Instagram, both widely used in Iran.<sup>25</sup> These images underscored a phrase from Ayatollah Khamenei that was plastered across billboards in Iran: "If we had not gone to fight in Aleppo, they would have come to fight us in Kermanshah or Hamedan." It became increasingly common to hear Iranians disillusioned with the state become pessimistic about the possibility or even desirability of meaningful domestic change, beset by the fear that "Iran could become Syria." <sup>26</sup> Fear had a demobilizing effect on those who just a few years before had been advocating for democratic reform.

Simultaneously, military men like the "martyrs" coming back from Syria and the commanders who led them became increasingly sanctified in national media. While shrines were in the background of the images, it was their faces in the foreground – and their stories were repeated on documentaries and in memorials across the country. Among the figures I follow in this dissertation are Qassem Soleimani, who went from an unknown Revolutionary Guards field commander in Iraq in the 2000s to Iran's head of regional military operations – and a wildly popular figure at home.<sup>27</sup> In 2018, when I began my fulltime fieldwork, I would frequently see

<sup>25</sup> While Facebook and Twitter were banned years ago and were thus only accessible with a VPN, Instagram remained unfiltered. During my fieldwork, Instagram was widely used not only by ordinary Iranians but also by government officials, who often released official statements there, as well as by Basijis and shrines.

<sup>26</sup> This is a process that unfolded in Syria as well. As Lisa Wedeen describes while trying to explain authoritarian resilience in that context: "It helps to see how the Syrian regime managed to produce a silent majority of citizens invested in stability and fearful of alternatives" See: Wedeen, Lisa. *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria.* The University of Chicago Press, 2019: pp. 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> His popularity also made him a hated figure among the many Iranians who deeply opposed and resented the regime.

his image on the walls of cafes frequented by Basijis, alongside Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, a powerful indication of the popularity he enjoyed. He was also widely seen as a possible presidential candidate, in part because he commanded support even among many of those who resented the Iranian political class. For them, Soleimani seemed to embody a nationalist protector of Iran untouched by corruption or domestic resentments.<sup>28</sup> These dreams came to an end in January 2020, when he was assassinated in a drone strike on US President Trump's orders. This turned Soleimani into a "martyr," his funeral drawing millions from across Iran as his casket toured the country.<sup>29</sup> Even many who opposed what he stood for took part in the funeral, as the moment came to represent the horror many felt at the possibility of war. Soleimani became even more important in death than in life, his image covering billboards and posters across the country, as Iranians yearned for a lost protector. The outpouring of public mourning seemed to confirm the affective power of government efforts to make Iranians afraid of the world beyond – aided by US belligerence and militarism.<sup>30</sup>

In 2021, when arch-conservative Ebrahim Raisi ran for Iran's presidency with Supreme Leader Khamenei's support, he adopted a line from Soleimani's will as his campaign slogan: "Iran is a shrine, and if this shrine falls, all the others will too." The line underlined the extent to which the militarized discourse of "The Defense of the Shrines" had come to dominate domestic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Soleimani's role in regional atrocities, such as Iran's support for Bashar al-Assad's quashing of protests and massacres of civilians in Syria, went unreported in Iranian official media, contributing to this highly positive perspective. It also contributed to a generalized ignorance among many Iranians of how Iranian interventions across the region had fuelled anti-Iranian and anti-Shia sentiment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> His funeral took place over several days in several cities. In Tehran alone, around 1 million people attended, and official sources gave high figures for attendance in the four other cities where his casket toured. See: Karimi, Nasser. "Throngs Mourn, Iranian Leader Weeps for General Slain by US." *AP News*, 7 Jan. 2020,

a pnews.com/article/united-nations-ap-top-news-persian-gulf-tensions-tehran-international-news-a3cf7645bfde80e340abecb96338ddf8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Only days later, this outpouring of grief would turn to rage and bewilderment after the Revolutionary Guards shot down a passenger plane as it was taking off from an airport in Tehran, killing everyone aboard. At the time, Iranian military forces were on high alert to guard against possible US missile strikes, and the massacre was apparently the result of the plane being misidentified as an incoming object. Thousands took to the streets of Tehran to mourn the victims, but the gatherings soon turned into protests as authorities sought to break them up.

politics and to rally loyalists. One of Raisi's claims to national fame was having been head of the Endowment of the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, whose network of financial endowments comprises the most important economic actor in the eastern half of the country.<sup>31</sup> In June 2021, after almost all other serious candidates had been blocked from competing in the elections in what is considered the most openly-manipulated election in Iran's recent history, Raisi triumphed and was crowned president. Voter turnout was around 48%, in contrast to previous elections in recent decades that had around 70-80% turnout, a clear sign of widespread disaffection.<sup>32</sup> But nevertheless, half of Iranians still turned out to vote, and the majority for him, revealing the continued strength of the loyalist base. Many voters I spoke to considered their vote for Raisi a show of support for "the Revolution" against outside conspiracies. His victory demonstrated not only the tremendous economic and political power of the shrines and those who manage them, but also their symbolic potency as a symbol and rallying cry. Thus, in this dissertation, I explore the shrine not only as a space, but as a symbol, and how it became closely tied to a sense of insecurity, conflict, and a particularistic Shia Muslim Iranian identity linked to the Islamic Republic.

#### Methodology

The research for this dissertation was carried out over five years, with the longest stint of ethnographic fieldwork taking place from 2018-21, when I was based in Tehran for three years. During that time, I carried out research at local shrines in Tehran, primarily Imamzadeh Ali Akbar in Chizar, as well as in the city of Qom, home to the shrine of Fatemeh Masoumeh and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> "The Unholy Business Empire of Astan Quds Razavi." *Tehran Bureau*, 10 Sept. 2021, tehranbureau.com/the-unholy-business-empire-of-astan-quds-razavi/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Hafezi, Parisa. "Khamenei Protege Wins Iran Election amid Low Turnout." *Reuters*, 20 June 2021, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-sole-moderate-presidential-candidate-congratulates-raisi-his-victory-state-2021-06-19/.

various local shrines. I spent time at holy places, small and large, in cities across Iran, including Mashhad, Tabriz, Ardebil, Isfahan, Shiraz, Qazvin, Kashan, Borujerd, and numerous smaller towns and villages. I was able to carry out research in Iran without official local permission because I hold an Iranian passport and thus did not attract the kind of surveillance that generally effects non-Iranian researchers attempting to do work in the country. I also carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Iraq in 2018, at the Arbaeen pilgrimage as well as in the shrine cities of Najaf, Karbala, Kadhemiyah, and Samarra. Over the course of my research, I carried out interviews with Iraqis living or visiting Iran, as well as Iranians living in or visiting Iraq. I also spoke to numerous Lebanese and South Asian pilgrims while in Iraq. Additionally, I carried out interviews in person in Lahore, Pakistan in early 2020 during a workshop I organized for the Lahore Biennale focused on religious sites in Pakistan and Iran in comparative perspective.

Beside my ethnographic fieldwork, I carried out archival research for this dissertation at two main sites: the British Library in London and the Ba'ath Party Archives at Stanford University. This archival research allowed me to construct historical narratives that underpin the arguments I make in this dissertation, which are based not only on the present but on change over time. At the British Library, I researched the history of cross-border connections between Iran, Iraq, South Asia, and the broader Arab World over the course of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly as this geography was split apart amid the expansion of British colonialism. I published part of this research in 2021 in an article entitled "From guests of the Imam to unwanted foreigners: the politics of South Asian pilgrimage to Iran in the twentieth century." In 2022, I carried out archival research at the Ba'ath Party Archive, examining how the Iraqi state under Saddam Hussein managed pilgrimage practices linked to the holy sites I

examine in this study. Beside these archives, with the help of colleagues I accessed documents from the National Library and Archive of Iran as well as the National Archives of India.

Undertaking an ethnography of a state that is notoriously hostile to researchers is no easy feat. It requires creativity in approach and method. I had to study authorities' techniques of governance without provoking their fury. A key method I deployed was urban ethnography. I conceptualized cities, their spaces, and infrastructure as the result of state visions and plans, and I set out to investigate how these plans had been developed as well as how they unfolded.<sup>33</sup> In studying authorities' urban policies – the kinds of spaces they built, how they were regulated, as well as how people used and contested those plans – I sought to understand the kind of public sphere and citizens various state actors sought to shape. In order to do this, I conducted "para-ethnography" – speaking to urban scholars, architects, planners, and employees, in addition to consuming and analyzing reports and articles produced by state organs and state media.<sup>34</sup> I also spent long stretches of time in public spaces, interviewing others who spent time there and analyzing how the spaces were used in ways that aligned with or contradicted authorities' plans.

I also drew on media ethnography as a method, analyzing forms of pop culture both licit and illicit to understand how representations of the topics I was researching were being popularly debated and understood. I spent considerable time watching state TV programs to see how shrines and martyrs were represented, and I discussed these with other viewers to consider how the public consumed these representations. I also collected memes and jokes that circulated about my topic on social media, where anonymous satirical accounts bypass state restrictions on

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> For urban ethnography and infrastructural analysis as method, see: Chu, Julie. "When Infrastructures Attack: The Workings of Disrepair in China." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 351-367; Collier, Stephen. *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*. Princeton University Press, 2011; Larkin, Brian. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2013, pp. 327–343.
 <sup>34</sup> Holmes, Douglas R. & Marcus, George E. "Fast Capitalism: Para-Ethnography and the Rise of the Symbolic Analyst." In ed. Fisher, Melissa S. & Downey, Greg. *Frontiers of Capital: Ethnographic Reflections on the New Economy*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2006, pp. 33–57.

official media venues and actively parody state officials and policies. Recognizing comedy as a "profoundly social activity" that "presumes a community but also remarks on it, and in this double action may also summon one into being," I understood these memes as expressing truths widely understood but expressed privately among Iranians due to the heavy media censorship and legal repercussions for mocking state symbols.<sup>35</sup> This was particularly true for a topic as sensitive as religion and religious spaces in Iran; I was warned by people I interviewed that, in order to protect myself from repercussions, I should avoid publishing any kind of jokes about shrines. I soon understood that this was not because such joking was uncommon, but rather that satire of the shrine expansion project was so widespread and so widely appreciated by Iranians that it would be impossible for me not to notice it. I duly collected examples I saw, many of which I share in the following chapters.

Finally, I used my own social media accounts extensively throughout my research to document and share information about the places I traveled and the shrines I visited. Although initially I had not considered this part of my research, I soon attracted many followers on Instagram from Iran, Pakistan, India, Iraq, and Lebanon who engaged extensively with my commentary and from whom I learned an incredible wealth of information. Hundreds of individuals shared their experiences of the pilgrimages I attended, offering me insights that would have been otherwise impossible for me to access in the limited time I had, and many others shared documents, historical photographs, and family recollections of shrines that I wrote about that helped me understand the processes of change affecting these sites. I connected with individuals across Iran who generously showed me around cities and neighborhoods where I otherwise would not have had any connection. Based on these experiences, I also solicited public

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Wedeen, Lisa. *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*. The University of Chicago Press, 2019: pp. 49.

feedback by publishing about my research in traditional media outlets (such as the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn*) and giving public presentations (including at the Tehran office of National Geographic, part of a summer institute organized by the Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia, as well as for a workshop organized by Forensic Architecture).

The fact that I am an Iranian-American who speaks Persian facilitated my relationships in Iran, as I was widely (and correctly) interpreted as someone who had grown up abroad and developed an interest in his home culture. As a result, many people took time to explain things to me about Iran and Islam that they would have assumed I knew (or should know) if I had been born and raised in Iran. This allowed me to ask in-depth questions and prompt my interlocutors to reflect on views or statements they otherwise took for granted, as I was interpellated as curious (rather than hostile, as might have been the case if I had been born and raised in Iran and was perceived as opposed to the state). With regards to my research in Iraq, the fact that I speak Arabic tremendously facilitated my interviews and ability to navigate public space. My interviews in Pakistan and with South Asians in Iran took place largely in English, except for a couple that I carried out using my rudimentary Urdu.

## Interventions

This dissertation engages with a wide variety of interdisciplinary theoretical questions. At its core, it is an ethnography of power in which I try to understand how a revolutionary state seeks to transform society and self and how it maintains authority over a nation through cultural, spatial, and gendered approaches. I analyze how an Islamic political movement and ideology has exercised authority since coming to power following a popular revolution. But it is also about how any state stays in power, and in this respect, I imagine it will be useful not only to scholars of Iran, Islam, or the Middle East, but to those interested in revolution, statecraft, and

transnational identity, and in particular their urban manifestations. Throughout the dissertation, I focus not only on the original revolutionary project but also on how it has disillusioned many Iranians. I trace how Iranians continue to challenge state hegemony, in ways big and small, by building horizontal connections across society, keeping the flame of revolution alive.

#### Anthropology of Revolution

Ideas change the world. They make possible the impossible. They move people to do things they could have never imagined achieving. The Iranian revolution is one example. When street protests broke out in 1978 calling for the downfall of Iran's authoritarian monarchy, few could have imagined that an unarmed popular movement would, within just a few months, unseat a US-backed dictator supported by the most powerful military in the Middle East. The power of ideas can also be seen in the Arab Spring uprisings that began in 2011, when millions across North Africa and the Middle East took part in mass protests demanding an end to dictatorial regimes that eventually brought down half a dozen leaders. Ideas can push people to do crazy things, even when they don't know if their desired outcome is even remotely possible. Over the last half-decade, this has become clear in Iran again too, as hundreds of thousands have joined waves of protests against state policies and demanding an end to repression writ large. Thousands have died, and hundreds of thousands have been arrested. But against utilitarian analyses that assign economic or logical motivations to all human behavior, revolutions show us how much ideas and beliefs move the world and propel movements for change.<sup>36</sup>

But ideas, and the revolutions they provoke, can have unintended consequences. These ideas can solidify into the bases of revolutionary regimes – and be recruited to mobilize new generations of defenders. In Iran today, those who see themselves as defending the 1979

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> For an overview of anthropologies of revolution, see: Cherstich, Igor, et al. *Anthropologies of Revolution: Forging Time, People, and Worlds.* University of California Press, 2020.

Revolution decry as "counter-revolutionaries" those who call for new revolts in the present. They, too, are motivated by ideas. Many anti-government Iranians deride government supporters as "mozdur" (hired laborer or mercenary) or "sāndiskhwār" (juice-box drinkers, meaning people who show up to government rallies for the free snacks) suggesting that they support the government because they are economically benefiting from it, insults which give a clear indication of the class tension embedded in the critique.<sup>37</sup> But those who support the revolutionary regime have reasons for their beliefs as well. Many of them have disagreements with specific parts of the Islamic Republic governing structure, or elements of policy-making, but support the regime as a whole because they relate to its ideology on a deeper level, recognizing in its religious interpretation of its analysis of the global order their own place in the world. Understanding what makes the project attractive to state supporters is key to understanding the resilience of the regime in the face of decades of (failed) predictions that it is on the verge of collapse. Part of what I am interested in understanding in this dissertation is how and why these commitments are formed - as well as how the Islamic Republic fosters this loyalty and the beliefs that underpin them through techniques of governance that articulate a vision of an ideal Iranian self and society.

The Islamic Republic was birthed through a popular movement directly inspired by anticolonial revolts across the Third World. Although Iran was never directly colonized, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century its politics were heavily influenced by decision-making elsewhere, and the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> This is linked to a perception among non-supporters that "the Revolution" is largely a project of ignorant, poor, and religious people, and that its supporters are duped into believing in the idea through financial support by the government. For an in-depth sociological analysis and deconstruction of the claim that regime supporters benefit from regime largesse, see Harris, Kevan. *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran.* University of California Press, 2017. For an analysis of how rural regime supporters conceptualize their connection to the state, see Wellman, Rose. *Feeding Iran: Shi`i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic.* University of California Press, 2021. For an understanding of the dynamics of change within the Revolutionary Guards, see: Bajoghli, Narges. *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic.* Stanford University Press, 2019.

United Kingdom, Russia/the USSR, and the United States repeatedly directly intervened, including through invasions, occupations, and coups directed at Iranian leaders.<sup>38</sup> At the cultural level, the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79) engaged in top-down Westernization of Iranian society, and by the 1970s, many Iranians viewed the regime as a US client state and part of the global imperialist bloc. The revolutionary discourse that became dominant in the late 1970s – shared by leftists and Islamists like – rejected so-called 'bourgeois' cultural norms. For many, this included a desire for a return to a culturally 'authentic' Iranian self. This goal was taken up by dissident intellectuals who came to inspire the Islamist revolutionary factions, like Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, who articulated a desire to end cultural Westernization while drawing on Western knowledge to advance – producing a strong, native civilization whose cultural core was intact even as it drew on modern scientific knowledge to improve the conditions of its people.

These intellectuals were in turn in dialogue with the works of Third Worldist theorists like Frantz Fanon, who theorized how the post-revolutionary state could mobilize an authentic, revolutionary society imbued with anti-colonial values. A new society would require a "new man" – and culture would become a political battlefield on which to articulate and contest different visions of post-colonial personhood.<sup>39</sup> In Iran, revolutionary leaders and intellectuals

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> This includes the crushing of the Constitutional Revolution in the 1910s with Russian and British support, the rise of Reza Pahlavi as head of state in the 1920s with British military support, the overthrow of the popular Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 with CIA support, and the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi until 1979 with US support.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> But whereas Fanon had identified culture as national or racial in origin and downplayed a religious component, in the late 1970s Iranian intellectuals like Ali Shariati – whose visions became central to the political order that emerged, even though Shariati himself passed away before the Revolution – identified Islam as central to Iranian national culture. The "New Man" concept can be traced back to Lenin, based on Enlightenment ideals of shaping human nature. For a genealogy of this concept, see: Cheng, Yinghong. *Creating the "New Man": From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities.* University of Hawaii Press, 2009; Cherstich, Igor, et al. "The Revolutionary Person: Penitence, Sacrifice, and the New Man" in *Anthropologies of Revolution: Forging Time, People, and Worlds.* University of California Press, 2020.

identified Islam, especially Shia Islam, as central to Iranian identity.<sup>40</sup> They argued that Islam itself would have to be revived and reinvented, and a revolutionary version of Iranian Islamic culture would be created. Once in power, Ayatollah Khomeini articulated an ideology that blended leftist thought and theory with Islamically-derived concepts, rhetorically championing the "mostazafin" (a Quranic term meaning "the oppressed") instead of "the proletariat." <sup>41</sup> This also translated into state policy, as the Islamic Republic broadly instituted a social welfare state and launched a "construction jihad" that both worked to "Islamize the provinces and villages while seeking to improve their infrastructure, health care, education, electrification, water, agriculture, and industry."<sup>42</sup> Through these projects, the Islamic Republic developed an understanding of the Revolution as a "culture" that is alive, connected to truth and God, and furthered through the continued struggle of the "religious and patriotic people of Iran." <sup>43</sup>

These ideas became the basis for a revolutionary teleology which imagined a constant progressive movement toward a future society, proceeding through political uprising into cultural renewal. Ayatollah Khamenei, supreme leader of Iran since 1989, articulated this process as consisting of five stages: Islamic Revolution, Islamic System, Islamic State, Islamic Society, and Islamic Civilization. These stages would be based on four principles: Religion, Rationality, Scientific Knowledge (`elm), and Ethics.<sup>44</sup> In 2021, Khamenei argued that the first steps had been completed with the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the second with the creation of the system of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> For more on the development of the creation of Islam as an ideology of liberation and political identity, see: Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform. I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Abrahamian, Ervand. *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. I.B. Tauris, 1993.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Lob, Eric. Iran's Reconstruction Jihad: Rural Development and Regime Consolidation after 1979. Cambridge University Press, 2022: pp. 114.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Manoukian, Setrag. City and Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, History and Poetry. Routledge, 2014:

pp. 54-55 <sup>44</sup> Jahanbin, Farzad, and Masoud Moinipour. "Farāyand-e Tahaqoq-e Tamadon-e Eslāmi az Manzar-e Hazrat Ayatollah Khamenehi [The Process of Achieving an Islamic Civilization from the Perspective of the Esteemed Ayatollah Khamenei]." Islamic Revolution Studies, vol. 11, no. 39, winter 2015, pp. 29-46.

*Velāvat-e Faqih* in which the nation's Supreme Leader is consider the chief political and Islamic religious authority, and the third with the rise of pious presidents. He identified Iran as being in the process of achieving the fourth stage, which would occur through a cultural transformation led from above through mobilization of the masses, in order to reach the fifth stage: the creation of a "modern Islamic civilization" (tamadon-e novin-e eslāmi). In the civilizational stage, Iran will stand as a global model of Islamic modernity and cultural authenticity, in keeping with how the official doctrine of Velāvat-e Faqih defines the Supreme Leader not only as the chief authority for Iranian Muslims, but of all Muslims worldwide. Although this process is led by the state, it requires citizens to transform themselves and to be mobilized, revolutionary selves – political actors in their own right, moving forward the revolutionary political project through their thoughts, words, and deeds.<sup>45</sup> No longer are Iranians mere subjects of the state, as they were under the Pahlavi monarchy, nor is it enough for them to merely have the right political positions - they are expected to think and act in accordance with the political ideology of the state, or at the very least to act like they believe it. In this sense, it resembles other revolutionary projects, where you are not meant to merely support an idea – you must become it.<sup>46</sup>

The creation of an Islamic "new man" is interwoven throughout this story, reflecting the centrality of gender in the Iranian revolution and its aftermath. While the expression "new man"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Moallem, Minoo. *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*. University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> This is based on the idea of the self as an individualized agent linked to the nation-state, albeit an "enchanted" nation-state in this incarnation – which is action-oriented and based on the idea of civilization as guaranteeing humans a purposeful will, freedom, and control over their actions. This is connected to liberal secular thought and how it imagines human beings as agential actors, and this conception was taken forward by leftist movements initially as a way to reform humankind into a kinder, more equal society. But in the process of its articulation within the state-led 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist projects, it gradually turned human beings into slaves of the state and ideology, undermining human liberty. This is one of the great contradictions of the leftist and national liberation movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to which Iran is no exception – in the name of using the state to guarantee human freedom, they often undermined it. See: Cheng, Yinghong. *Creating the "New Man": From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities*. University of Hawaii Press, 2009.

was used by revolutionary thinkers and governments throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to refer to the ideal kinds of citizens that they intended their political transformations to produce, in this dissertation I focus specifically on what has so often been an unmarked category in analysis of society and gender: men and masculinity. In 2012, I carried out ethnographic research in Tehran for an earlier research project focused on Iranian women's experiences focused on how and why women's access to higher education expanded so rapidly in the two decades following 1979.<sup>47</sup> One interviewee ascribed women's increased assertiveness in demanding their rights to how the political revolution had inspired a thousand smaller revolts in people's daily lives. She argued that the revolution's victory inspired Iranians to develop an oppositional consciousness in all aspects of their lives, encouraging women in particular to challenge conservative familiar and social norms. When I asked her how the men in her family, and society more broadly, reacted to these changes, she responded: "Why don't you ask them?" In this dissertation, I do precisely that, seeking to understand men's experiences of "the Revolution" and the state it birthed, both as willing participants and as opponents. Instead of taking men for granted as a universal category, I investigate the contours of shifting notions of masculinity in contemporary Iran and their production by conflicting forces of state organs, popular culture, and street politics.<sup>48</sup> I pay particular attention to how the revolutionary process in Iran has constructed different groups of men as heroes, protectors, and villains, while I simultaneously investigate "emergent formations"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> This research was later published as: Shams, Alex. "Revolutionary Religiosity and Women's Access to Higher Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2016, pp. 126– 138. An extended version of the research was published as: Shams, Alex. "If Not for the Revolution: How Higher Education Became an 'Islamic Right' for Religious Iranian Women." in Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al (ed). *Women, Islam and Education*, Routledge, London, 2019, pp. 103–121.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Gutmann, Matthew C. "Trafficking in Men: The Anthropology of Masculinity." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1997, pp. 385–409.

and patterns" that challenge these imaginaries.<sup>49</sup> In doing so, I contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between gender and revolution.

In this story, revolution means many things. It can mean the revolution as a moment in time when one political order falls and another emerges – state capture. For Iranian authorities "the Revolution" has become a cultural project with a singular framework, whose memory and values must be kept alive through state efforts and policies. But revolution is also something messier; when we look from the ground-level, we see a process, a series of interconnected events and feelings structured by a sense of common purpose and goal, connecting people and changing their lives in ways not accounted for in the singular narratives produced from the top. The Iranian Revolution developed over many years, through revolutionary acts and behaviors by a wide variety of parties and actors that in turn emboldened others to join, building a sense of collective struggle.<sup>50</sup>

Even if many of these acts failed and led to repression and a sense of despair, in the fact that they awakened a sense of collective defiance, they produced an oppositional selfhood whose subjectivity and sense of being part of a collectivity was crucial for the eventual revolutionary political triumph. It was the feeling of being united in collective defiance – what Michel Foucault, who was a journalist on the streets of Tehran in 1978-79, referred to as "political spirituality" – that produced the possibility of imagining a revolutionary horizon that had been

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Amar, Paul. "Middle East Masculinity Studies: Discourses of 'Men in Crisis,' Industries of Gender in Revolution." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2011, pp. 36–70: pp. 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> While in Iran, the state has defined the triumph of the "Islamic Revolution" as beginning with the Shah's flight from the country followed by Ayatollah Khomeini's return from exile, historians have pointed out that we can just as easily date the beginning of the revolution to the popular protests that triggered the Shah's departure in 1953 (before a CIA-backed coup returned him to power), Khomeini's own uprising in 1963 in Qom, or the beginning of leftist armed struggle against the regime in the late 1960s. We could also date it to the spread of student protests on Iranian campuses and among Iranian students abroad in the 1970s, or the beginning of literary gatherings that explicitly condemned the Shah's regime in 1978. It is a political choice in the present to decide from which point to begin the story. But in my reading of events, all of these were moments of revolutionary action and defiance that when taken collectively created a revolutionary momentum.

foreclosed by the authoritarian politics of the Shah's regime.<sup>51</sup> Asef Bayat has called revolutionary movements without revolution "non-movements" or even "refolutions;" taken together they have the power to change how people think and transform their understanding of reality in a way that becomes part of a long-term process of revolutionary change.<sup>52</sup> The Iranian Revolution was no different in this respect; even as the political uprising of 1978-79 was followed by years of severe repression against those who did not align with the new regime's narrative and ideology, it produced wave of social revolutions beneath the surface.

This is also the case in the decades since. In this dissertation, even as I examine a stateled project of revolutionary transformation in society, I also pay close attention to how Iranians continue to fight for every inch of space and possibility to continue building and imagining a revolutionary collective that keeps alive the vision of political transformation against the repressive order of the present. I see the horizontal connections produced by people involved in these acts and moments of defiance, even when temporary, as the conditions of possibility for imagining an oppositional political collective and thus revolt. Revolutions require existing networks, connections, and horizontal links between people that evade the state and that can become activated during an uprising. In each chapter, I seek out spaces where these links are emerging, searching for ways in which people disaffected by the Iranian state project build connections. Although they may not resemble what we often think of as 'revolutionary,' I argue that the relations of care they produce between members of society are precisely the necessary preconditions for mobilization: the "conditions of possibility" for their emergence.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> See: Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Bayat, Asef. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford University Press, 2017.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge, 2010.

My analysis is not a theoretical exploration of revolution or an attempt to fit events in Iran into a pre-existing schema of how things unfold; it is an interrogation of historical teleology in which I map out how "the Revolution" has unfolded as a political project as well as how hundreds of tiny acts of revolution continue to unfold against that project. I am tracing the Revolution's effects in society while also engaging in an ethnography of a state that does not want to be critically researched. I am thus performing an ethnographic intervention in the sense that my research project is a practice of resistance, in which I am mapping out a Revolution as well as resistance against it, including in forms and shapes that do not resemble existing analyses of revolution. I thus draw on resistance as method, drawing from unconventional sources of analysis and experience to trace the contours of a revolutionary project.

Even as I trace the features of this state-led project in my ethnography of the Iranian state, I pay close attention to the question of how Iranians can and are making revolution possible against a self-described revolutionary state, and what kind of events and processes must happen for that to become possible. I thus ask: what kind of revolutions can happen under the watchful eyes of a revolutionary state that deems its opponents counter-revolutionary? In doing so, I am pushing us to consider forms of rebellion beyond what we are used to seeing as revolutionary political movements and/or beyond or within the spaces carved up by the state itself. In the beginning of the dissertation, I focus on the state's projects and how they have transformed the landscape of society, while in the second half, I center various forms of defiance and resistance that continues to circulate transnationally, continuing to inspire defiance and hope in people even when they don't know exactly what it means or where it's going.

Against the neat teleology of the state's civilizational project, I posit that it is precisely the unorganized character of resistance that creates spaces and possibility for imagining

alternatives that do not themselves reproduce a hegemonic order monopolized by a single power. If Khomeini defined Iran's Islamic revolutionary order in direct opposition to what he saw as the Shah's secular monarchic order before him – for example, mandating the veil for women in direct response to the previous regime's mandatory unveiling of women – today the forms of defiance, protest, and dissatisfaction on Iran's streets clamor for something else without making clear what exactly that alternative will be. Instead, they enact in the present the world they desire for the future.

In this dissertation, I focus on self-defined religious peoples, spaces, and rituals in Iran. Given that the state defines itself in religious terms, this may seem a surprising choice. But I am interested in exploring precisely how Iranians who consider themselves religious understand, analyze, and contest the state's claims to be the hegemonic arbiter of religious meaning. For the Iranian state, religious Shia Muslims are their primary audience and the community they see themselves as representing; while other Iranians are understood to be a part of the nation, the state draws its legitimacy from a discourse of Islamic authenticity and in the public sphere it only recognizes discourses that similarly draw on Islam as a source of inspiration. Those who wish to work for change within the legally-recognized public sphere must thus articulate their demands, aspirations, and theologies in an Islamic framework.<sup>54</sup> Even as the Iranian state has couched its legitimacy in terms of democratic participation, it has simultaneously done so by imagining

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Thus, calling for separation of religion and state affairs is technically banned by law; but reformist politicians who have directly challenged state repression and have led mass protest movement have articulated a conception of Islamic human rights and democracy in order to carve out a space to oppose state violence. See: Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 2008; Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform*. I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Eskandar. *Revolution and Its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 2020; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Eskandar. "From Etelāʿāti to Eslāhtalabi: Saʿid Hajjarian, Political Theology and the Politics of Reform in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 6, Nov. 2014, pp. 987–1009.

Iranians as a united Islamic *ommat* (nation).<sup>55</sup> It maintains its goal as producing all Iranian citizens as religious Shia Muslims, even as it *a priori* interpellates them as already being so. As a result, the state is sensitive to critique couched in Islamic discourse and theology in a way that it is not when the critique is secular. I thus trace not just the open protests and rallies that oppose state policies or state structure, but also the kinds of practices of care and horizontal solidarity that emerge between people that flourish far beyond the state, its structures, and imaginaries.

This is an anthropology of a revolutionary project but also of an ongoing revolutionary movement against it, focusing on the forms of dissent and resistance that have emerged within religious spaces and discourse to oppose the state's monopolization of religious interpretation. I seek to demystify the processes at work in Iran and help us make comparisons and consider it in a global perspective. Even as I focus on the Iranian state, I decenter it. By examining a state project in transnational perspective, I seek to understand how the state is shaped by its actions and how cross border flows influence its development. Whereas Iranian studies has been broadly limited by Iran's borders, and Middle Eastern Studies has taken regional borders for granted, I cross all these lines in a transnational, transregional approach which sees geographies connected by thoughts, idea, and movements. In doing so, I reflect the perspectives of Iranians, whose perspectives have been shaped not only by events within their borders but also their awareness of events to the East and West of them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> As Minoo Moallem has noted, "cultural and nationalist Islamic claims have provided space for monolithic, masculinist narratives of an Islamic ummat that actually ignore diversity and multiplicity of discourses actually present in Islamic world." Moallem, Minoo. *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran.* University of California Press, 2005: pp. 15.

An "Islamic" State?

Early in my fieldwork, I was invited to speak at a university in Qom, a city about two hours south of Tehran that is home to the nation's most important seminaries and which is, in the popular imagination, a de facto center of power for its role in educating and training the clerical elite who rule the country (it is also the subject of my second chapter). As I met with the sociology professor who had invited me to speak to his class, I discussed my research questions, which I framed in terms of trying to understand how the emergence of a political system based on religion had shifted the religious landscape inside Iran. As I finished trying to sensitively articulate these questions in the broadest way possible, the professor looked at me and with a smile asked: "Do you think the Revolution made Iran more secular or not?" I at first hesitated, worried about reifying an arbitrary divide between religion and secularism that I had learned to analyze skeptically while reading the works of Talal Asad at the University of Chicago. But I finally offered my initial observation; that the state's embrace of religion as central to its ideological project had turned religion into a tool of power, subject to argument and negotiation in an unprecedented way, and in the process it had made Iranians increasingly skeptical of both. The professor enthusiastically shook his head: "I agree completely; people have turned against religion because they see what the state does with it and they oppose it, so they come to resent Islam as well, not just the state." A devout Muslim, the professor expressed a concern that I came to hear repeatedly among religious Iranians: because the state acted in the name of Islam, it in turn sullied religion. They also complained that because the state offered privileges to those who embraced its form of religiosity, including preference in employment and studies, that it had pushed non-religious people to pretend to be religious, encouraging deceit in the name of Islam.

This is a function of how the state operates at the most basic ideological level. Iranian revolutionary selves are mobilized in support of "religious democracy" (*mardomsālāry diny*), in which legitimacy is derived both "through electoral politics as well as the transcendental laws of the *shari`ah*." <sup>56</sup>



Figure 1

A mural in Qom depicts the tension in state ideology. Ayatollah Khomeini is seen casting his vote for an Islamic Republic, presumably in the 1979 referendum. The quote below reads: "Velāyat-e Faqih is the world of the authority of the Prophet." Here, Khomeini is depicted an ordinary Iranian casting his vote, even as he is also understood by the audience as the supreme religious guide whose interpretation of religious law, which gave shape to the Velāyat-e Faqih politico-religious ideology, brings the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad into the present. He votes for what he already knows is the only right option – just like Iranians should. (Photo: Alex Shams)

But while the state frames itself in terms of continuing and reviving Islamic tradition, it in

fact is dramatically reinventing it. Nowhere is this more clear than the state doctrine of Velāyat-e

Faqih itself, which is based on a 1971 book by Khomeini and espouses a political system

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform. I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2008, pp. 83

unprecedented in Islamic history. Meant to reconcile Islam's place in the modern-nation system, it in fact dramatically reshapes the meaning of Islam itself. Sociologist Behrouz Ghamari-Tabrizi notes:

By locating Islam in the public sphere, not only did the new constitution alter the political apparatus, legal system, education, and gender relations in Iran, it also transformed Islam from an a priori source of legitimacy into a contested body of discourses. In effect, in order to Islamize the postrevolutionary society, the Islamizers had to struggle continuously over the meaning of Islam and its bearing on specific contemporary social, economic, and cultural issues.<sup>57</sup>

On one hand, as Iranian analyst Said Hajjarian has noted, this process "transformed Shi'ism into state ideology;" on the other hand, by joining state and religion, it "played the propelling role of a catalyst for the *secularization* of the Shi'ite juridical establishment" (emphasis in the original).<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, the religio-political doctrine that came to be the official state ideology after 1979 attempted to monopolize religion – but in fact, it turned it into an object of constant debate, democratizing religious Iranians' perceptions of Islam as they no longer depended on the interpretations of religious rulers but increasingly sought to explore in personal ways "what kind of Islam" they wanted to practice.<sup>59</sup> The revolution succeeded in getting Iranians to ask questions about Islam and turn it into a "problem space;" as Niloofar Haeri points out, "against the odds, the public sphere in Iran has become more vital and plural since the revolution." <sup>60</sup> The contradiction is that this is unfolding under an authoritarian regime – but it is precisely this regime that, through the revolutionary process and introduction of Islamic discourse including

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Niloofar Haeri explores this process among a group of women in north Tehran, focused on how they integrate mystical poetry in their spiritual practices. See: Haeri, Niloofar. Say What Your Longing Heart Desires: Women, Prayer, and Poetry in Iran. Stanford University Press, 2021.
 <sup>60</sup> Ibid 5.

through mass theological education, has turned Islam into a topic of mass, public debate.<sup>61</sup> The fact that Islam was at the core of the state's own bureaucratic rationality, had, inadvertently, transformed the meaning of religion in public life.

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that Iranian authorities themselves were conscious of the processes I described above. They were particularly afraid of the negative outcomes of this process, which they grouped together under the label: *din-gorizy*, aversion to religion. Perhaps unwilling to describe the social process as "secularization," as this would imply that their project of religious governance had had the opposite effect of what they intended, they lamented the fact that so many Iranians seemed to be turning away from Islam. Even as Iranians grew up with an in depth and almost mathematical understanding of Islam's rules and the workings of Islamic law through an education system in which religious studies were mandated at every level, clerics decried the lack of "Islamic values" at the social level, pointing to the rise of conspicuous consumption, women's pulling back of mandatory headscarves in public spaces, and the growing normalization of irreligiousness in public space. They conflated these trends with a collapse in (Islamic) revolutionary values.

In many ways, what they identified as the problem was closely tied to changes in state policy since the 1990s, including the introduction of neoliberal economic reforms which had produced high levels of income inequality, the less frequent enforcement of dress codes in public spaces, and a greater emphasis in local government on creating welcoming public spaces, with programs like free music concerts becoming *de rigueur* in public parks.<sup>62</sup> These reflected differing visions of the state's role in society, with the 1980s model of brute force to enforce an "Islamic society" having since the late 1990s been increasingly replaced by government attempts

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Ibid 162.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Adelkhah, Fariba. Being Modern in Iran. Columbia University Press, 2004.

to entice people to embrace their vision; carrots instead of sticks. It was in this context that Khamenei's assessment that Iranians were in the stage of building an "Islamic society" made sense, as it spoke to a cultural project to attract Iranians to Islam. But what was most striking to me was that, 40 years after the Revolution, with the Islamic system well-established, authorities were still so deeply alarmed at the possibility of social secularization – and growing numbers blamed the Islamic system itself.

The situation was so bad that in 2018, Hojjat al-Islam Ahmad Zadhoush, one of the top officials in Qom's seminaries, proposed that the city become an independent country along the lines of a "Shia Vatican." He argued that the seminaries' affiliation with the government had so badly damaged Islam's reputation among the masses that it was time to cut the cord.<sup>63</sup> What was striking was that if an opposition journalist had made such a call, they could have been arrested; for sedition and for supporting political secularism, both legally defined as crimes.<sup>64</sup> The fact that the head of a Qom seminary was now making precisely such a proposal spoke to the deep insecurities that plagued Iran's religious authorities. But it also reflected a topic I want to explore in this dissertation – how the implementation of a system of religious governance in Iran changed not only politics but also religion, and in the process sharpened popular consciousness of secularism. In doing so, my argument diverges from what has become known as the Asadian school, which focuses on how secularism has transformed religious states like Iran that could

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> "Pishnahād-e Tashkil-e Keshvar-e Mostaghel-e Qom [A Proposal to Form an Independent Country of Qom]." BBC News Persian, 18 Apr. 2018, www.bbc.com/persian/iran-43807337.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> This anecdote also speaks to the wide degree of freedom of speech that seminarians are allowed, with seminary publications often debating questions that would be strenuously avoided for fear of censorship in mainstream publications.

elucidate and refine the Asadian argument.<sup>65</sup> This is based on two arguments: 1) that there is a substantive and meaningful difference between secular and religious political rule and 2) that many of the features Asadians identify as being typical of "secular" states are in fact shared by all nation-states, whether they define themselves as secular or not. A key tenet of the Asadian argument is that secular states are not neutral toward religion, but instead enforce a particular vision of religion on society, including through their interpellation of citizens as members of religious communities. This is based on research in Middle Eastern states like Egypt, which are imagined as secular but which maintain personal status laws (*ahwāl shakhsiyah*) that differ based on citizens' religious identities (Muslim law for Muslims, Christian law for Christians, etc).

It is strange, however, to refer to a country like Egypt as "secular" – a term not used by the Egyptian government – when the law classifies citizens according to "sectarian" identity. And the features the Asadian argument typically identifies as central to "secular" governance – state management and compartmentalization of religion and its ensuing transformation into an object of the nation-state – appear to be shared by Iran's government, a state that describes secularism as a key enemy.<sup>66</sup> If even Iran can be described as "secular," then it is unclear to me what the term "secular" is doing anymore. Given that there are mass movements across the region, including in Iran, calling for secularism as opposed to what they see as religiouslyinflected "sectarian" governance, I believe it does a disservice to critique "secularism" when what is really meant is the working of the nation-state more broadly as a bureaucratic entity concerned with categorizing, regulating, and ruling citizens. It is fair to say the modern nation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> For this section, I am deeply indebted to Hadi Enayat's analysis and critique of the Asadian tradition, as articulated in his text, Enayat, Hadi. *Islam and Secularism in Post-Colonial Thought: A Cartography of Asadian Genealogies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. Nazm-e Novin-e Ruhāniyat dar Irān [*The New System of the Clergy in Iran*], Mardomak Press, Las Vegas, NV: 1390 [2011].

state has its origins in secular ideology. But the way the nation state has shifted as a concept as it has been used and taken up by actors around the world has produced shared logics around the world – including in Iran. This is the structure of the modern nation-state, not secularism per se.

At the same time, the fact that Iran's chief executive is by law required to be the top religious leader as well means that there are specific effects and changes that happen within the religious sphere as a result. This makes Iran different from, say, Egypt, where the chief political authority deems specific individuals as religious authorities – the chief imam of Al-Azhar for Muslims, and the Coptic Pope for Coptic Christians – but he is not himself that authority. In this dissertation, even as I explore these topics, I try to steer away from arguments about religion and secularism because I find it unhelpful to use the discourse of "secular" states at a time when secularism is being raised as a demand by progressive movements across the region - and when in a country like Iran, advocating for secularism can result in a prison sentence. Tarring "secularism" with a single brush de-historicizes secularism as a political project with local specificities while simultaneously playing into the discourse of religious conservatives opposed to secularism.<sup>67</sup> And it overlooks the many activists across the Middle East who, having lived under religious or sectarian rule for decades, have loudly called for or supported the implementation of secular governance.

In 2021, I sat in a room with Mehdi, a young Iranian seminarian living in Iraq. Mehdi worked for Ayatollah Sistani, a religious cleric based in Najaf who commands widespread allegiance among Iraqi Shia Muslims and is highly respected by many Iranians, Lebanese, and others. Mehdi administered a section of Ayatollah Sistani's website in which people were encouraged to submit moral questions and decisions facing them in their lives, and they are given

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Enayat, Hadi. Islam and Secularism in Post-Colonial Thought: A Cartography of Asadian Genealogies. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

answers by seminarians who would pore over Sistani's past statements for clues to how to address the queries according to his views.<sup>68</sup> Mehdi ran the Persian section of the website, catering primarily to Iranians who, in directing their question toward Sistani, showed that they preferred his rulings over that of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei (who, according to Velāyat*e Faqih*, should legally have been who they considered their *marja*, or religious guide). Mehdi was visiting Tehran for a few days, and as we sat eating *khoresht* stew and rice on the floor of a mutual friend's apartment who was also visiting from Najaf, we discussed the political situation in Iraq. Mehdi lamented the deleterious effects of the Iraqi political system put in place by the United States since 2005 on the nation's social structure, which seemed to constantly collapse under the weight of recurring crises framed in terms of religious conflict. I offered my analysis of how the sectarian basis of that system – in which Iraqis are categorized and forced to vote by law according to sect, similar to Lebanon's political system – reproduced the fractures and divisions in society that he identified, under the guise of merely attempting to legislate them.<sup>69</sup> He asked me what I considered as an alternative for organizing Iraq's political system. As I described to him the rudimentary outline of a "secular" (`almāni) system, he nodded in agreement, saying that this was an ideal system – and one that Sistani himself explicitly agreed with and wished for Iraq as well (using the term dawlah madaniyyah, "civil state," to avoid how the word `*almāni* had come to be associated with atheism).

In arguing for such a separation, Sistani was not alone, as the example of Qom's shortlived independence bid shows. But what was ironic was that a position that in 1979 Iran would have been denounced by many as a conservative or quietist position – for seeking to keep

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Such websites are maintained by all major Shia Muslim religious leaders, who see a central part of their public duty as being to help believers navigate the quandaries they faced in their daily life.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> My analysis is deeply indebted to the works of scholars on sectarianism in the region, particularly those who have worked on Iraq and Lebanon. See Chapter 3 for more in depth analysis.

religion out of politics and thus rendering it irrelevant to the questions of the day – was now being articulated as a progressive position based on decades of lived experience.<sup>70</sup> By analyzing in detail the way that decades of religious governance has transformed the functioning and practice of religion in Iran, I hope that this dissertation can complicate arguments about secularism that have taken a central position in debates across a number of fields.

# Religion and Modernity

I trace the question of *din-gorizy* (aversion to religion) through this dissertation as I believe that it was a central concern of the state and a major motivation behind many of the approaches it took to dealing with religious affairs and spaces. But this deep-seated fear, I argue, was related to a deeper problematic in the construction of Iranian modernity: the extent to which the religious establishment has been positioned as backwards and anti-rational. There is an acute awareness among religious leaders that they are judged poorly in the public mind, even among religious people themselves. This has roots in Iranian reformist discourse since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which positioned Shia Muslim clerics as holding the country hostage to fanaticism, in tandem with the inept and corrupt Qajar dynasty that preceded the Pahlavis. One of the most emblematic depictions of "the mullahs" as arch-villains of modernity can be found in Mullah Nasreddin, a wildly popular early 20<sup>th</sup> century publication that lampooned the religious elites for spreading ignorance in the name of faith.

Within the nationalist telling of Iran's "re-awakening" pervasive during Pahlavi times, the counter narrative that even today the Islamic Republic finds itself constantly responding to,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> For more on this, see: Hashemi, Nader. "A Secular Age and Secularization from Below in Iran" in ed. Taylor, Charles, et al. *A Secular age Beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

mullahs are configured as the vanguard of the forces of regression.<sup>71</sup> Mid-century intellectuals like Shariati and Al-e Ahmad followed this line of reasoning, arguing that the clerical establishment was outdated, reactionary, and in need of being overthrown; they argued that a revolution in the seminary against quietist clerical authorities would pave the way for the advent of a revolutionary, progressive version of Iranian Islamic modern culture. It is in this context that the religious establishment that took power in 1979 developed an intense focus on proving themselves – and Islam more broadly – as being as equally modern as their intellectual opponents. For the Islamic Republican ideology that emerged was not a call to "return" to an ancient past; it was an attempt to devise a discourse that provided an alternative to Western Capitalism and Eastern Communism, while liberally borrowing from both (and disavowing that borrowing).<sup>72</sup> In this dissertation, I examine this project of "modernizing religion" in two domains: that of religious practice and ritual, and that of re-ordering religious spaces.

With the triumph of Islamist forces under Ayatollah Khomeini in the Revolution, and the liquidation of all other opposition groups by 1983, a new discourse of cultural advancement was developed that combined an obsession with scientific modernity and a focus on theorizing rationality within Shi'i Islam, thereby allowing "state-allied intellectuals and religious leaders concerned with critiquing and elaborating their epistemic foundations of an Islamic civilizational alternative to the West." <sup>73</sup> In this discourse, "modernity" is a positive, but highly vague, signifier. But it led to several very real effects and policies. First among these was a trend toward rationalization of religious life in which a "wide range of objects … [came] under critical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> This was in turn reinforced by global discourses around secularization and modernization theory, which explicitly posited the disappearance of religion from the public sphere as a sign of modernization.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> The Islamic Republic's Constitution, for example, is based on French and Belgian models and was in direct conversation with decades of liberal and leftist activism in Iran toward abolishing monarchic, divine right rule.
<sup>73</sup> Doostdar, Alireza. *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny*. Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 5.

scrutiny and turned into objects of state planning." Alireza Doostdar describes rationalization as a "reflexive mechanism through which actors recreate their world - bringing new social and cultural forms into being, reinforcing old ones, or charging them with new intensities - as they attempt to ensure conformity between their practices and commitments to reason."<sup>74</sup> In the context of spiritual life, this included a focus on authenticating religious practices using scientific methods of inquiry. This was a process that entailed the development of a state bureaucracy "elaborated in service of state interests publicly justified in terms of Shia orthodoxy."<sup>75</sup> In the context of shrines, seminarians are employed to determine the "true" identity of saints buried in shrines and to produce extensive genealogical records that can verify their relation to the Prophet Muhammad. In doing so, they attempt to eliminate uncertainty and messiness, re-narrating shrines with unclear provenance or no obvious connection to the Prophet Muhammad to fit them into the schema of properly-authenticated Shia Muslim practice, which values worship at the graves of the Prophet's descendants but sees such devotion as heretical when oriented toward, say, Sufi holy men or naturally-appearing features such as holy rocks or trees. By demanding the scientific authentication of shrines, the religious bureaucracy turns unproblematic local practices into religiously problematic ones, and "fixes" them by eliminating those problematic features. This victory over superstition become a way to clearly delineate the difference between superstition and religion and in the process assert the modernity of religious Iranians and of Islam as a whole, indicating the success of the Islamic revolution.

In my work, I draw on definitions of modernity not as a single thing but as something people perceive and understand – it's something you know when you see it. In this sense, modernity is an "orientation" toward "progress and renewal," acting less as a specific set of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Ibid 16-17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Ibid 8.

criteria rather than a "geography of imagination that creates progress through the projection and management of alterity." <sup>76</sup> The project of Islamic modernity I trace is deeply connected to aesthetics, drawing on a long legacy of colonial influence and state-policy making that emphasize restructuring the urban environment as a way of ordering society and creating "disciplinary power," focusing not on "restricting individuals and their actions but by producing them." <sup>77</sup> Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian authorities have sought to reorganize Iranian cities to create visual signs of modernity through "urban design, public ceremony, and dress codes." <sup>78</sup> The destruction of the winding old historic quarters through construction of grid patterns of boulevards and streets affected almost every Iranian city between the 1870s and 1930s. This process reached absurd heights under Reza Shah, when local authorities carried out haphazard demolitions in advance of royal visits to impress him with their newly-modern urban aesthetics, even including the construction of completely fake "modern" quarters comprised entirely of facades.<sup>79</sup> These projects were intended to produce the nation as neat, orderly, and visually modern, allowing for the creation of new kinds of urban spaces and thus new kinds of citizens by removing the visual disorderliness that European observers and local reformers identified as signs of the "Oriental backwardness" that characterized Iran (and much of the world beyond Europe).

Although Iranian authorities today position the 1979 Revolution as a total break with the past, the intellectual genealogies and insecurities of pre-Revolutionary Iranian modernity persist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> See: Knauft, Bruce M. Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies. Indiana University Press, 2002.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonising Egypt*. University of California Press, 1991: pp. xi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Marashi, Afshin. *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940.* University of Washington Press, 2011: pp. 18-27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Persia: Internal Affairs 1931-8: IOR/L/PS/12/340-4, PZ1021-1931, India Office Records, British Library (hereafter IOR).

into the present, pointing to the continued dominance of the Western model of progress in the global imagination. As part of the contemporary shrine modernization project, I argue that authorities seek whenever possible to remove patina – the look of age – from shrines, in the process establishing the present as the only time possible and removing the past-present distinction, instead producing the landscape as forever modern by removing the messiness of the past from the visual landscape.<sup>80</sup> In the case of shrines, the removal of patina protects these sites from becoming part of the past, keeping them forever in the present, a process that serves as a refutation of secularist teleologies that condemn religion to disappear amid the march of modernity. The broader urban renewal projects, in turn, allow Iranian authorities to "edit" the past and its manifestations in the present, keeping buildings they want to include in the official historical narrative and removing those that offer contradicting versions of the past.<sup>81</sup> Thus in my work, I trace not only these urban renewal projects but also the 'messiness' where they seek to implement order, examining places where disorder refuses to bow its head. I see these heterogenous spaces as holding possibilities for alternatives to the highly structured plans of the state and its authorities and the narratives they propose.

As I show in this dissertation, the physical renovation of religious spaces was central to proving the modernity of shrines. Against the stigma of religious spaces as dirty, backward, and full of superstition, the state sought to show that shrines were clean, air-conditioned, welcoming, and light-filled public spaces that define the Iranian Islamic public sphere in an aesthetically

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> As Shannon Dawdy notes, the presence of patina on historic buildings "critiques the present in general and capitalism in particular, by creating a heterotopia of an 'other time'" beyond the here and now. It also allows for archeological fragments to offer alternative readings of historic sites. The destruction of these layers of patina, in contrast, undermines the possibility of alternative narratives and instead bends the site in service of the aims of those who control it in the present. See: Dawdy, Shannon Lee. *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> I use "edit" in line with Setrag Manoukian's work on urban renewal in Shiraz. See: Manoukian, Setrag. *City and Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, History and Poetry*. Routledge, 2014.

pleasing and yet entirely modern way. They can thus assert their presence as a modern and modernizing force in Iranian politics, one that is rooted in local, spiritual authenticity but is equally interested in building a technologically modern state that takes into account aesthetics, accessibility, and security. The question of producing religion as modern takes material form in the reconstruction of shrines. And I argue that it was this spatial dimension that became key to articulating the Islamic civilizational project that the state has embarked upon in recent decades.

At the heart of the experience of modernity – and modern understandings of past, present, and future – is a sense of a rupture between the past and the present, as well as between modern countries and those left unmodern. Indeed, popular expressions such as being "caught between tradition and modernity" reinforce this conception, as do narratives of certain places being "stuck in the past." Modernity the world over has been defined by "the perpetual disruption of temporal and spatial rhythms," but across the Global South this is frequently understood as particular to the local context and the struggle with "tradition." <sup>82</sup> As Marshall Berman notes in a passage that would be equally relevant in Iran as anywhere else, "To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own." <sup>83</sup> In Iran, however, this "rupture" between the present and the past is often understood as specific to Iran, imagining the country as being held back by aspects of its cultural and religious identity that are specifically and exceptionally retrogressive.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Blackwell, 2000, pp. 216.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Simon and Schuster, 2010, pp. 13.

Our question here is not to identify which of these narratives is true or not; it is to recognize the power of narratives to shape how people consider the world around them. According to Iranian sociologist Ebrahim Toufiq, this way of considering Iranian history as defined by a rupture – the idea that the past was long ago, but we have not reached the future and are instead stuck in suspended time, unable to move – ignores the fact that modernity in every society has been marked by contradictions; the obsession with producing a fusion of modernity and locality is a never ending trap.<sup>84</sup> He argues that the framing of the question is Orientalist, stigmatizing Iranians and the East more broadly as somehow genetically incapable of integrating parts of themselves with modernity in the same exact way that Westerners have. Instead, it produces a problem space that is inescapable because it defines the current position as a problem to be solved, not a reality we live in.<sup>85</sup> The rapid experiential change of modernity, including the feeling of the past as something dramatically different from "everyday life" in the here and now, produces a sense of nostalgia that can fuel a sense of nationalism based on a conception of identity rooted in land and territory linked to the nation state and the nation as a core tenet of human belonging – at precisely the moment that people are increasingly displaced from the places they actually belonged to through rapid urbanization and impoverishment of the countryside. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that exactly when Iranian society was experiencing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Toufiq, Ebrahim, editor. Nāmidan Ta`aliq: Barnāmeh-ye Pazhuheshi barāye Jām`ehshenāsi-ye Tārikhi-ye Enteqādi dar Irān [Naming the Rupture: A Research Program for Critical Historical Sociology in Iran]. Māniāhonar Publishers, 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> The irony of this debate is that it is one possible only from the vantage of modernity, as Harry Harootunian argues: the idea of tradition as an identifiable object that can be isolated and revived, he argues, is only possible by having an analytical distance that allows you to see it as a distinct object, in danger of destruction or in need of saving. Referring to Japan, he argues that "the appeal to native culture was, in fact, the very sign of capitalist modernity and its modernist ideological program rather than resistance to it." In doing so, Harootunian traces the origins of anti-colonial nationalist thought across "the East" to the responses of Japanese modernity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who were explicitly mentioned as a model around the world, including by the Shah who said that he would turn Iran into the "Japan of West Asia." See: Harootunian, Harry D. *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life*. Columbia University Press, 2002.

mass rural to urban migration, a political regime came to power promising a sense of identity rooted in land and belonging. And this is precisely where in the shrine comes in, as a powerful symbol of a locally-rooted Islamic identity, in which the Prophet Muhammad's family fled toward safety in Iran, a land of shrines that is now protected by a government that sees the nation as a whole as a shrine.

## Chapter Outline

I begin this story in **Chapter 1** by offering an overview of the shrine modernization project on a national scale, examining how this process unfolded spatially. Iranian authorities renovated, expanded, and updated shrines and their facilities. But in doing so, they also renarrated the national landscape, "enchanting" it and producing the entire nation as a sacred geography. Cities were reanointed as holy places in their entirety, and local shrines were connected to a narrative of history that centered Islam's place in the landscape – and naturalized the Islamic Republic as its contemporary protector.<sup>86</sup> Shrines were powerful places to narrate this history, linking past and present, Islam and Iran, in an unparalleled way. Drawing on the power of "dead bodies" to attract pilgrims and patrons as well as to structure ordinary citizens' feelings and allegiances by producing their connection to historical, national, and religious narratives, the state transformed shrines into "monuments." <sup>87</sup> I argue that this required the rationalization of shrines through authentication through scientific methods, a process which entailed eliminating contradictory, complicated, or inconvenient stories and places and reimagining them as part of a uniform geography of Shia Muslim religiosity. In this sense, modernizing the shrines was part of a process of modernizing the national landscape and producing the Islamic Republic as the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History. Beacon Press, 1997.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Allais, Lucia. *Designs of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century*. The University of Chicago Press, 2018; Verdery, Katherine. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. Columbia University Press, 2000.

nation's natural protector. I also trace the counter-narratives of these spaces and transformations that people maintained and developed, highlighting these alternative forms of memory that contested the state project.

The modernization of shrines also entailed their integration into a new network of economic relations closely connected to Iranian authorities of neoliberal economic reforms. In Chapter 2, I examine how this process unfolded in Qom, the seminary capital that has been transformed into a showcase of the Islamic Republic's brand of Shia Islamic modernity. The shrine of Fatemeh Masoumeh at the city's heart attracts twenty million religious tourists a year, including hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from other parts of the Middle East and South Asia. Since the early 2000s, authorities have dramatically expanded the shrine, bulldozing historic bazaars and building malls in their place, alongside billions of dollars in investment in spectacular transportation projects – like a metro, monorail, and international airport – that have transformed the urban fabric. These projects have not only transformed economic relations in Qom, uprooting communities and gentrifying swathes of the city center, but they have also entailed the re-narration of local shrines for an international and national audience, disentangling them from local communities, surrounding them with parking lots atop demolished homes, and turning them into part of tourist itineraries. They also have included the promotion of new sites of pilgrimage, promoting narratives of the naturalness of the Islamic Republic's national rule that seek to undermine locally-existing religious as well as leisure practices. I link the development of this tourism project not only to Iranian soft power efforts but also attempts to develop a regional economic network with neighboring countries in response to US efforts to sanction and blockade Iran.

In **Chapter 3**, we cross the border into Iraq in order to understand how the regional context of the US-led War on Terror shaped Iranian authorities' understanding of their own "Defense of the Shrines," and how these narratives came to be deployed by the Iranian state. I examine how Iranian intervention in Iraq beginning in 2003 to secure and rebuild the country's holy shrines amidst a wave of bombings, violence, and even a US military led siege transformed Iranian leadership's understanding of the regional context. I explore how the US military-led walling off of Iraq's urban landscape, particular around its shrines, within a paradigm of War on Terror urbanism sectarianized the Iraqi landscape and entrenched sectarian conflict through architectural interventions that, after the US withdrawal, were inherited by Iranian and Iraqi authorities. I also examine how Iranian pilgrims to these shrines experienced these events on visits to Iraq, which emerged as the largest foreign destination for Iranian travelers in the 2010s. I examine how these flows of pilgrims rebuilt transnational Shia Muslim ties after a century of rupture – but in the process reinforced a regional sectarian geography.

The specter of regional violence created an opportunity for the Iranian state to position itself as a protector. But as crushing US sanctions undermined Iranians' livelihoods and a growing environmental crisis led to major water shortages in the mid-2010s, Iran began to experience growing domestic political unrest on a scale unprecedented since 1979. Authorities responded by deploying Basiji paramilitaries across the country, carrying out waves of violence repression against protestors who responded with growing ferocity and calls for the regime's collapse. In **Chapter 4**, I examine how the state promoted an ideal vision of masculinity informed by the "Defense of the Shrines" as well as Iran's neoliberal economic reforms and positioned this form of revolutionary male subjectivity in opposition to the working-class young men who drove the protest waves – and suffered intensely as a result. I examine how the state

has promoted a particular vision of masculine subjectivity as key to the Islamic civilizational project, using shrines as bases to promote this vision through rituals, training, and cultural events. In this chapter, I look at men's presence as fighters, enforcers, and martyrs on all sides as well as how the construction of masculinity has become a key site of cultural production.

While some resisted the state's authoritarianism on Iran's streets, other spaces of dissidence and alterity emerged within the religious rituals associated with the Ashura holiday. In **Chapter 5**, I look at how Iranians in grassroots religious associations inside Iran and through participation in the Arbaeen pilgrimage in Iraq challenge state hegemony and monopolization over religious interpretation. Drawing from the same narratives that the revolutionary state has built its legitimacy upon since 1979, they resist in ways big and small. In doing so, they produce horizontal connections that stand outside and in opposition to state control. In the first part of the chapter I examine the emergence of the oppositional poetry of the *hey'ats* of Yazd, examining how they have utilized these religious spaces' quasi-independence from state control to directly critique state repression, in the process creating sonic communities of resistance. In the second half, I turn to the yearly Arbaeen pilgrimage in Iraq, and I examine how it has emerged as the largest transnational Shia Muslim space since 2003. For the 5 million Iranians who go every year, Arbaeen is an alternative to spaces inside Iran directly controlled by the state. Drawing on theories of social change through "carnivalesque" resistance, I examine how these religious rituals framed around the heroes of early Shia Islam, including pilgrimage to their tombs, create temporary spaces with potentially transformative possibilities that stand in marked contrast to state hegemony over the shrines themselves. In exploring these cases, I imagine how selfgovernance can emerge in more liberating ways beyond the confines of state-based nationalism or religious identity.

# Chapter 1: Constructing a Sacred Geography

When I began my fieldwork research in Tehran in the mid-2010s, shrines seemed to be everywhere. They featured prominently in news broadcasts, were discussed and debated on talk shows, appeared in official speeches and in opposition media, and they adorned posters across the city dedicated to Iranian soldiers who'd died in ongoing conflicts across the region, officially labeled as the "Defense of the Shrines." Their golden domes and soaring blue minarets were more visible than ever before, highlighted by signs on major streets and freeways advertising their presence and pointing pilgrims in their direction. Their presence gave Tehran the feeling of an ancient spiritual center – even though it was a city with barely 200 years of history. And it wasn't just in Tehran – across the country, shrines seemed to be everywhere.

The explosion of shrines' visibility even made its way onto one of Iran's most popular shows, *Pāytakht* ("The Capital"). Broadcast on state TV, the first season of the comedy series follows a good-natured but simple rural family as they move to Tehran, only to find themselves evicted and sent back to their village on Iran's Caspian coast. The show was widely seen as an allegory for ordinary Iranians' struggles in the face of modernization. In the second season, the father, Naghi, finds a job at a factory that makes golden domes to place atop newly-renovated shrines. In one episode, when a dome is completed and lifted onto a truck to be taken away, crowds gather along the dusty highway nearby, lifting their hands to the sky and chanting prayers. The camera pans to show the dome perilously hanging off the side of the truck as honking cars swerve around the crowds, many of whom wipe tears from their eyes oblivious to the traffic around them. The show mocks how the factory-made golden domes are treated as sacred relics even when they are not connected to any saintly or spiritual presence. This juxtaposition between the sacred and the banality of its construction through architectural

elements comes to a head when Naghi buys a chicken to slaughter for a celebratory meal. Having no place to store it, he hides it in the factory. When his boss finds the chicken, he berates Naghi. Pointing at the factory floor, where men in dirty uniforms chat nonchalantly beside half-built domes under a thick layer of soot, he yells at a bewildered Naghi: "This place is full of *qedāsat* [sacredness]; how dare you sully it by bringing a chicken in?"



Figure 2

The golden dome featured on Season 2 of *Pāytakht*. After filming finished, the dome and minarets were sent to be used on a mosque in Fars province. (Source: Mehr News)

This comedic depiction – on a government-funded show aired primetime on state TV no less – gestures at how much the sudden visibility of shrines captured national attention and turned them into an object of media debate. Comedy "attunes us to things we already know but are not attending to;" in its presumptions about viewers' knowledge and what they will find funny, it "presumes a community" that through laughter "may also summon one into being." <sup>1</sup> In mocking the industrial production of 'holy' shrines' domes,  $P\bar{a}ytakht$  pointed at and reinforced larger debates occurring in Iranian society about the meaning and place of shrines at a time when authorities were renovating and expanding shrines at breakneck speed across the country.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Wedeen, Lisa. *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*. The University of Chicago Press, 2019: pp. 49.

The spread of humor about shrines reflected their growing visibility in the Iranian landscape – as well as their soaring numbers. In 2013, Iranian officials released figures showing that Iran was home to more than 11,000 imamzadeh shrines located in 8,000 different shrines (with some shrines hosting more than one tomb).<sup>2</sup> The numbers made headlines across the Persian-language press inside and outside the country. Media sites juxtaposed the number with pre-1979 statistics, which counted around 1,000 shrines.<sup>3</sup> Politicians and journalists raised alarm bells that the rapid spread of holy sites could undermine public confidence in religion, leading to *din-gorizy* (aversion to religion), and they called upon the government's religious administration to intervene. Jaafarzadeh Imanabadi, a member of Iran's parliament from Rasht, called for an investigation into how exactly the number of shrines had increased tenfold in less than forty years. A startling number of shrines had seemed to appear out of nowhere, with newly-minted domes and minarets – like those depicted on  $P\bar{a}ytakht$  – emerging across the countryside.



Figure 3

An infographic by Etemad newspaper depicting the distribution of shrines across Iran. (Source: Etemad News)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "Enteghād az `Adm-e Barkhord Masulān-e Irān Bā Emāmzādehhā Bedun-e Shajarehnāmeh [Criticism of Lack of Officials' Addressing Imamzadehs without Genealogies]. BBC News. 3 Jan. 2013.

https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/01/130103\_139\_shrine\_fake\_emamzadeh

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Mahjoub, Niki. "*Emāmzādehhā ke dar Irān Miruinand* [Imamzadehs that Grow in Iran] *BBC News*. 29 Jan. 2013. <u>https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/01/130127\_nm\_shrine\_religious</u>

On popular social media sites – where anonymity allows for even more pointed criticism - the appearance of "new" shrines was a frequent butt of jokes. A meme on the satirical Instagram page "Akhoond News" offered its tens of thousands of followers suggestions on how to build their own imamzadeh, noting that constructing a holy site was "an exceptional work opportunity with no initial capital required and a 100% return on investment." <sup>4</sup> An explanation of the year-by-year steps were as follows: 1) Set up a watercooler on a busy street and write " $Y\bar{a}$ Hossein" ("Oh Hussein!") on it, 2) Place candles above the watercooler for passerby to light and pray by, 3) Cover it with green fabric and place a Quran on top, 4) Construct a wooden tomb around the water cooler to indicate the presence of a saint's grave, 5) Attach a name appropriate to local culture ("such as Imamzadeh Zayn Ali and Ayn Ali"), 6) Create a genealogy for the saint buried there, 7) Request a budget to expand the plaza around the tomb and to pay salaries for shrine employees, and then 8) Have the saint appear in a dream to a physically disabled or blind person, after which "there is nothing left to do except count the money." The meme points to a number of inter-related concerns that provoked suspicion about shrines, including: 1) the role of state-funded engineers and architects in physically expanding the shrines, 2) the complicity of clerical genealogists in authorizing potentially false historical narratives through creation of saints' genealogies, and 3) the money-making potential of shrine expansion (both from government budgets as well as donations from worshippers).

Although the memes were funny – and raised serious issues – they often misunderstood a crucial point. Most of the shrines were not newly-created; they existed before, they just lacked the visibility that newly-minted golden domes and expansive plazas had created. Expansion

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> "Akhoond News" means "Mullah News," with "akhoond" being a derogatory word for religious clerics. The meme page combines anti-clerical and anti-government messages, which, in Iran, are overlapping categories of humor. Link: <u>https://www.instagram.com/p/Bu3wyVBnIau/?hl=en</u>

occurred as thousands of humble local shrines largely unknown beyond their immediate surroundings were incorporated into the government religious bureaucracy through the Islamic Endowments Organization (widely known as  $Awq\bar{a}f$  in Persian, meanings "Endowments"), which reports directly to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. This process began in the mid-2000s under President Ahmadinejad, as the Iranian state began a program to renovate, expand and convert shrines into "centers of culture" (*qotb-e farhangi*), part of a national project to build Iran into a "modern Islamic civilization." It was through shrines' registration, categorization, and centralization under state authority that they had acquired state budgets, infrastructure, and an unprecedented level of visibility – one that had in turn produced scrutiny. Focusing on the numbers of shrines risks obscuring the qualitative changes that accompanied the explosion in shrine visibility – as well as the social transformations they produced.

In this chapter, I explore how shrine modernization unfolded at sites across Iran from the 1990s into the present.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, I offer a general survey of the process and how it remade the national landscape over the course of just a few decades. I argue that the modernization project converts shrines into bases from which to produce and cultivate revolutionary selves in three key ways. 1) Firstly, through renovations that make shrines highly visible through a uniform architectural vocabulary, the project produces a spatially-rooted narrative of Iran as a Shia Islamic holy land that naturalizes the political rule of the Islamic Republic. 2) Secondly, by altering and "correcting" religious practices associated with the shrines, including through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> It is crucial to note that this program was never announced in a single moment; it began in the 1990s at major shrines and subsequently spread to local shrines and to neighboring countries. Although officials frequently and repeatedly spoke about the program's effects and aims, it was never announced as a singular project. As a result, clear budgets for the entirety of the project are unavailable. While some of the budgets come from *nazri* donations by pilgrims, large amounts come from state coffers. In 2013, for example, an Endowments official claimed the state owed 29 billion toman to imamzadehs. See: "*Mo`āven-e Sāzmān-e Awghaf-e Irān: Dowlat beh Emāmzādehhā Bedehkār Asst* [Deputy of Endowments' Organization of Iran: The State is In Debt to Imamzadehs]" BBC News. 16 January 2013. <u>https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/01/130116\_103\_shrines\_debts</u>

"authentication" of the identities of saints buried within and "rationalization" of ritual practices occurring there through both physical and security mechanisms, the project turns shrines into a site at which to model and promote the state's brand of "modern" Islam. 3) Thirdly, through architectural interventions that allow for the holding of government-funded religious rituals and the construction of Basij paramilitary offices inside shrines, the project turns the shrines into spaces in which a sense of religious discipline and order can be implemented. All of these turn shrines into central nodes within a project of reshaping Iran's physical landscape and producing centers for the cultivation of particular kind of revolutionary selves. This is not a process that has been exclusively imposed from above; as I will show, it has also engendered popular interest, demand, and participation by drawing on pre-existing norms and values in Iranian society that have drawn in large parts of the population to actively desire and ask for these changes.

I argue that the shrine renovation project was a key part of the plan to convert Iran into a "modern Islamic civilization" by defining Iran through a highly visible sacred geography of shrines that would become centers for the cultivation of revolutionary selves. These three forms of interventions are intended to reshape Iranians' sense of history and its relation to the present. In the chapter that follows, I first offer a brief history of why shrines became so central to the project. I then examine how the shrine modernization project was tied to an aesthetic project to visually convert Iran into a sacred geography and thus re-narrate its history, how it sought to correct popular religiosity and rationalize Islamic practice, how it was connected to the development of an Islamic archaeological science, how it produced new political saints, and finally how it converted shrines into politicized spaces to cultivate Iranian revolutionary selves. Throughout the chapter, I pay attention to public debates around how rampant *qedāsatsāzy* ("construction of the sacred") could potentially lead to *din-gorizy* ("aversion to religion"). As

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funds poured into holy sites, shrines became a "problem-space" through which actors critical and supportive of the state articulated broader arguments related to the nature of religio-political governance in Iran more broadly – and fears that turning all of Iran into a holy land was increasingly depriving "holiness" of meaning.<sup>6</sup> These problem-spaces thus became geographic spaces in which these debates played out. In the process, the shrine expansion project created a lightning rod that sparked very public debates around the role of faith, rationality, and politics in contemporary Iran.

## Shrines as Living Buildings

Shrines are "living buildings" with enormous popular appeal.<sup>7</sup> Unlike mosques, which are places of prayer, shrines are home to saints' tombs and are thus defined by the spiritual power worshippers experience at their heart. They are spaces of the dead; but the dead are integrated into the routines of the living. They are social spaces, where women meet to talk and families gather for weekend picnics, just as they are spaces of solace and prayer, where people appeal to the saints for help with issues as varied as childbirth, sickness, money problems, or depression. They're also a place to share joys, where people pass out sweets when a problem is solved. The practice of *nazr*, or making vows to God through saints, is central to the Iranian practice of Islam, and these vows are often fulfilled through distribution of food at shrines.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> I borrow this term from David Scott, who defines "problem-space" as "conceptual-ideological ensembles, discursive formations, or language games that are generative of objects, and therefore of questions. And these problem-spaces are necessarily historical inasmuch as they alter as their (epistemic-ideological) conditions of existence change." My usage, however, has a double meaning, as I am describing literal spaces. See: Scott, David. *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*. Princeton University Press, 1999: pp. 7-8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Mulder, Stephennie. *The Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi'is and the Architecture of Coexistence*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Regarding spirit money transactions in China, Julie Chu argues that officials were often suspicious toward vows as a kind of "superstition." But she notes that these exchanges were more acceptable in practice – where they could be presented as relatively harmless – than when presented as a belief system. This holds true in Iran as well, where authorities tolerated the practice but also de-emphasized its importance at shrines and tried to curb what were considered excesses. For example, at Imamzadeh Saleh, the traditional form of vow made to the saint involved the distribution of salt, and bags of salt were always available for purchase from numerous vendors at the shrine's gate.

While scholarship on Islam tends to focus on scriptural and legal systems, saints and their tombs – as well as the "social memory, devotional practice, and popular myth" associated with them – have long been central to how many Muslims experience Islam as a lived practice.<sup>9</sup>

Shrines attract not only pilgrims but also states and their patronage. Authorities have long recognized that shrines carry tremendous influence in shaping how people understand and construct relationships to power, faith, and urban space.<sup>10</sup> The major shrine complexes (*haram*) across Iran have been built up little by little, century by century, as different patrons have donated gifts and buildings to them, with the name of the patron often inscribed in calligraphy to be visible to pilgrims. Tombs and other memorials to the dead "enchant" the public sphere, investing it with the weight of the past and sacrifices that created the present.<sup>11</sup> They require the production and shaping of urban space. Enhancing their visibility requires a simultaneous choice about what will not be memorialized, concretizing certain narratives over others. The dead are central to the makings of modern political power; if the right to choose who lives and who dies is at the core of state politics, the question of how to narrate the dead and their legacies is central to claiming that power.<sup>12</sup> This is a common feature of modern societies the world over.<sup>13</sup> While the

However, at the gift shop inside the complex, salt was not for sale. The gate delineated the boundaries between "official" and "unofficial" Islamic practice. See: Chu, Julie. *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*. Duke University Press, 2011. For more on Iranian practices at imamzadeh, see: Honarpisheh, Donna. "Women in Pilgrimage: Senses, Places, Embodiment, and Agency. Experiencing Ziyarat in Shiraz." *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2013, pp. 383–410; Overton, Keelan, and Kimia Maleki. "The Emamzadeh Yahya at Varamin: A Present History of a Living Shrine, 2018–20." *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 2021, pp. 120–149.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Moin, A. Azfar. *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*. Columbia University Press, 2014: pp. 21-22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Mulder, Stephennie. *The Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi'is and the Architecture of Coexistence*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Verdery, Katherine. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. Columbia University Press, 2000.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Mittermaier, Amira. "Death and Martyrdom in the Arab Uprisings: An Introduction," *Ethnos*, vol. 80, no. 5, 2015, pp. 583-604; Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press, 2019; Verdery, Katherine. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. Columbia University Press, 2000.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> In the United States, clashes over monuments dedicated to Civil War generals, for example, reignite questions of historical memory and the responsibility of the living to the dead, as well as who and what should be honored in

dead may always be present, debates over the space they occupy throws the stakes into sharp relief. In Iran today, the dead play a crucial role in questions about power, nation, and faith. As Shahla Talebi notes, "in constructing the state and governing the nation, the ideologs of the Islamic Republic incorporate myth, deity and stories of origins to formulate their own regimes of truth, power and knowledge."<sup>14</sup>

But the importance of the dead, and urban interventions into the spaces they occupy, have been central to Iranian identity since long before the revolution that brought the Islamic Republic to power. In the 1930s, as part of an effort to modernize Iranians and weaken the Muslim clergy's power, Reza Shah Pahlavi supported the nascent heritage ministry's excavation, demolition, and reconstruction of Persian poets' graves that were configured as central inspirations for the persistence of Iranians as an ethno-national unity in the face of the Arabo-Islamic invasion.<sup>15</sup> Previously small graves resembling Muslim saints' tombs, many were rebuilt as white marble neo-Classical monuments. Some were even built where no tomb previously existed.<sup>16</sup> Authorities drew on cultural 'heritage' to create an alternative geography of pilgrimage, one based not on saints' tombs but on poets' graves, narrativized as having paved the way for a modern Iranian culture culminating in Reza Shah's rule. This was accompanied by a dramatic reshaping of Iran's cities through urban reforms to make cities look more modern by superimposing grid networks atop their historic urban fabric, involving the dislocation of

contemporary memorialization of the past. In contemporary Russia, similar processes can be witnessed. See: McGlynn, Jade. *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia*. Bloomsbury, 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Talebi, Shahla. "From the Light of the Eyes to the Eyes of the Power: State and Dissident Martyrs in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *Visual Anthropology* vol. 25, no. 1-2, 2012: pp. 139-40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Grigor, Talinn. Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs. New York: Periscope Pub. 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> This includes Ferdowsi's tomb. Ibid, Chapter 4.

thousands in city after city. In some cities, like Qom, the reforms even included the conversion of large cemeteries into city parks, triggering protests and resistance that were brutally crushed.<sup>17</sup>

During the reign of his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the state expanded its investment in cultural heritage and monument building to encompass the Mashhad shrine of Imam Reza, the brother of Qom's Fatemeh Masoumeh.<sup>18</sup> The majority of the city's historic core was demolished, isolating the holy complex to stand as a monument amidst a large grassy park. The project drew on methods developed by the global heritage industry for producing historical monuments since the Second World War, namely clearing surroundings and "encasing" them so as to be uncluttered by nearby buildings.<sup>19</sup> In this conceptualization of monumentality, still common in the heritage industry, the monument as a physical building held the heritage value, not its relation to the neighborhood around it.<sup>20</sup> Muhammad Reza Pahlavi was overthrown in a popular revolution in 1979. Soon after he fled the country, his father Reza Shah's tomb, located beside the Shah Abdol-Azim shrine in south Tehran, was demolished by a large crowd.

After the Iranian Revolution, the dead came to take center stage in a political discourse like never before. Official speeches constantly invoke the sacrifices of the nation's "martyrs," a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Protests against the conversion were in part led by Mohammad Taghi Bohlul, a cleric in Qom who was exiled after sharply criticizing the move. He later moved to Mashhad, where he played a key role in protests against the Shah at Gowharshad Mosque at the shrine of Imam Reza that were brutally repressed in a massacre in 1935. For more, see: Bohlul, Mohamad Taqi. Khāterāt-e Siāsi-ye Bohlul bā Negāhi beh Qiyām-e Gowharshād *[The Political Memoirs of Bohlul with a View toward the Gowharshad Uprising]*, Hozur Press: 1387 [2008].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> For more on the history of Mashhad's architecture, see: Farhat, May. "Shi'i Piety and Dynastic Legitimacy: Mashhad under the Early Safavid Shahs." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2014, pp. 201–216; Farhat, May. "Urban Morphology and Sacred Space: The Mashhad Shrine during the Late Qajar and Pahlavi Periods." In Ugurlu, A. Hilal and Yalman, Suzan, eds. *The Friday Mosque in the City: Liminality, Ritual, and Politics*, Intellect, Bristol, UK, 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Allais, Lucia. *Designs of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century*. The University of Chicago Press, 2018: pp. 4-5, 15. Decades later at a public presentation I attended, the lead urban planner on the project described the cleared areas as old, dirty, and "worthless urban fabric" [*bāft beh dard nakhor*] inhabited by poor migrants, including cemeteries where "addicts" hung out. <sup>20</sup> This distinctly modern view of monumentality was dramatically different from traditional Iranian architectural

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> This distinctly modern view of monumentality was dramatically different from traditional Iranian architectural aesthetics, which stressed the contrast between open courtyards lined by beautiful buildings, approached from within dense urban fabric, such as at the Safavid Naghsh-e Jahan Square in Esfahan.

category whose definition became central to claiming political legitimacy. The 1979 revolution followed years of protests by diverse political factions, ranging from Communists to liberals, constitutional monarchists to political Islamists, resulting in the ouster of a US-backed dictator. In the years that followed, a faction under Ayatollah Khomeini that called for the creation of an "Islamic Republic" took control, monopolizing power and persecuting dissenters. When in 1980, neighboring Iraq's ruler Saddam Hussein invaded, Khomeini urged Iranians to rally around the flag and denounced political opponents as traitors. The deaths of hundreds of thousands in the war – and the disabling of many more, including through chemical weapons attacks on civilians – became narrativized as the central act of sacrifice that ensured the survival of the nascent Islamic Republic and the nation. It was also a defense of the faith; the war was framed in official discourse as a battle between revolutionary Islam and a reactionary secular regime. Returning bodies were buried in public funerals, operating as combined political and religious rituals that served to mobilize a "particular politico-religious discourse within Islam" and make martyrdom in particular an object of passionate devotion.<sup>21</sup>

As death became nearer, so too did spaces of death. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, urban cemeteries were closed and new burials restricted to large cemeteries outside city boundaries, ostensibly for reasons of public health. But during the war, small cemeteries around shrines were re-opened to facilitate burial close to people's neighborhoods. Early in my fieldwork, I interviewed Ali Abbaspur, a deputy minister in Iran's government during the 1980s. In the years that had passed since serving in office, he had become increasingly cynical of many state

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Sefat, Kusha. "Things and Terms: Relations between Materiality, Language, and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *International Political Sociology*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2019, pp. 175–195. The reverence shown for bodies of "martyrs" stands in stark contrast to the leftist activists executed and dumped into mass graves, such as at Khavaran, where tomb stones were frequently vandalized by pro-government activists and commemorations were broken up by police, or those of persecuted groups like the Baha'is.

policies, and he spoke with surprising candor about the reasoning behind official decisionmaking at the time. Abbaspur explained the opening of shrine cemeteries as a reaction by authorities to the stream of bodies that were coming back from the warfront. As "martyrs" returned from the battlefield during the war, the government "allowed people to be buried at the imamzadehs to thank the families for their sacrifice; it gave them a sense of satisfaction instead of complaining about the issue of why we were at war," he said, referring to the fact that the war continued beyond its initial goals of defending Iranian territory (and instead came to be about invading Iraq and overthrowing Saddam Hussein). For the families, he added, "being buried next to an imamzadeh made it non-political and gave them a sense of contentment." He continued: "Imam [Khomeini] would always say that the martyrs are with God and for that reason, we are jealous because we are not there with them." Many local shrines became spaces dedicated to the war dead, graves topped by display boxes decorated with photos, the deceased's personal effects, and banners and flags locating their sacrifice in national and religious struggle.



A woman sits at the grave of a 'martyr' in the cemetery of Imamzadeh Ali Akbar, Tehran. (Photo: Alex Shams)

These were spaces of memorialization for families but also living monuments to the state's narrative of the revolution and war. Located in the vicinity of saints' tombs, they were grounded in religious narrative, backed by the saints of Islamic history. The valorization of shrines as spaces of sacrifice tied to the nation represented a re-inscription of their meaning, painting them not merely as men who died fighting for the nation, but as holy martyrs, as they are widely known in Iran even today. It also led to an early influx of state funding for reconstruction, upkeep, and the holding of official memorials, initiating the processes I discuss in this chapter. As a result of the war, shrines came to stand at the very heart of the faith and a renewed bond between people, their martyred children, and the nation.

Although the shrines can be home to the tombs of a diverse mix of holy figures, the state narrativized them broadly as being literal imamzadeh – "descendants of the imams" – and thus descendants of the family of the Prophet that fled into Iraq, Iran, and further afield because of persecution by authorities in the early days after the emergence of Islam. They were thus linked to the state's investment in the narrative of the Battle of Karbala, which came to frame their narrative of the war's martyrs. The battle marks an uprising in early Islamic history ending with a massacre of members of the Prophet Muhammad's family by a corrupt leader, the Caliph Yazid. It is retold yearly during the Islamic month of Muharram as representing the martyrdom of truth and righteousness by the forces of evil, and on the Ashura holiday large processions and street re-enactments occur. During the Revolution, Ashura was marked by mass protests, becoming a powerful political metaphor of resistance against oppression. The narrative grew in symbolic power after the Iraqi invasion. The shrines of Islamic figures killed at Karbala are located in southern Iraq; "liberating" them became a powerful motivator that sacralized the war effort. After war's end in 1988, shrines back in Iran continued to stand at the heart of the new

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political order's symbolic universe, a visible and living testament of the official political narrative and its ties to a longer religious and historical narrative.

The 1980s war can be considered a watershed moment in Iranian history because it united the nation in an unprecedented way to mobilize to defend the country. It interpellated Iranians as part of a national project, creating a politicized subjectivity uniting disparate communities.<sup>22</sup> For the tens of thousands of families who lost loved ones, the "Sacred Defense" discourse provided a meaningful way to make sense of a horrific loss that traumatized much of the country.<sup>23</sup> Burying bodies at shrine cemeteries made proximity to God concrete through physical proximity to the saints, symbolizing the divine nature of thousands of families' sacrifice. The re-imagination of imamzadeh as burial grounds for martyrs (or at least, descendants of martyrs) collapsed time and space - you could pray to a saint (presumably) tied to the Battle of Karbala and walk out and pray in the cemetery for the boys of your neighborhood who died "defending Islam" in the recent past. This was reinforced through government-led rituals at these shrines, which invariably focused on the martyrs of Karbala and often directly tied the imamzadehs, regardless of the specific story involved, to them, if merely by the fact that their presence in Iran suggested they had fled persecution elsewhere. For the millions of former combatants, many of whom came to serve not only in national and local politics and took over control of shrine administration boards

<sup>22</sup> Moallem, Minoo. *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran.* University of California Press, 2005; Terman, Rochelle. "The Piety of Public Participation: The Revolutionary Muslim Woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 11, no. 3-4, 2010, pp. 289–310; Vahdat, Farzin. "Reflections on Iranian Revolution of 1979: Rise of Subjectivity and Citizenship." *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2014, pp. 83–100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> In recent years in Iran, many middle-aged people have begun to idealize the 1980s as a time of nostalgia, oriented around the idea that it was an era when everyone was in the same boat and helped each other out. The background of this perceived unity was wartime. But it is narrated through this possibility of national togetherness which seemed to dissipate after the war when social and economic differences seemed to re-emerge with a vengeance. This is an alternative narrative to the "Sacred Defense," focused more on neighborliness in a situation that was out of people's control (rather than the state-sanctioned narrative of divine sacrifice).

and bodies committed to promoting the war's memory, perpetuating the "Sacred Defense" discourse – and the narrative of Iran as a holy land of martyrs – was a key political project.

In the 1990s, a handful of major shrines (*haram*) underwent renovation.<sup>24</sup> But it was only in the mid-2000s and 2010s that thousands of local shrines (imamzadeh) were targeted. To understand why the program expanded the way it did, we must understand this program in its the historical, political, and economic context. Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, was known to largely eschew imamzadeh visitation. But his successor Ayatollah Khamenei, who came to power upon Khomeini's death in 1989, described these shrines as key to spiritual practice. The program to modernize shrines nationwide as state policy is tied to the 2005 election of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. A fervently devout engineer who volunteered on the battlefront during the 1980s Iran-Iraq War, he embraced and promoted the *Maktab-e Irāni* (Iranian School [of Thought]) concept. In contrast to a political approach that emphasized Islam's universal nature, *Maktab-e Irāni* stressed the particularity of "Iranian Islam" as a guiding principle for his administration's policies, including by highlighting the centrality of religious shrines in Iran as part of Shia Muslim devotional practices.<sup>25</sup> Ahmadinejad was not alone in embracing this conceptualization; indeed, top religious and political leaders like Ayatollah

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> These renovations, which provided a blueprint for the local shrine renovations, will be discussed in the next chapter. I have separated them out, however, because the major shrine complexes already had the architectural features and clear lineages that I argue were central to the project's local iterations in this chapter.
<sup>25</sup> Ahmadinejad was fervent in his devotion to Jamkaran shrine in Qom and his administration undertook major public works to expand the site and build infrastructure around it, a topic discussed in depth in Chapter 2. An indepth exploration of the *Maktab-e Irāni* ideology can be found in the book Dowlat-e Irāni-Eslāmi: Siri dar Mabāni va Mo`ālefehhā-ye Takvin-e Dowlat-e Bumi dar Ārā-ye Doktor Mahmud Ahmadinejād, Ra`is-e Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān [*Irano-Islamic State: A Survey of the Fundamentals and Components of Indigenous State Development According to Dr. Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, the President of IRI*]. *Markaz-e Pazhuhesh-e Riāsat-e Jomhuri* [The Center for Research and Archives of the President of the Republic], Tehran, Iran, 1387 [2008]. Initially a

controversial concept labeled as a "deviant tendency" by detractors because it was seen as having the possibility of dampening the Islamic Republic's pan-Islamic message of unity, it was embraced by many over time. Two decades later, the Supreme Leader spoke of the need to promote "*Sabk-e Zendegy Irāni Eslāmi*" (an "Iranian Islamic lifestyle") as state policy. *Maktab-e Irāni* should not be confused with Henry Corbin's book "Inside Iranian Islam," which is widely-read among Iranian religious intellectuals but which is a distinct intellectual project.

Motahhari had articulated such arguments in his *Khadamāt-e Moteqābel-e Eslām va Irān* (published in English as "The reciprocal services between Islam and Iran") in the late 1960s in which he argued for the importance of Iranian-Islamic fusion, and Supreme Leader Khamenei also frequently spoke of a specifically "Islamic-Iranian" form of development.<sup>26</sup> This ideology of Islamic-Iranian synergy, spurred by Ahmadinejad's particular commitment to it, provided the intellectual basis for the program of shrine expansion and renovation; soaring oil prices that fed burgeoning state budgets for religious affairs provided the economic basis.

This was, in turn, linked to a broader popular debate over how to memorialize the conflict. By the 2000s, a new generation had come of age with little memory of the 1980s. At the same time, former combatants from the Revolutionary Guards and the volunteer Basij paramilitary who were deeply invested in the narrative of the "Sacred Defense" had ascended to high positions in the government.<sup>27</sup> President Ahmadinejad was one of them. The conceptualization of Iranian Islam allowed his administration to combine religious devotion and nationalism in a way that was present in the Sacred Defense discourse but whose national components had been hitherto de-emphasized. This was expressed in a push to monumentalize the war in public spaces, including through the construction of tombs to war martyrs whose remains had only recently been identified in the middle of college campuses, parks, and at newly-built memorial sites. At universities, these reburials provoked clashes between pro- and anti-government students.<sup>28</sup> After being built, these memorials would function as shrines did

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Bahman, Shuaib. "Islamic-Iranian pattern of development from Ayatollah Khamenei's perspective." *Journal of Social Theories of Muslim Thinkers* vol 8, no 2, 2018; pp. 9-35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> This in part because of quotas favoring them at public offices and universities, as well as the ties and connections they built through service at the front which not only bestowed upon them political legitimacy but also made them connected to political and economic projects that emerged after the war, such as the Revolutionary Guards' emergence as a major economic player through war-era reconstruction.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Talebi, Shahla. "From the Light of the Eyes to the Eyes of the Power: State and Dissident Martyrs in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *Visual Anthropology* vol. 25, no. 1-2, 2012.

elsewhere; sites of prayer where devotees would pray for martyrs. These were different than imamzadeh; but they were symbolically linked through the official narrative that drew a direct link between the Islamic saints of the past and the Iranian martyrs of the present. The narrative of the war turned all of Iran into a holy land; shrines would be the permanent sign of this holiness, drawing popular religiosity into a historical, religious, and national narrative that collapsed the memories of the Prophet's descendants, who fled war and persecution to find in Iran a refuge, with the martyrs of the 1980s war who defended this refuge from invaders. And at a time when the risk of war was at an all-time high following the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan – located on either side of Iran – this narrative was more important than ever before.

# A Holy Land of Golden Domes

The first shrine renovation projects were launched in the 1990s at a handful of major shrines across the country, primarily: Imam Reza in Mashhad, Shah Cheragh in Shiraz, Shah Abdol-Azim in Rey (south Tehran), and Fatemeh Masoumeh in Qom (the subject of Chapter 2). These projects became blueprints for works undertaken in the second half of the 2000s, when the project was gradually expanded to thousands of smaller shrines. The project's most visible sign in the landscape was aesthetic. Over the course of a few years, thousands of small, often single mud-brick room shrines gradually became larger and more luxurious, backed by burgeoning state budgets for shrine renovations that triggered requests from communities and sites across the country. Whereas once they looked old and worn – often like the towns around them – the renovated shrines were brand-spanking new, shiny and glossy in a way that made them stand out amidst their contexts. Specific architectural interventions on shrine exteriors like crowning them with gold, silver, or blue domes and laying machine-made, blue-tile facades were implemented with the help of a vast team of architects and engineers. On the interiors of shrines, elaborate

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mosaics of mirrorwork were built to cover dome ceilings, while simple wooden grills around the saints' tombs were replaced with elaborate, metallic grills inscribed with verses of Arabic or Persian calligraphy. In the process, the project produced an aesthetically uniform, brilliantly-modern sacred geography that rooted the Islamic Republic's goal of creating a modern Islamic civilization in the landscape. It thus established the physical environment as the embodiment of the state in the present and projected it into the past and the future, creating a teleology of the state as forever-present as guardian of the nation.<sup>29</sup>

These architectural interventions were inspired by the historic architecture of Iran's major shrine complexes. They were picked from a specific reference point – the architectural features that were primarily developed under the Safavids, the dynasty that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century conquered Iran and converted the nation to Shia Islam.<sup>30</sup> The local shrines targeted by these changes had a variety of features that reflected local architectural histories; for example, in Qom, a large number of shrines predated the Safavid empire and their designs were instead reflective of 14<sup>th</sup> century Seljuk styles.<sup>31</sup> But the shrine renovation program, in the name of enhancing and beautifying holy sites, tended to cover a wide variety of shrines from various historical periods in this style of renovation. The aesthetic interventions thus drew on specific visual cues of Shianess to build a uniform sacred geography that could tie together the landscape into a single visual code, what has been variously described as neo-Safavid architecture, or an Islamic Republican

<sup>30</sup> The major shrine complexes involve a combination of architectural features from both before and after the Safavids, but many of the distinctive features of Shia shrine architecture that have become adopted by Iranian architects as symbols of heritage were developed during that period. See: Allan, James W. *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran and the Indian Sub-Continent*. Azimuth Editions, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Bsheer, Rosie. Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia. Stanford University Press, 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> See: Hillenbrand, Robert. "A Shi'i building boom in 14th-century Qum: the case of Bāgh-i Sabz towers." in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam.* Ed. Fahmida Suleman. New York: Palgrave, New York & Basingstoke, 2000: 72-85.

architectural style.<sup>32</sup> In adopting neo-Safavid elements and erasing others, the project not only created a single uniform visual code of Shia Islam, it also rewrote history so as to make it appear as if all of Iran's imamzadeh were in fact a result of Shia patronage, producing 'silences' in the historical record.<sup>33</sup> But as the example of Qom above makes clear, many of these shrines predate Iran's conversion to Shia Islam in the 1500s – and historically, shrines of the Prophet's family were patronized by Muslims of varied sects and affiliations, including the nominally Sunni Mongols.<sup>34</sup> Focusing on Safavid-style design, however, reinforces Shia political hegemony in Iran as the precursor to the emergence of an authentic form of Islam and downplays the shrines' ecumenical histories.

The shrine renovation program was often explained to the public as being part of an effort to expand pilgrims' access. This included through a variety of features such as air conditioning, heating, parking lots, wheelchair accessible ramps, restrooms, and expanded seating areas and plazas that could accommodate (and attract) larger numbers of visitors. Urban and rural shrines became increasingly important as public spaces that people could spend time at, and shrines along major roads became convenient rest stops for travelers, their parking lots often filled with tents pitched by overnight visitors. Shrines also became more directly policed. Gates were erected and guards were stationed there, preventing people from spending too long at the sites and enforcing dress codes on visitors, such as the wearing of long *chādor* robes for women

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Contrast this with the neo-Achamaneid architectural style that developed through connections between 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran and India, drawing on ancient Persian motifs. See: Grigor, Talinn. "Persian Architectural Revivals in the British Raj and Qajar Iran." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2016, pp. 384–397.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History. Beacon Press, 1997.
 <sup>34</sup> James W. Allan mentions Sunni visitation and patronage of the Imamate shrines in Iran in the early centuries after their deaths. See: Allan, James W. The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran and the Indian Sub-Continent. Azimuth Editions, 2012. For the history of Sunni patronage of such shrines in Syria, see: Mulder, Stephennie. The Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi'is and the Architecture of Coexistence. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

(rather than just a headscarf, as mandated by Iranian law). These new security additions allowed shrines to be closed at night. This was particularly striking because many of the stories of miracles that occur at shrines specifically involve saints appearing in pilgrims' dreams. These miracles were now impossible. Additionally, the renovations included the creation of gender segregation barriers inside shrines, turning an informal practice into one that was standardized and enforced through architectural design. Shrines were split evenly between men and women, articulating the state's vision of gender segregation in society in a subtle, bureaucratic way.<sup>35</sup> Previously informally enforced through social norms, gender segregation was now built into the shrines themselves, naturalizing it as a part of social life (albeit one that made shrine visitation somewhat awkward for families). Tiles or references to shrine patronage that may have occurred under the Pahlavi dynasty were excised (though earlier ones were allowed to remain), replaced with tiles commemorating renovations undertaken by the Islamic Republic – and one that positioned the Islamic Republic as the protector and patron of shrines, erasing the contributions of the regime it replaced.

But it is important to recognize that whereas the shrine modernization program began as a government project, the funding was often acquired by local communities through requests for renovation budgets – in the process fueling a process of increasing popular demand. The shrine project did not emerge out of nowhere, but reflected priorities and sensitivities across Iran. As Noah Salomon has argued in the case of Sudan's Islamic state, the "magnetism" of the state project "was also due to the fact that the Islam on which it relied was not merely a bureaucratic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> For more on the evolution of gender segregation in Iran, as well as the evolution of its enforcement through spatial, architectural, and bureaucratic mechanisms, see: Shahrokni, Nazanin. *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran.* University of California Press, 2020.

logic, but a normative framework that far exceeded the state." <sup>36</sup> Similar to him, I do not see the Iranian state as separate from society, but instead as a series of processes that produce a novel form of modern power that is "neither human nor entirely divorced from our collective will," but which reflects and cultivates certain desires and imaginaries whose roots were already present.<sup>37</sup>

In many Iranian towns and villages, shrines are historically linked to local pride and identity. As they acquired budgets to renovate their shrines, other towns and villages moved to commence their own renovations. In many places, local councils applied for funding to register and thus renovate their local shrines and build signs (and greater domes) in the hope of directing passing tourists to them. State funding to make these holy places appear more grandiose and have more facilities for visitors – like air conditioning, electricity, bathrooms, TV screens, and so on – were a point of pride. The fact that a village might be home to the descendant of the Prophet motivated people to ask for state recognition. The physical renovation from simple, mudbrick architecture to gleaming golden domes and blue tiles produced the aesthetic sign that tied a local saint to the transnational sacred pantheon, elevating a town's importance to a recognized holy place within Iran's sacred geography.

This applied even to saintly figures who had recently passed away, especially young men who had died as martyrs in the Iran-Iraq War. At one tomb in northern Iran, for example, visitors frequently reported experiencing miraculous events they attributed to the young man who was buried there. In his war diaries, which were preserved and published, the young man had mentioned witnessing miraculous intervention on the battlefield, which likely encouraged these

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Salomon, Noah. For Love of the Prophet: An Ethnography of Sudan's Islamic State. Princeton University Press, 2016.
 <sup>37</sup> Ibid 11.

rumors.<sup>38</sup> His family asked the municipality to construct a shrine on his grave, a fact given further backing by the fact that his family was distantly descended from the Prophet's family. Even this example of a political saint emerged not from state efforts but based on the feelings of family and friends, perhaps part of a process of coming to understand the meaning of the sacrifice that their loved one had undertaken. To think of the emergence of shrines as a top-down process obscures the complex factors at play locally that pushed people to imagine places – including new ones – as holy to begin with.<sup>39</sup>

The shrine renovation projects were by their very nature heavy-handed, involving imposing a particular architectural form on thousands of unique holy sites across a geography with widely-varying styles. As incidents of shrine renovation – and destruction – multiplied in the news, a growing number of conservationists and architecture professionals began expressing their dismay at the destruction of historical architecture and its replacement with ersatz antiquity. For architects involved with the projects, however, these concerns seemed to miss the point. Hamed was an architect in his 30s from Qom who commuted several times a week to an office at a university in Tehran that was involved in shrine reconstruction. Architects at universities across the country were involved in the shrine renovations, and Hamed – who had a strong interest in Islamic architecture and even ran an Instagram page on the topic – had been highly motivated to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Ayaz, Morvarid. "Between History and Memory: a Case Study of a Martyr Mausoleum in Iran." Khosronejad, Pedram (ed.). *Saints and Their Pilgrims in Iran and Neighbouring Countries*, Sean Kingston Pub., Wantage, 2012. <sup>39</sup> Ironically, Iranian religious authorities increasingly dismiss the notion of "living saints," a common practice among Sufi adherents in neighboring regions, agreeing with secular critics that "new shrines" should not be appearing, as if to suggest that in terms of temporality, holiness was a feature of the past, not the present. In contrast, for example, there was nothing remarkable in neighboring Pakistan about the construction of new tombs for recently-deceased holy figures: prominent architects were (and are) involved in projects to build new shrines. For example, Kamil Khan Mumtaz, an Agha Khan award-winning architect, constructed a shrine for a revered saint who died in 2001. When I mentioned the controversies in Iran to the architect's associates in Lahore, Pakistan in 2020, there was a sense of disbelief at the idea that it would be unacceptable to build new shrines. In Iran, perhaps due to the popular ascendance and government promotion of a medicalizing discourse that treats classic symptoms of divine favor as expressions of nascent mental illness, new saints rarely emerge in life. War martyrs, however, could still become saints in death.

get involved. A devout Muslim, he also saw the renovations as improving pilgrims' abilities to visit and spend time at the shrines, and thus understood his work as serving the moral good of society. During our interview, I mentioned criticism I had heard of the replacement of historic architecture with factory-made contemporary equivalents unrelated to the shrine's history. In Hamed's opinion, the criticism was misplaced. "Ordinary people who come for pilgrimage come here to pray at the *zarih* [the grill around the tomb] ... They don't care about history. They don't come to see a historical building. They don't care if its 100 years old or 1000. They want to pray at the tomb." But the architects involved do, I argued, pointing to his own fascination with Islamic architectural history. His response was that even if the architecture mattered to the architects, "it doesn't matter to the ordinary people." He continued: "People have needs, and the shrines must provide visitors services. People don't come to see a dome that's 400 years old; they come to pray at the grave. If the dome is too small to accommodate everyone trying to come to it, they're not going to care if an ancient dome is replaced with a new one. ... Comfort is the most important thing from them. In the past, there were fewer pilgrims. But nowadays, there is more access, and standards of living have gone up and people expect comfort." In Hamed's opinion, since facilitating people's access to the shrines to undertake religious pilgrimage was the most important fact, destruction for the sake of renovation made sense. In our conversation, the preferences of "ordinary people" became a justification for destroying historic architecture.

But buildings are not just stone and carvings, they have an affective dimension; historic architecture produces a sense of connection to the past and creates a different experience of space. There is a substantively different feeling to entering a historic site built 1,000 years ago in which the original material is intact compared to entering one recently constructed. The same goes for the old alleyways that were often obliterated by shrine expansion projects. This is an

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argument espoused by the directors of the documentary film *Nesyān*, which explores the destruction of the historic urban fabric around Mashhad's central shrine since the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> Produced by the Sāmen Research Institute, the film notes how state urban planners have systematically demolished the majority of the city's core in order to build massive hotels, malls, and highways that have gutted the neighborhoods that once surrounded the Imam Reza shrine. In place of lively alleyways, the shrine is now surrounded by parking lots. At one point in the film, the narrator argues that "if the architects had walked down these streets," and seen the kids playing and the people going about their daily lives, they would not have committed these acts of urban destruction, which he compares to the bombing of Hiroshima. "Our power became great, and so did our power to destroy." It is precisely this bird's-eye view of the city that drives the destruction of neighborhoods around Iran's shrines. In this sense, these urban renewal projects resembles the "state-initiated social engineering" projects of high modernism that political scientist James Scott describes.<sup>41</sup> He notes that they are made possible through four factors, all of which I believe are present in Iran: an administrative ordering of nature and society, a high modernist ideology based on self confidence about scientific and technical progress and rational design or the social order, an authoritarian state willing to use the full weight of its coercive power to bring these designs into being, and a prostrate civil society lacking capacity to resist.<sup>42</sup>

Historic architecture allows for continued research into the traces of the past beneath the surface, traces which are obliterated in heavy-handed reconstructions that discard the original materials in favor of new replicas. The removal of patina – the residue that accumulates with time on the shrines' domes – makes the shrine look miraculously fresh and new at every sighting.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Ākhundpur, Hossein, director. Nesyān. Pazhuheshkadeh-ye Sāmen, 2017.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Scott, James C. Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. Yale University Press, 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Ibid 4-5.

For the renovation architects, this patina is a sign of wear and tear that diminishes the dome's shining brilliance. It undermines the emotive significance of this architectural feature, the sight of which is enshrined in popular customs, including *gonbadnāmeh*, the moment at which the pilgrim first sees the dome from afar and utters a greeting to the saint. By removing the patina, the shrine is removed from history, always a perfect version of itself, unencumbered by the passage of time.<sup>43</sup> Critics of the renovations included Iranian heritage practitioners, archaeologists, anthropologists who took to social media to voice their anger; but the fact that the buildings were controlled by the Endowments organization as religious sites meant their views had little effect. It was exactly the sense of history that was being sacrificed in the push to renovate the shrines. Instead, a single narrative would be produced of the shrines – one imprinted in their newly-renovated architecture.

The renovations of shrines, because they take buildings considered to be living sites as their focus, are not concerned with the historical aspects of those sites. The focus is on the site as part of a heritage of memory, a sacred geography, in contrast to a view of heritage which takes the physical structure as the source of significance. It was not only that which was being lost, but the possibility of alternative narratives to emerge from the architecture, for future researchers to read other stories into the shrines. Even though Shia Islam had only been dominant in Iran since the 1500s, the biographies of saints dated hundreds of years before that, creating a lineage for the faith and its contemporary defenders, the Islamic Republic, that stretched far deeper into the past. The shrine narratives would imprint Shia Islam's deep history in Iran on the nation's landscape with Safavid-style golden domes and blue times, each of them imprinted with the Islamic Republic's logo and the photographs of its leaders to make it clear who was protecting the sacred

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Dawdy, Shannon Lee. *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

geography they marked. But whereas the narratives were ancient, the buildings themselves would be brand new. And by constantly refurbishing them, they would be removed from historical time, instead appearing to be forever-new, an undeniable and central part of the landscape that was as in sync with modernity as the rest of the country.

## **Decommissioned Shrines**

Ironically, it was precisely shrines that authorities *did not want* people to worship at that became preserved as heritage monuments with as little intervention as possible. At religious sites across Iran, the Endowments' organization – which is responsible directly to the Supreme Leader - has asserted itself as a dominant presence with ultimate control, and they are responsible for coordinating the managing the renovations. But at a variety of holy places, it is *Mirās Farhangi* (preservation authorities from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts) which reports to the President, not the Supreme Leader – that has become responsible. This division of labor is not accidental; it reveals how strategies of heritage preservation can often unwittingly coincide with state efforts to alter religious practices. This has been the case at the mausoleum of Sheikh Safi, a Sufi mystic who founded the Safavi order followed by the Safavid Empire that eventually converted Iran to Shia Islam. For centuries, the site was an active shrine patronized by Sufi devotees.<sup>44</sup> But Sheikh Safi poses deep theological problems; he was a Sufi mystic who lived long before Iran converted to Shia Islam and lacked any traceable lineage to the Prophet Muhammad that could make him an appropriate imamzadeh.<sup>45</sup> Although he led the order that centuries later presided over Iran's conversion, his most famous follower, Safavid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Rizvi, Kishwar. *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine: Architecture, Religion and Power in Early Modern Iran*. I.B. Tauris, 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Moin, A. Azfar. *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

leader Shah Ismail, was revered as possibly being the living embodiment of the Imam Ali or the 12<sup>th</sup> Shia imam and was famous for eating the organs of his defeated enemies.

Venerating the grave of Sheikh Safi as a shrine would contradict core tenets of the version of Shia Islam promoted by state religious bureaucracy, and possibly raise uncomfortable questions about the Safavids more broadly. Thus renovations undertaken by *Mirās Farhangi*, with UNESCO support since the complex was declared a world heritage site in 2010, have reframed the site as a museum, for example by charging an entrance fee and allowing tour guides to enter the inner sanctum of the shrine to give explanations, treating the site as a historical monument rather than a solemn holy space. This has also been done through architectural interventions such as fencing off Sheikh Safi's tomb, thus preventing people from praying at the grill around it (which would attract worshippers at an active shrine). Other rooms beyond the inner sanctum, meanwhile, have become display rooms for historical objects, converted into a literal museum – as opposed to being spaces of reflection and quiet. These architectural innovations have largely desacralized the space.

Here we see how the goals of the Endowments organization, on one hand, and *Mirās Farhangi* and UNESCO on the other, can converge. The former is concerned with ensuring the site not exist as a site of worship. Conceiving of the tomb as a heritage monument akin to a museum, the approach of the latter two, fits perfectly with this goal. By treating heritage preservation as a neutral science focused on preserving the built environment, UNESCO funding unwittingly furthers the aims of the Endowments' organization: to make alternative forms of spiritual worship, in this case Sufi veneration of an ancient leader, physically impossible.<sup>46</sup> While

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> In contemporary Iran, Sufi groups are persecuted by the state for having heretical beliefs; at shrines across the country, renovation and addition of walls, lighting, and security guards have made the presence of wandering Sufi dervishes largely impossible. For more on Sufism in contemporary Iran, see Golestaneh, Seema. *Unknowing and the Everyday: Sufism and Knowledge in Iran*. Duke University Press, 2023.

in many imamzadeh, religious authorities have overseen the destruction of the physical sites to be rebuilt, renovated, and expanded in a more grandiose style, the physical features of Sheikh Safi's tomb have been methodically and carefully restored and preserved. This allows the site to exist as a beautiful building, dead as a site of worship and removed from its spiritual context, following dominant norms of global heritage preservation.<sup>47</sup> It also neutralizes the potential threat the site could pose to the variant of Shia Muslim practice promoted by the state, using the tools of bureaucracy and heritage preservation to eliminate deviant practices and legislate away inconvenient forms of religious difference.<sup>48</sup> As we can see from these examples, the process of shrine renovation was not just about creating an aesthetic standard that united Iran into a holy geography. It also required the production of a single narrative that these holy sites could fit into, and from which others could be excluded. The renovation of the shrines was not just physical – it required the production of all Iranian shrines as imamzadeh. And to do so, shrines that did not fit the mould of the vision of Islam that Iranian authorities wanted to promote had to be forced into it – or otherwise neutralized.<sup>49</sup> This points to the second objective that the shrine renovation program would work towards: the correction of Iranians' religious practices.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> In recent years, international heritage discourses have been increasingly critiqued for constructing a "fortress of rationality" around sites that removes them from their context as well as active use by communities around them. In some cases, communities living in or adjacent to them are expelled, reflecting an emphasis on the sites as physical objects, not as living places connected to the lives of the people around them. See: Byrne, Denis. "Archaeology and the Fortress of Rationality." In Meskell, Lynn (ed.) *Cosmopolitan Archaeologies*, Duke University Press, 2009, pp. 68–88; González-Ruibal, Alfredo, "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism: An Archeological Critique of Universalistic Reason" in Meskell, Lynn (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Archaeologies*, Duke University Press, 2009, pp. 113-139; Hevia, James L. "World Heritage, National Culture, and the Restoration of Chengde." *Positions: Asia Critique*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2001, pp. 219–243.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> This has been replicated at various sites across Iran. But authorities have not always been successful – some visitors continue to treat defunct or destroyed shrines as spaces of prayer regardless. Seema Golestaneh discusses a Sufi tomb in Esfahan's Takht-e Foulad cemetery that was demolished by authorities, ostensibly as part of "beautification" efforts. She notes that the Sufis who used to gather for religious rituals at the tomb continued to gather directly beside it after its demolition. See: Golestaneh, Seema. *Unknowing and the Everyday: Sufism and Knowledge in Iran*. Duke University Press, 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> It is notable that authorities chose museumization rather than, say, demolition, which is a strategy that has been used by authorities in countries like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan to deal with religiously problematic sites.

# **Correcting Popular Religiosity**

In the summer of 2013, pictures began circulating on popular Iranian social media pages depicting a green sign indicating the way to a shrine. Below it, a woman stood pointing at the holy place's name: "Imamzadeh Bizhan." Imamzadeh shrines are said to be the tombs of the Prophet Muhammad's descendants; Iranians thus expect these saints to bear Arabic names. Bizhan, however, is not Arabic – the "zh" letter ( $\zeta$ ) exists only in Persian. The image spread like wildfire on meme and joke pages, making it onto state-run news channels inside Iran and opposition-run satellite TV channels abroad. For those laughing, the existence of Imamzadeh Bizhan – and the government-funded sign – highlighted how Iran's religious government was encouraging the creation of fraudulent holy sites, promoting superstition among ordinary people and allowing the state to collect donations deposited there by pilgrims.

As the outcry grew, authorities responded. The Endowments organization, responsible for all holy sites in Iran, quickly installed a new sign for the shrine – Imamzadeh Seyyed Muhammad Bi-Jan – a properly Arabic name with no pesky "zh" letter. The organization, which considers all holy sites in Iran under its purview, dispatched spokespeople to media outlets to clarify that this was not a "fake shrine," but merely a (very real) shrine with a local nickname.<sup>50</sup> They had certified the saint's identity and corrected the signs; they stressed that he had a clear *shajarehnāmeh*, a genealogy, indicating his connection to the Prophet and thus a proper holy lineage. But the controversy never disappeared; even years later, "Imamzadeh Bizhan" appears in news broadcasts. In 2021, a news show focused on imamzadeh ran on Iran International, one of the most watched opposition satellite channels, broadcast from London (and funded by Saudi

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Officials were qidely quoted on this topic; for one example, see: "*Sana`at-e Emāmzādehsāzy dar Irān: 8151 Emāmzādeh bā Shajarehnāmeh va Te`dād-e Bishmāri-ye Boq`eh-ye Ja`ali* [The Imamzadeh-Building Industry in Iran: 8151 Imamzadeh with Genealogy and an Uncountable Number of Fake Shrines." *Radio Zamaneh*, 3 Mordad 1396 [25 July 2017]. <u>https://www.radiozamaneh.com/351266/</u>.

Arabia). It opened by showing Iranians rolling on the floor of a rural shrine in an apparent devotional act before discussing the Iranian government's lack of financial transparency in running religious affairs, illustrated with video of men grabbing donations from the interior of a saint's tomb (where worshippers customarily deposit small bills).<sup>51</sup> The segment drew a direct line between state support for an ever-increasing number of shrines, rural believers' "superstitious" religious practices, and religious officials making money by managing holy sites. The segment even compared the number of imamzadeh in Iran with the number of bookstores, emphasizing the perception of the Islamic Republic as a government of mullahs dedicated to keeping Iranians ignorant and superstitious. Official spokespeople, ironically, used the Imamzadeh Bizhan controversy to highlight the opposite: the fact that the Islamic Republic was combating superstitions and correcting incorrect practices by using verifiable social scientific methods, drawing from history and theological sciences, to authenticate the identities of saints buried in shrines. They stressed that if the shrine had been fake, authorities would have demolished it. But because experts had ascertained the saint's genealogy, they had proven the shrine was "real" and worthy of state support. They blamed "enemies of Islam" for seeking to undermine religious faith by mocking Muslim saints.<sup>52</sup> Invisible in the controversy were the local villagers who visited the shrine and apparently had no issue with their saint's Persian name. That is, until it became an issue of national controversy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Iran International. "*Emāmzādeh Qel Qelli*." *Zir-e Zarrebin*, 31 Oct. 2021. <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63c3hJDVUjs</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Khabarban. "*Andar Hekāyat-e Asāmi-ye `Ajib va Gharib Ziāratgāhhā-ye Ja`ali dar Fārs* [Inside the Story of Strange Names of Fake Shrines in Fars]." 6 Mordad 1396 [28 Jul. 2017]. https://khabarban.com/14210854/ اندر حکایت اسامی عجیب و غریب زیارتگاه های جعلی در فارس/14210854



Figure 5

Top: One of the original images that circulated widely showing the Bizhan shrine. Bottom: The 'corrected' shrine sign, with the name rewritten as "Bi-Jan."

The Imamzadeh Bizhan controversy was one of many that emerged in the 2010s. As the Endowments authorities poured large budgets into shrines, more and more Iranians applied to renovate their local holy sites, leading to an explosion in the number of registered shrines. Endowments authorities, meanwhile, developed a bureaucratic apparatus tasked with authenticating the identities of saints buried in shrines, staffed with religious clerics whose job was to investigate their lineages and produce *shajarehnāmeh* (genealogies) to be displayed at the shrines marking them as "legitimate." They also created *ziāratnāmeh*, prayers to be read at shrines, drawing on existing models but integrating new names and references for shrines that previously lacked them.<sup>53</sup> The question of saints' identities – and the necessity of verifying them – had become a state concern.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> There are two types of *ziāratnāmeh*: *mowsuq* and *gheyr-mowsuq*. The first category refers to those which were written by one of the early Shia Islamic holy figures, while the latter category refers to those written later. The new *ziāratnāmeh* fit into the second category; they draw on the patterns established by the first category but alter them as

Shrines have long been an important part of spiritual life in Iran. The most important ones belong to direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through the Shi'a imams, including that of the eighth imam, Imam Reza in Mashhad, and his sister Fatemeh Masoumeh in Qom. While these are grandiose urban complexes built up through centuries of royal patronage, the vast majority of Iran's shrines are humble sites of local importance – and often unclear provenance. For worshipers, it is the holiness emanating from the shrine which has historically been central; the issue of who exactly is buried where is a question for theologians. Shrines were historically refuges for those on the margins. The fact that many smaller shrines existed beyond the purview of the clerical establishment made them suspect to religious authorities.

The umbrella term for shrines, imamzadeh meaning "descendant of the imams," obscures the wide variety of holy sites that a shrine can be, ranging from graves of holy figures, natural formations like an old tree or a spring where miracles have occurred, or pre-Islamic figures whose tombs continue to be venerated following conversion to Islam. One of the most wellknown 'imamzadeh' shrines near Tehran, for example, is Bibi Shahrbanu, located on a steep mountaintop. The site is said to have been home to a temple honoring the Zoroastrian deity Anahita before Islam's arrival.<sup>54</sup> Today it is known as the tomb of the daughter of the last Zoroastrian king of Iran, said to have wed the Islamic figure Imam Hussein in a partnership that came to symbolize the fusion of Islam and Iranian national myth. Widely referred to as an imamzadeh, it clearly does not host the tomb of a descendant of the imams. But shrines can create historical continuities between the past and present, the sacred power emanating from them changing shape and form – and the buildings around them renovated and rebuilt – even as

necessary to produce new versions. They are not considered religiously problematic, though at times when they have been publicized, members of the public have viewed them as suspicious (alongside 'new' shrines).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> For more on Bibi Shahrbanu and its association with Anahita, see: Boyce, Mary. "Bībī Šahrbānū." Encyclopædia Iranica, vol. 4, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 1989, p. 198.

pilgrims continue to visit. At many shrines, it is not the origin that makes a place sacred for pilgrims; it is the very fact that it is sacred, lifted beyond ordinary time. A site's sacredness is attested to by believers as being *mojarrab* – meaning "tried," or proven by experience – meaning that vows (*nazr*) recited there are answered.<sup>55</sup> A *mojarrab* place acquires fame through the stories that circulate about the miracles enacted by the saint buried there, encouraging more pilgrims to frequent it.<sup>56</sup> Pilgrims ask for divine favors while clutching the grill around the saint's tomb, seeking comfort in the saint's embrace, reading holy texts nearby or giving out sweets to other pilgrims (*nazri*) in recognition of a prayer answered. A shrine that is not *mojarrab* might be abandoned over time.

When the Islamic Endowments Organization began actively integrating shrines into a centralized bureaucracy, the process did not merely entail adding a pre-existing list to a database. Integrating these disparate holy places into a single register meant finding and recording them. It also meant authenticating them. While some sites had existing genealogies or oral legends tying them to the Prophet's family, many more did not. Peyghambarieh, one of the most-visited imamzadeh in Qazvin, for example, is known as the tomb of four Jewish prophets said to have brought news of Christ's birth to Persia, placing them long before any imams existed. Endowments' authorities officially classified the shrine as a *boq`eh*, a tomb, despite its popular classification as an imamzadeh shrine. The goal of the Endowments' religious bureaucracy was to identify shrines and legitimize their existence through genealogies, and simultaneously

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> In the context of medieval Islamic science, *mojarrab* was used to mean "tested," in the sense that a prescription for a particular malady had been tested. See: Pormann, Peter E., and Emilie Savage-Smith. *Medieval Islamic Medicine*. Edinburgh University Press, 2013: pp. 148.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Unlike in Catholicism, for example, who has for centuries had a religious bureaucracy devoted to authenticating saints and their miracles, in Shia Islamic history, religious investigators tended to focus on the recorded acts and sayings of historic religious figures. Although they may have been interested in contemporary accounts of miracles and holy men to the domain of popular piety and might opine on them, they did not exercise control over them.

identify non-shrines and classify them as such. This would allow shrines to be added to the state budget, providing payment for caretakers as well as funds for religious and political activities.

The Endowments authorities drew upon existing centers focused on tracing Islamic lineages and recruited religious scholars to carry out the task of identifying saints across the nation.<sup>57</sup> Known as *`elm-e ansāb* or *nasabshenāsi* (literally, the science of genealogy), this process involved both historical research (consulting books detailing the migration of the Prophet's family, the established literature of Prophetic genealogy, and the narratives of the imams) as well as ethnographic fieldwork (visiting the shrine, speaking to caretakers, locals, and *sādāt*, those who can trace lineage to the Prophet).<sup>58</sup> The process of authentication was by its nature circular; a shrine's existence was taken as evidence of reason to develop a *shajarehnāmeh*, itself a process of educated guesswork attempting to piece together a story through disparate narratives and archives. Authentication started from the idea that the shrine must be authentic because it exists, though shrines that were clearly not imamzadeh could be subtly reclassified as mere tombs or resting places.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> The science of genealogy existed in the context of Islamic seminaries, where it was linked to processes of verification common in *`elm-e hadis*, which involves trying to understand the evidence and chains of transmission that make a particular saying or story about the Prophet Muhammad or the 12 imams reliable or unreliable (*sanadiyat*) as a source of religious knowledge. This is part of the curriculum at seminaries in Iran. While for Sunni Muslims, it is focused on the Prophet Muhammad, for Shias it also includes the Imams. See: Niloofar Haeri. *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires: Women, Prayer, and Poetry in Iran.* Stanford University Press, 2021: pp. 133.
<sup>58</sup> These two forms of research were detailed as the most important by Hojjat ol Eslam Seyyed Mehdi Rajaii, an official at the Sadat Genealogy Research Institute in Qom. Azizi, Ramazan Ali. "*Dar Goftogu bā Ma`sul-e Pazhuheshkadeh-ye Ensāb; `Elm-e Ensāb dar Gozar-e Tārikh* [In Conversation with the Director of the Lineage Research Institute; Genealogy Throughout History]." *`Ofoq-e Howzeh*, 4 Nov. 2009, hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/6435/7093/86101/%D8% AF%D8%B1-%DA% AF%D9%81%D8% AA-

%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C-

<sup>%</sup>D9%88%DA%AF%D9%88-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A6%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%BE%DA%98%D9%88%D9%87%D8%B4%DA%A9%D8%AF%D9%87-

<sup>%</sup>D8%B4%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AE. <sup>59</sup> This is not exceptional but in certain ways is foundational in much contemporary archaeology in the Middle East. It can be directly compared to the discipline of Biblical archeology, which took the existence of Palestinian holy sites as proof of the existence of ancient Jewish sites referenced in scripture, in the process marginalizing oral narratives and genealogies from local tradition and replacing them with theologians' narratives. This had the effect over time of turning shared holy places into sites of conflict, an issue that endures today between Israelis and

The fact that a government budget was at stake further steered the process. Researchers, who were trained in the seminary as well as in historical and social scientific research methods, carried out this work among locals who understood that their ability to prove the holy lineage of saint was the only way to guarantee their shrine became funded.<sup>60</sup> Although spokespeople said that they destroyed shrines proven fake, they also admitted that in practice this rarely occurred out of deference for local sensibilities.<sup>61</sup> In practice, the state-funded clerical researcher's ability to verify the shrine allowed him both to integrate it into a state narrative of Iran's sacred Muslim geography and give funds to locals to reconstruct and expand their shrine and make it a site for government-funded cultural, political, and religious activities, carried out uniformly at the same time across the nation.<sup>62</sup>

Palestinians in disputes over the identity of those buried in holy tombs. See: Abu El-Haj, Nadia. *Facts on the Ground: Archeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001; Shams, Alex. "Why do Palestinians burn Jewish holy sites?: The fraught history of Joseph's Tomb." *Jerusalem Quarterly*. Issue 78, 2019, pp. 77-85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> The fact that the researchers could draw on these different methods is a product of the reformation of the Islamic seminary system since 1979, introducing social sciences and history into religious training and vice-versa. The creation of an equivalence system between seminary and university degrees was a key part of this process, which was connected to a desire to ensure religious training was in step with contemporary learning. A glance at the resume of Gholamreza Jalali, the head of the Genealogy Group of the Base of Islamic Research at Imam Reza's shrine in Mashhad, offers an example of the back-and-forth between university and seminary education and teaching that characterizes the experience of leaders in the field. See: "*Mosāhebeh Bā Gholāmrezā Jalāli; Modir-e Gruh-e Ansāb-e Bonyād-e Pazhuheshhā-ye Eslāmi-ye Ostān-e Qods-e Razavi* [An Interview with Gholamreza Jalali, Director of the Lineage Group of the Islamic Research at Astan-e Qods-e Razavi]." Dar Os-Siadeh, darossiadeh.ir/مصاحبه-با-غلامر ضا-جلالى المحربة المحربة

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> That being said, I did hear of various shrines that were "decommissioned." For example, in Kashan, the tomb of Piruzan Nahavandi was long treated like an imamzadeh shrine. It is said to hold the tomb of Abu Lulu, a Persian soldier who was said to have slain the Caliph Omar. For many Shia Muslims, Omar is a hated figure who is seen as having usurped the rightful place of Imam Ali, a beloved figure, and of having persecuted the Prophet Muhammad's family. On the anniversary of the Caliph Omar's slaying, some Iranians hold *Omar Koshun*, a joyful holiday celebrating his death. However, after 1979 Iranian authorities banned the holiday because they felt that it provoked anti-Sunni sectarian animosity. According to people I spoke to in Kashan, the shrine used to be host joyous celebrations on *Omar Koshun*, which were attended in particular by women who would dance and sing inside. To curb these practices, authorities took over the tomb and turned it into a police station.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> For example, the cultural and social deputy of the Endowment's organization Hojjat ol Eslam Ahmad Sharafkhani noted in 2016 that during the *Daheh-ye Karamat*, which marks the victory of the Iranian Revolution and the return of Ayatollah Khomeini from exile in 1979, across Iran 2,100 shrines hosted state-funded celebrations at the exact same time. "*Elat-e Afzāyesh-e Emāmzādehhā va Eshtebāhi beh Nām-e Emāmzādeh Bizhan* [The Reason for the Increase in Imamzadehs and an Error by the Name of Imamzadeh Bizhan]." *Khabarban*, 4 Aug. 2017, khabarban.com/14163786/ يات الأزايش امامزاده ها و الشتباهي بنام امام زاده بيژن/

The diverse origins of Iran's shrines were not completely unknown to authorities. When I met Abbaspur, the former deputy minister we met earlier in the chapter, to discuss my research, I was surprised that he brought up the fact that many of the imamzadeh were not imamzadeh in the literal meaning. "They're good people that did good things, and so people began to visit their graves and over time they receive inspiration (*elhām*) that they were, for example, imamzadeh. ... But there's an energy that comes from these kinds of places. As an engineer, I can't really deny it. There are things in this world that happen that you can't really explain," he continued. "We don't know why, but they happen – that energy is there." The question of inspiration was particularly important given that shrines often had diverse origin stories that circulated among devotees pointing to miraculous events that heralded their being discovered. Often, the story involved someone seeing the shrine's location in a dream, and then later going to the site and finding some evidence of its presence. But Abbaspur mentioned that he thought this could also happen for more cynical reasons. "Some villages feel that because they lack an imamzadeh, they lack an identity. And then someone has a dream and says: Oh! There's an imamzadeh there. And so they go and build one. And it becomes an industry." Abbaspur's awareness of the possibility of shrines to have diverse lineages - or even to be "fake," at least in terms of their origins - was not completely unique.

#### Building an Islamic Archaeology

The drive to authenticate shrines was connected, in part, to long-standing clerical suspicions in Iran about popular religiosity and specifically regarding people's attachment to shrines of uncertain provenance. In the post-revolutionary context, in which state policies and budgets were directly steered by members of the clerical establishment, an opportunity emerged to allay these suspicions by rationalizing these practices with scientific methods – and correcting

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practices that didn't measure up. Since 1979, Iranian government institutions have been tasked not only with promoting Islam but also purifying it, removing practices seen as irrational or lacking basis in scripture or tradition and replacing them with modernized forms. In the 1990s, for example, Ayatollah Khamenei issued a fatwa banning self-cutting with daggers (qamehzani), practiced by some worshipers during the mourning holiday of Ashura. The fatwa, since reiterated multiple times, became the legal basis for police to break up religious rituals to prevent its occurrence.<sup>63</sup> This fatwa was based broadly on the idea that public blood-letting hurt the image of Muslims among non-Muslims (and, specifically the image of Shia Muslims, since selfflagellation during Ashura only exists among Shia Muslims) and could thus undermine their standing ("vahn-e mazhab").<sup>64</sup> It is also based on the prohibition of any practices that cause bodily harm.<sup>65</sup> If believers wanted to shed blood in tribute to Imam Hussein, the religious figure commemorated at Ashura, they should do it in a way that helps others. As a result, blood donation drives are now held yearly during the holiday to encourage people to 'shed blood' in a scientific, rational, and modern way. This reasoning highlights the importance of the media in shaping how Iranian officials conceived of proper, orthodox Islamic practice.<sup>66</sup> Similar to the controversy around Imamzadeh Bizhan in the introduction, in which social media and critical opposition news broadcasts triggered the state to intervene, the gaze of others through the media

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> This practice also spurred extensive debates in other Shia Muslim majority contexts. See, for example: Hegland, Mary Elaine. "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)Forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender through Pakistani Women's Rituals of Mourning." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, pp. 240–266.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> "*Cherā Qameh Nazanim*? [Why Should We Not Engage in Qamehzani?]." *Portal Anhār*, portal.anhar.ir/node/9704#gsc.tab=0. Accessed 26 June 2023.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> His rulings can be found on his website: "Rules of Muharram Month." *Pāygāh-e* `*Etelā*' *Resāny-e Daftar-e Maqām-e Mo*`azam-e Rahbari [The Media Center of the Office of the Supreme Leader], 3 Oct. 2016, www.leader.ir/en/content/16350/Rules-of-Muharram-month.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> In later years, this rationale was often stressed above and beyond the former rationale by religious scholars who sought to explain the ruling. See: "*Fatāvy-e Ayatollah Khāmenehi darbāreye Qamehzani, Barahneh Shodan, La`n-e Doshmanān-e Ahl Ol-Beit, va Alfāz-e Rakik dar `Azādārihā* [Ayatollah Khamenei's Fatwas about Ghameh-Zani, Getting Naked, Cursing the Enemies of the Prophet's Family, and Vulgar Words in Mourning

Ceremonies]." Khabar Online, 25 Oct. 2014, <u>www.khabaronline.ir/news/381996/ فتاوای-آیت-الله-خامنه-ای-دریاره-قمه-زنی-Khabar Online</u>, 25 Oct. 2014, <u>www.khabaronline.ir/news/381996</u> <u>برهنه-شدن-لعن-</u>دشمنان

was key. Sometimes glossed as "enemies of Islam," the others were generally understood to mean the West, Iranians opposed to the Islamic Republic living abroad, and Iran's local enemies, Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>67</sup>

This emphasis on defending Shia Islam as being in tune with vaguely-defined notions of modernity and science against charges of superstition is informed by a longer history. Since the late 1800s, Iranian intellectuals have positioned the Muslim clergy as counter-figures of Iranian modernity.<sup>68</sup> Concerned with "catching up to the West," they stressed the need to adopt Western technology, reform Iranian culture based on Western models, and diminish the power of the religious clergy, an outlook adopted as state policy by the Pahlavi dynasty.<sup>69</sup> Ideologues like Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-e Ahmad who inspired the 1979 Revolution agreed on the need for reform, but they argued that Iran needed to develop its own form of modernity based not on the West but instead rooted in "authentic" Iranian Muslim culture.<sup>70</sup> But they also shared earlier intellectuals' dislike for the clerical establishment as outdated and reactionary. In 1979, Islamist forces triumphed in the revolutionary infighting, with Ayatollah Khomeini at the helm. Khomeini argued that revolutionary clergy like himself were uniquely positioned to overthrow the traditionally quietist seminary and transform Iranian religion and society to create a cultural and political model that was at once Iranian, Islamic, and modern, allowing the Islamic Republic to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> An Endowments' official, for example, argued that shrines were the most important center for combatting "Wahhabism" – i.e. Saudi Arabia – and indirectly blamed them for igniting social media mockery of Iranian shrines including Imamzadeh Bizhan. This argument is somewhat less fantastical if we consider that the Saudi government is believed to be one of the main backers of the Iran International satellite TV station. See: "*Elat-e Afzāyesh-e Emāmzādehhā va Eshtebāhi beh Nām-e Emāmzādeh Bizhan* [The Reason for the Increase in Imamzadehs and an Error by the Name of Imamzadeh Bizhan]." *Khabarban*, 4 Aug. 2017,

<sup>.</sup> علت افرايش امامزاده ها و اشتباهی بنام امام زاده بیژن/habarban.com/14163786

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> One of the best examples from Iranian literary history is the cartoon Mulla Nasroddin, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century publication that lampooned the religious elites for spreading superstition and ignorance in the name of faith.
 <sup>69</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi, M. *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Vejdani, Farzin. *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture.* Stanford University Press, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Eskandar. "Gharbzadegi, Colonial Capitalism and the Racial State in Iran." *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2020, pp. 173–194.

become an "Islamic civilizational alternative to the West." <sup>71</sup> The revolutionary clergy would thus lead over a process of technological advancement and cultural change based on a belief in the inherent compatibility of scientific reason and Islamic values. In order to achieve this, a "wide range of objects ... [came] under critical scrutiny and turned into objects of state planning." Authorities began carrying out a society-wide process of rationalization, specifically focused on "bringing new social and cultural forms into being, reinforcing old ones, or charging them with new intensities as they [attempted] to ensure conformity between their practices and commitments to reason." <sup>72</sup> Far from being anti-modern, as within the Islamic Revolutionary ideological paradigm, the successful rationalization of spiritual life would be an assertion of the modernity of Iranians and of Islam as a whole.<sup>73</sup>

The Islamic Endowment organization's efforts to register shrines provided an unprecedented opportunity for tombs across the country to be authenticated and linked to the Prophet's family. The organization's approach was given intellectual backing by the burgeoning body of literature produced by research institutes and thinktanks in Iran dedicated to "Islamicizing" the social sciences.<sup>74</sup> Texts, articles, and guidebooks were produced explaining the work of the organization and its theoretical bases, focused on shrine history and the historical texts drawn upon to craft genealogies for them. This was also in part an effort to resuscitate the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Doostdar, Alireza. *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny*. Princeton University Press, 2018: pp. 5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Ibid, 16-17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> The irony of the debate between modernity and tradition is that it is possible only from the vantage of modernity, as Harry Harootunian argues: the idea of tradition as an identifiable object that can be isolated and revived requires an analytical distance that allows you to see it as a distinct object, in danger of destruction or in need of saving (49). Islamic revolutionaries' critique of the realities of everyday life under the Shah, and the secularization of public life, in particular, was a symptom of modernization – the fact that, "rather than being an inert experience of facts, everyday life was increasingly seen as the site that revealed symptoms of societies' deepest conflicts and aspirations" (69). Harootunian, Harry D. *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life.* Columbia University Press, 2002.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> For more on this broader intellectual project, see: Doostdar, Alireza. "Varieties of Islamic Social Science." *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2018, pp. 229–247.

reputation of archeology in Iran. Since its foundation, the field was dominated by Western scholars primarily focused on uncovering ruins of ancient pre-Islamic empires who carried away most of the artifacts they uncovered.<sup>75</sup> Although religious sites were exempted from agreements that legalized removal, the continued presence of imamzadeh tilework in Western museums to this day attests to widespread theft.<sup>76</sup> Iran's ruling regime from 1925-79, the Pahlavi dynasty, drew upon the ancient past to legitimize its rule. This included in grand ceremonies like the ostentatious celebration of 2,500 years of monarchy at Persepolis that drew widespread criticism in Iran – and which became widely seen as a major event that discredited the regime and helped ignite the 1979 revolution.<sup>77</sup>

The revival of archaeology and interest in preservation were resuscitated in Iran by the 1980s Iran-Iraq War. Widespread destruction of historic sites by Iraq's invading forces gave the *Miirās Farhangi*, the Cultural Heritage Organization, impetus to begin recording and reconstructing them.<sup>78</sup> The conflict was labelled the Sacred Defense in Iran and was understood as a holy war to defend not only the Islamic Republic but Islam writ large from the grasp of Saddam Hussein, portrayed as a reactionary secular dictator on par with Yazid, the great villain of Shia Islamic history. Amidst the war, state-affiliated intellectuals articulated a notion of heritage preservation focused on sacred ruins that highlighted their importance as sites of memory and religious devotion. Mehdi Hodjat, the director of *Mirās Farhangi* from 1981 until

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> For a history of archaeology and colonialism in Iran, see: Abdi, Kamyar. "Nationalism, Politics, and the

Development of Archaeology in Iran." *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 105, no. 1, Jan. 2001, pp. 51–76. <sup>76</sup> The continued "nakedness" of the walls of Imamzadeh Yahya in Varamin, even as its tiles hold pride of place at numerous museums in Europe and North America, is one of the best examples of this. See: Overton, Keelan, and Kimia Maleki. "The Emamzadeh Yahya at Varamin: A Present History of a Living Shrine, 2018–20." *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 2021, pp. 120–149.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> See: Grigor, Talinn. "Preserving the Modern Antique: Persepolis '71," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historical Preservation History, Theory, and Criticism*, vol. 2, no.1, Summer 2005, pp. 22-29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> See: Musavi, Seyyed Ahmad. Mirās Farhangi va Jang-e Tahmili [*Cultural Heritage and the Imposed War*]. The National Cultural Heritage Organization. Tehran, Iran, 1370 [1991].

1991, wrote a PhD thesis on the topic of preservation that offers some insight into his way of thinking.<sup>79</sup> In this thesis, Hodjat puts forth a Quranic analysis of heritage that stresses the need for humankind to reflect upon the monuments of the civilizations that preceded them. He argues that the Pahlavi dynasty paid too much attention to ancient monuments, arguing that the current regime should focus on cultural heritage that would help Iran "recognize its Islamic-Iranian identity."<sup>80</sup> He notes that in archaeology, to excavate one layer, others must be removed, and he thus argues for a prioritization of heritage according to a coherently-linked conception of an individual culture. Hodjat thus attempted to recover the notion of preservation from being associated with the *ancien régime*, a fact he stresses initially imperiled conservation efforts, by linking it directly with the promotion of the revolutionary state's understanding of culture.

Others took this further. In *Shi'ism and the Preservation of War Ruins*, preservation architect Ahmad Asgharian-Jeddi argues that Shia Islam was at its core a religion dedicated to preserving and protecting ruins.<sup>81</sup> It was precisely through the locating of the graves of the Prophet's family – the imamzadeh shrines – and pilgrimage and patronage of them that Shia Muslim faith had acquired meaning, constituting a collective work of preservation. In this approach to preservation, what was most important was the heritage of memory, keeping alive the narrative of the site and the saint buried there. These sites were *lieux de mémoire* – but not the physical building itself, which changed over time and was always secondary to the tomb.<sup>82</sup> The author argued for the memorialization of war battle sites, comparing them to the shrines of the Prophet's family.<sup>83</sup> Pilgrims and patrons had done their work over the centuries to keep these

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Hodjat, Mehdi. *Cultural heritage in Iran: Policies for an Islamic country*. PhD thesis, University of York, 1995. <sup>80</sup> Ibid i.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Asgharian-Jeddi, Ahmad. Shi`eh va Hefz-e Āsār-e Jang [*Shi'ism and the Preservation of War Ruins*]. Allameh Tabatabaei University Press, 1379 [2000].

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire." *Representations*, vol. 26, 1989, pp. 7-24.
 <sup>83</sup> In another parallel, the construction of war memorials and the state-funded cultural industry that emerged to perpetuate the memory of the war with terms like "the Culture of the Front" and "Sacred Defense Art" sought to

sites alive, in the face of those who would have wanted to destroy them (i.e. the "enemies of Islam") – now, it was up to the Endowments' authorities to protect their continued existence and open them up to more pilgrims. Shrines were living sites, home to the tombs of saints who were cognizant and awaiting pilgrims; their expansion and promotion by Iran's newly-Islamic government was key to maintaining the legacy of 1400 years of patronage that contributed to their existence into the present. The culture of memorialization of the war and its martyrs would thus come to find new expression in the expansion of the imamzadeh. The variety of shrines scattered across the country would become proper imamzadeh, their gleaming golden domes visually symbolizing Iran's place as a Shia Muslim holy land and refuge for members of the Prophet's family. And as centers for cultural, political, and religious activities funded by the state, the shrines would become bases for further proselytization and awareness of Iran's uniquely sacred geography.<sup>84</sup> In the process of renovation, plaques marking the patronage of the Islamic Republic along with portraits of Iran's current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and its revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini were prominently placed in every shrine, leaving no doubt as to who was to thank.

The project of imamzadeh renovation is not reducible to a desire to be or appear modern.<sup>85</sup> But I argue that the post-1979 government's pervasive compulsion to show the

produce a singular narrative of the war years that constructed a nostalgic image of a society united in religious fervor to defend the nation. In reality, Iran entered the war as a society highly fractured by the Revolution and the clashes between different parties and factions that followed; behind the curtains of the "united society" was widespread repression and consolidation of power by the newly-emergent Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini's authority. These tensions would be obscured however on the state-organized Rāhiān-e Nur tours that visit the battle sites, part of a thriving "heritage" tourism industry focused on the war.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> This proselytization was directed not only at non-observant Iranians but also Sunni Iranians, who number nearly 10 million people. The internal dynamics of holy space and sectarianization are explored in Chapter 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> While it may not be reducible, it certainly is a component of it. In Iranian political discourse, references to the invisible Western audience are constant, such as the interpretation of government-organized protests as a statement to "enemies" of the Iranian people's steadfastness. Ironically, this discourse constantly asserts the West's importance as interlocutor; the main goal is not evoked as convincing unconvinced Iranians or sending displays of solidarity to the oppressed that are the stated *raison d'être* of the rally, but instead to prove to the West that Iranians believe X. Even as Iranian political discourse seeks to undermine Western power and frames it as insignificant –

population that religion is consonant with prevailing (if vague) notions of technological modernity is a central motivator of a project that has involved rebuilding historic religious shrines to appear brand new. Given popular perceptions of the religious establishment and its mosques and seminaries as old and outdated, modernizing religious sites and emphasizing that they are new, climate-controlled, and light-filled public spaces that define the Iranian public sphere in an aesthetically pleasing way is a route to assert the clergy's presence – and their state – as a modernizing force in Iranian society, and also one that is natural and rooted in Iranian history, as evidenced by the architectural continuities of the renovated present-day shrines with those of the past. The question of producing religion as modern takes material form in the shrine project, positioning the Iranian state as the guardian of the nation's spiritual heritage, which in turn through its visibility in the landscape is positioned as defining Iran as a Muslim holy land.

Shrines offer the Shia Muslim site *par excellence* in which to engage in this project, in part because their visitation has been at times shrouded in religious controversy. In neighboring countries, 20<sup>th</sup> century Sunni Muslim reformist movements largely condemned shrine worship as superstition, a view that has in recent decades become widely adopted by the region's elite and middle classes as consonant with a "modern" approach to religion. Echoing Wahhabi critiques of shrine visitation as a practice bordering on heresy because it puts a saint before God, these movements – which grew out of interactions with European colonial authorities – emphasized a Protestant-like approach of building direct connection with God and scripture.<sup>86</sup> They portrayed Sufi mystics who claimed a special connection to the divine, long central to the popular practice

such as in the famous phrase of Imam Khomeini, today plastered on murals across Iran, that "America cannot do a damned thing" – Iranian officials constantly emphasize the importance of Iranians directing their energies toward delivering messages to the West.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Militant groups inspired by Wahhabism have repeatedly attacked and destroyed shrines, including Shia and Sufi shrines alike, a topics explored in Chapter 4.

of Islam, as glorified charlatans. In Sunni-majority contexts, practices like shrine worship that were once common across society are increasingly condemned by religious authorities and avoided as superstitious, especially by the middle and upper classes.<sup>87</sup>

Shia Muslims, however, emphasize the particular spiritual connection that the Prophet's family is supposed to have to the divine, even considering them infallible. Their central religious rituals focus on the persecution of the Prophet's family at the hands of the early leaders of the Muslim community.<sup>88</sup> Visiting their descendants' tombs has a long ritual history, justified with reference to numerous quotations from early Muslim leaders emphasizing that visiting the Prophet's descendants is akin to visiting the Prophet himself. His descendants are thought to be present at their tombs and can hear and respond to pilgrims, underpinning the spiritual necessity of visitation. Shia Muslim clerics generally agreed with Sunni reformists that Sufi mystics were charlatans and viewed visiting the Prophet's descendants – the imamzadeh – which they saw as wholly different.<sup>89</sup> As a result, distinguishing between Sufi tombs and Shia imamzadeh

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> The landscape differs by country; for example, in Lebanon or Palestine, saints' shrines are almost completely out of use, while in Indonesia or Morocco, they continue to be frequented by certain segments of society while avoided by those who see themselves as following a more 'modernized' Islam. In countries like Pakistan and India, shrines have seen a revival – but self-consciously as a tradition affiliated with Sufism as a mystical branch of Islam. For an analysis of shrines in various Sunni-majority contexts, see: Amster, Ellen. Medicine and the Saints: Science, Islam, and the Colonial Encounter in Morocco, 1877-1956. University of Texas Press, 2013; Bandak, Andreas, ed. Politics of Worship in the Contemporary Middle East: Sainthood in Fragile States. Brill, 2013; Beránek, Ondřej, and Pavel Ťupek. The Temptation of Graves in Salafi Islam: Iconoclasm, Destruction and Idolatry. Edinburgh University Press, 2019; Frembgen, Jürgen Wasim, and Michel Boivin. 'We Are Lovers of the Qalandar': Piety, Pilgrimage, and Ritual in Pakistani Sufi Islam. Oxford University Press, 2021; Grehan, James. Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine. Oxford University Press, 2016; Schielke, Samuli. "Hegemonic Encounters: Criticism of Saints-day Festivals and the Formation of Modern Islam in late 19th and early 20thcentury Egypt." Die Welt des Islams vol. 47, no. 3-4, 2017, pp. 319-355; Schielke, Samuli. "On Snacks and Saints: When Discourses of Rationality and Order Enter the Egyptian Mawlid." Archives De Sciences Sociales Des Religions, no. 135, 2006, pp. 117-140; Stauth, Georg, and Samuli Schielke. Dimensions of Locality. Muslim Saints, Their Place and Space. Transcript, 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Although both Sunni and Shia Muslim theological perspectives consider this persecution unjust and unfounded, in Shia Islam the commemoration of its major events – especially the killing of the Prophet's grandson Imam Hussein at Karbala – are at the core of faith and religious practice.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Imamzadeh can mean both the person and their tomb.

shrines was important. For sites that could not be assimilated into the imamzadeh paradigm, they could be neutralized through bureaucratic conversion into museums,  $boqe^{h}$  (tombs), or  $\bar{a}r\bar{a}mg\bar{a}h$  (resting places). This was not merely a bureaucratic designation, but one that would allow the removal of features like grills around tombs through which believers placed donations for vows – thus physically preventing such devotional practices and desacralizing the site.<sup>90</sup> Thus, figuring out who was buried in each shrine – and ensuring that Endowments' organization budgets would only go to shrines that were proper imamzadeh with clearly-verified genealogies – became a key task of the state.

But as the discussion above regarding the process of authentication makes clear, establishing truth is a process and a question of power, one that can always be altered as the importance of certain facts are re-evaluated in light of others. Debate about shrines and their numbers often re-enshrine the rule of the state and its right to act as an arbiter of truth, as when criticism of Imamzadeh Bizhan led the state to reshape the shrine's identity. These debates become a site on which longer-standing arguments over whether Iranians should be ruled by religious or secular authorities play out, in which critics condemn the state as promoting superstition through construction of shrines or funding "fake shrines" as evidenced by the Iran International coverage discussed earlier. The government, on the other hand, defends itself from claims of superstition by authenticating shrines through religious knowledge, which it considers the antidote to superstition. Because the debate is framed as such, it presupposes and in fact fuels government intervention in the religious lives of people. The fact that the shrine program is based on the government reforming people's religious beliefs by bringing them into line with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> An example of a shrine classified as a "tomb" with large signs to indicate the fact that he is a scholar, not a saint, can be found at Tarasht in central Tehran. Further south near Rey, at the presumed tomb of Javānmard-e Qassāb, a historical figure considered by scholars to be legendary, no grill has been installed around the tomb, preventing classic Shia devotional acts (touching, holding, tying vow ribbons, placing donations) from occurring.

textual understandings of religion is ignored, as from the perspective of both secularists and clericalists such superstitions need to be cleansed. Both perspectives rely on a shared impulse to cultivate proper, modern behavior among Iranians, one motivated by fixing wrong practices, the other by putting an end to them by condemning popular religion. The terms of this debate also reflect back on religious authorities' feeling like they need to defend the idea of religion as modern – and in the present context, push the state to constantly produce means of authentication confirming it's the case.

#### New Shrines – But Only for Political Saints

By and large, shrines that were actually new were widely seen as being opposed to the modernized version of Islam the state sought to promote. In 2018, *Shahrvand* newspaper launched an investigative report after it was found that an imamzadeh had been built over the grave of the father of a sitting member of parliament. Calling the increase in shrine numbers one of the "hottest topics in the media" (*dāghtarin suzhehhā-ye resāneh*), the article zeroed in on the shrine near Ardebil, the *Āstān-e Moqaddas Emāmzādeh Sayyid* '*Aziz* ("The Holy Shrine of the Imamzadeh Sayyed Aziz") whose *motevalli* ("caretaker") was none other than Mir Hemayat Mirzadeh, a member of parliament representing the province. The 'saint' buried there was his father. In an interview with the paper, Mirzadeh stressed that he was not the right person to ask about the tomb; "Go ask the people of the region who have devotion for him what kind of person he was and why people from their own pockets paid and made vows for his tomb." Another news agency followed up with a special report in which they interviewed the regional head of Endowments.<sup>91</sup> Hojjat ol-Eslam Akbar Qiami said that the tomb was not registered as an

imamzadeh but merely a tomb, and he stressed that it did not receive any government funding for ritual activities.



The headline in Shahrvand newspaper reads: "The people built a dome and tomb for my father; not me!"

But while Mirzadeh's father's shrine may or may not have received funding, it was not the only seemingly new shrine that had emerged over a politically-connected figure's tomb. One of the most visible – and controversial – "new" shrines in recent decades was that built around the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini after his death in 1989. What originally began as a small structure to host millions of pilgrims who flocked to visit his grave after his funeral – which had attracted around 10 million mourners – ballooned over the decades into a massive complex with shops, hotels, and extensive parking that had cost, at least, hundreds of millions of dollars.<sup>92</sup> Among the many culinary offerings when I visited in 2019 was "Pizza Hut Burger Noufel le Chateau," a reference to the small town outside Paris where Khomeini lived in exile before his

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> In 1990, the New York Times quoted unnamed Iranian officials as saying the complex would eventually cost \$2 billion, but due to lack of transparency in financial affairs in Iran, this is impossible to verify. Shenon, Philip. "Khomeini's Tomb Attracts Pilgrims." *The New York Times*, 8 July 1990, www.nytimes.com/1990/07/08/world/khomeini-s-tomb-attracts-pilgrims.html.

triumphant return. The shrine carries the label *haram motahhar* – "holy shrine" – linguistically equating it with the major shrines of the Prophet Muhammad's direct family. The shrine is topped with a massive golden dome and huge minarets visible from miles around; its interior is a luxurious mishmash of architectural styles that draws equally from ancient Rome as it does any recognizable version of Islamic architecture.<sup>93</sup> Located at the entrance to Tehran just beside a major highway, it is the first thing visitors entering the capital from the south see upon arrival, and since the 2000s, from Iran's largest airport as well.

Beside the constant stream of visitors who stop by to pay their respects, religious rituals held at the shrine attract hundreds of thousands of visitors, and organized pilgrimage tours from countries like Iraq, Pakistan, India, Lebanon and elsewhere frequently include the shrine as a stop. Since its latest iteration was opened in the mid-2010s, the complex's luxuriousness has attracted major criticism, including from members of Khomeini's family.<sup>94</sup> During his life, Khomeini was widely known for the simplicity of his lifestyle; the fact that he eschewed furniture, preferring to sit on the floor (and in the process, forcing his visitors to do so as well), was a common motif. He also roundly criticized the fact that some religious shrines had been turned into castles, comparing them to "Umayyad" palaces and thus symbols of state corruption

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> The shrine has been redeveloped almost continuously since its inception. For an analysis of an earlier architectural iteration of the shrine, see: Rizvi, Kishwar. "Religious Icon and National Symbol: The Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran," *Muqarnas*, vol. 20, 2003, pp. 209-224. The building has been dramatically renovated since then, however. <sup>94</sup> Rashid Davoudi, a seminarian, political scientist, and student of Hassan Khomeini, Khomeini's nephew and one of the shrine authorities, argued that Khomeini's family had not pushed for the luxuriousness of the shrine, saying that it was "the system" as a whole – and specifically the Revolutionary Guards - who had promoted the expansion of the shrine in the shape that it took. See: "*Haram-e Emām Bā Tasmim-e Sarān-e Qoveh va Tavasot-e Sepāh Sākhteh Shod Na Seyyed Hassan Khomeini*" ['Imam's Shrine Was Built on the Decision of the Armed Forces and by the Revolutionary Guards, Not Seyyed Hassan Khomeini']." *Ensāf News*, 5 Sept. 2021, www.ensafnews.com/308504; <u>https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-32917408</u>; <u>https://www.rferl.org/a/food-aid-for-iranian-poor-at-khomeini-s-luxurious-shrine-ignites-controversy/30608259.html</u>

in the name of Islam.<sup>95</sup> The fact that his mausoleum was subsequently converted into a goldendomed shrine attracted strenuous criticism, including from many of his followers.

In September 2021, senior political leaders attracted criticism for reading the *ziāratnāmeh* prayer located at the tomb. A *ziāratnāmeh* is a feature of all shrines across Iran, read by pilgrims as a form of greeting to the holy figure they are visiting. Hessam Mohsen Mazaheri, a prominent sociologist of Islam, wrote in a widely-shared commentary that the *ziāratnāmeh* written for Khomeini used language that equated him with the holiest figures of Shia Islam.<sup>96</sup> His ziāratnāmeh represented an attempt to turn one of Iran's political leaders into a religious saint, and its placement by authorities above the tomb – inviting pilgrims to read it as they visited – was equivalent to using state money to promote a religious cult around him, and potentially legitimize perceptions among some of his supporters that he akin to a '13<sup>th</sup> Imam.' <sup>97</sup> In a Telegram note that attracted widespread media attention entitled "Religious Innovation and the Misguidedness of Critiquing the Religion of the People instead of Critiquing the Religion of Power," Mazaheri lambasted state officials for attacking the Iranian masses as being "superstitious" for praying at local imamzadeh shrines of unclear origins while simultaneously using state money to promote what was an almost heretical innovation – elevating a contemporary political figure into the realm of holiness.<sup>98</sup> Mazaheri argued that criticizing the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> The Umayyads were the second Islamic dynasty and, among many devout Shias, they are considered responsible for corrupting the purity of Islam by opposing (and persecuting) the family of the Prophet Muhammad.
<sup>96</sup> He also noted that the ziyaratnameh written 30 years ago had been significantly altered since Khomeini's death;

whereas previously it had resembled a formulaic prayer for a deceased person worthy of respect, the revised version dramatically escalated the holy language used. See: "*Cherā Ziāratnāmeh-ye Khomeini Qābel-e Defā` Nist?* [Why Is Khomeini's Ziaratnameh Indefensible?]." *Ensāf News*, 29 Aug. 2021, <u>www.ensafnews.com/307477/-4</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Shia Islam recognizes 12 Imams. The 12<sup>th</sup> Imam is thought to have gone into occultation, and according to dominant Twelver Shia Muslim belief his eventual return will usher in the end times. Describing Khomeini as a 13<sup>th</sup> Imam thus directly contradicts religious orthodoxy. See: "*Rahbari Siāsi ya 'Emām-e Sizdahom'*? [Political Leader or 'Thirteenth Imam'?]." *Zeitoon*, 1 Sept. 2021, <u>www.zeitoons.com/91325</u>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam. "*Noandishi-ye Dini va Birāheh-ye Naqd-e Din-e Mardom beh Jā-ye Naqd-e Din-e Qodrat* [Religious Innovation and Misguided Criticism of the Religion of the People Instead of the Religion of

form of official religion promoted by the state was crucial because it "claims authenticity and purity" and claims power over people, unlike popular religious practices which have no such pretensions. "For this reason, the palace-tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini is more dangerous for Shia Islam than 1,000 *qadamgāh*, pilgrimage sites, or small fake imamzadehs that ordinary people have built or are building," he argued.<sup>99</sup> The question of which new shrines were problematic – and which could be justified – was clearly a political one, reflecting contrasting visions of how to understand the Islamic Republic and the emergence of a class of political saints.<sup>100</sup> It also points to a role that shrines came to hold as holy sites upon which to make concrete the new order – and build new kinds of citizens, with new kinds of beliefs.

## Disciplining Space to Create Spaces of Discipline

The shrine modernization project does not only affect the tombs or the buildings they are housed in. At holy site after holy site, renovations have involved the expansion of plazas around them as well as the implementation of security features. As a result, these holy sites are converted into spaces in which authorities' visions of a perfectly-ordered and disciplined modern society and self can be constructed. This includes some of the features that have been discussed so far in this chapter, such as gates that prevent unauthorized entry and allow for surveillance of visitors as well as guard posts where caretakers who are government employees can enforce a particular religious dress code on shrine visitors (that goes above and beyond what the law requires on the streets beyond). It also includes gender segregation that is architecturally

Power]." Shoar-e Sal News Agency, 29 Aug. 2021, shoaresal.ir/fa/news/356971/نواندیشی-دینی-و-بیراهه//E2%80%8C ی-قدرت-06%D9%90 جای-نقد-دین B2%80%8C مردم-به-90%09 نقد-دین.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> For more on this class of 'political saints,' and the hagiographies told about them in contemporary Iran, see: Doostdar, Alireza. *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny*. Princeton University Press, 2018: pp. 181 -222

permanent. Another major feature of the program is the construction of offices for the Basij paramilitary inside shrines. This converts them into bases for a group that engages in a wide variety of activities to mould Iranians into ideal revolutionary selves, ranging from holding religious classes and organizing volunteer trips or summer camps, to holding religious and political rituals and celebrations, to erecting checkpoints around Iranian cities to police moral behavior or anti-government activities (In Chapter 4, I explore Basiji activities in shrines in depth in the context of cultivating ideal masculinity).

The broader effect of these changes has been to convert local shrines into cultural spaces within a wider government program where government-funded activities and rituals can be held. Their plazas have been gathering spots for large crowds, attracted by rituals by governmentaffiliated religious leaders and chanters ( $madd\bar{a}h$ ) who are given large platforms and salaries. At major holidays, their events are advertised on state TV. At the same time, independent religious groups or those that do not follow the official Islam promoted by the state are prevented from using these spaces for any activities and cannot promote their events on state TV. The shrines have thus become part of a broader media ecosystem tied to the Revolutionary Guards and the Basiji paramilitary whose cultural events are promoted as hegemonic by the state, even as they present themselves as independent representatives of 'the people.' These events are then broadcast on state TV, positioning them as hegemonic for viewers at home. Many of these events - religious or political - are coordinated to occur at shrines across the country at the same time, and they promote a standardized religious narrative heavily focused on the martyrs of Karbala, with the shrine serving as a holy backdrop. In these events, the saint buried inside the local shrine is almost completely beyond the point – they exist as a generic instantiation of a saint tied to the martyrs of Karbala, not as a particular individual with a particular relation to the city and

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neighborhood around it. This in turn contributes to how the uniformization of the imamzadeh produces a standardized, national spiritual geography while erasing particularities. It also erases connections between neighbors, re-orienting them toward the state and its media for religious events that previously would have taken place locally and away from state representatives.

The location of war martrys' graves at the shrine, in turn, links them to this narrative. Shrines thus emerge as the permanent sign of this holiness, drawing popular religiosity into a historical, religious, and national narrative that collapsed the memories of the Prophet's descendants, who fled war and persecution to find in Iran a refuge, with the martyrs of the 1980s war who defended this refuge from invaders. War cemeteries located around imamzadehs today host an assortment of new religious rituals invented by the state. These include *ghobārruby*, the "dusting off" of martyrs' graves, held as a collective devotional act at a specific time and place promoted by the government. In the discourse of clerics at the shrines, the past and present are collapsed in the histories of the "martyrs" present, both from early Islam's history and the 1980s. In Chapter 4, I explore these changes more in depth at a single shrine in Tehran.

## Conclusion

All of these changes point to the myriad ways the Iranian state is remaking society and selves using shrines as bases. Indeed, the project has conceived of shrines as nodes in a national project or cultivating a particular image of revolutionary selfhood. In this chapter, I have shown three ways in which I argue that it is drawing on the shrines to produce a 1) spatial understanding of Iranian history as a sacred geography that ties together the early Islamic period with the present, to 2) modernize and 'correct' Islamic practice through bureaucratic interventions to rationalize the shrines' narratives as well as physical interventions to make devotional acts impossible at certain sites, and 3) the recruitment of these spaces into a centralized political

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program tied to the disciplining of Iranian selves through shrine rituals standardized across the country. I will unfold the processes I have highlighted here in the following chapters, where specific aspects of the project's implications will be examined in particular local contexts. In order to get a full view of the project, we must have a sense of how it unfolded nationally – but to understand what it means for particular communities, we must see it at ground level. Thus, in the following chapter, we move to a single city: Qom.

# **Chapter 2: The Political Economy of Building "Holy Qom" Into a Transnational Pilgrimage Destination**

"When I sit in the courtyard of Bibi Fatima, I feel a peace and tranquility I can't find anywhere else on Earth. My soul is calm. I could sit there forever." A light came into Asra's eyes as she described the memories her most recent pilgrimage to Qom had left her with. A 28-yearold from Karachi, Pakistan, Asra had previously visited Iran twice when we met. She described the hours she spent at the Qom shrine of Fatima Masoumeh and her brother Imam Reza in Mashhad as some of the most beautiful of her life. But it was not only the shrines themselves that impressed her. "The cities in Iran are very clean. Highways too. And it's safe to go outside, even for a woman," she commented approvingly. Asra visited Iran in the mid-2010s, at a time when bombings targeting Shia Muslims and other minorities in Pakistan had become a regular occurrence. In Iran, she found a refuge. Pilgrimage there had confirmed that Iran was also a part of her: "For the Shias of Pakistan, Iran is our country, too. We have a bond with it that cannot be broken. It is a connection we will always have." Pilgrimage to Iran was her way of enacting and securing that connection. When things got hard at home, she fantasized about applying to study in Qom's Jamaat al-Zahra women's religious seminary, which had fully-funded programs for international students. She felt she could live independently in an environment full of female scholars there, in contrast to the restrictive social mores she faced at home. In Oom, Asra could have a different kind of life.

Asra was one of the more than 100,000 Pakistani pilgrims who visited Iran yearly in the 2010s, part of a wave of religious tourism from across the region – attracting mostly Shia Muslims from Iraq, Pakistan, India, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and the Arab Gulf

countries – that by 2020 had brought millions. Once marginal in size, their numbers had swelled since the Iranian government began actively promoting pilgrimage to Iran's holy shrines in Qom and Mashhad as a form of transnational mass tourism in the mid-2000s. In order to transform the shrine cities into destinations, Iranian authorities invested billions of dollars to reshape their urban fabric, expanding pilgrim accessibility and turning the cities as a whole into showcases of the Islamic Republic's brand of religious modernity. This transformation attracted more visitors than ever, providing a major windfall for Iran's economy at a time when international sanctions were having a devastating impact. But these projects also had major effects on the urban fabric of the shrine cities that were largely invisible for visitors.



View of the shrine of Fatemeh Masoumeh from one of the courtyards. (Photo: Alex Shams)

In this chapter, I examine how these projects reshaped the shrine city of Qom in a variety of ways that transformed the city spatially, socially, and economically. I examine the destruction of historic neighborhoods to expand the city's central shrine and make room for hotels and shopping complexes nearby, displacing thousands of people and gentrifying the central precincts of this important spiritual center. I look at how this was followed by infrastructural megaprojects – including a monorail, subway, international airport, and highway – that tore through the city as well as renovations and demolitions around small neighborhood shrines across the city to renarrativize them not as community centers but as landmarks for tourists to visit. The project even entailed the creation of an entirely new shrine complex geared toward pilgrims on Qom's edge, which in turn created a construction boom even as nearby villages remained impoverished and excluded from the newfound wealth. I argue that constructing the entirety of Qom as a holy land – *Qom-e Moqaddas*, "Holy Qom," as it was referred to in official literature – entailed re-imagining the city not as a home for its residents but as a sacred landscape oriented toward Shia Muslim pilgrims and tourists. It also entailed the neoliberal transformation of its economy, with space increasingly imagined by authorities as a financial resource from which to produce profit, encapsulating a broader economic turn across Iran since the mid-2000s.

In doing so, I contend, Iranian authorities envisioned Qom as a "staging" ground to showcase what Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has described as the Islamic Republic's central mission: constructing a "modern Islamic civilization" that infuses all aspects of political, social, and civic life with religion, drawing on technology in pursuit of national development and creating a "resistance economy" informed by an 'authentic,' native Iranian Islamic culture. As Qom became site for staging Iranian revolutionary identity, it also became a platform to build Iranian revolutionary selves through the transformation of the city's spatial makeup and identity. I argue that the city served as a symbolic site which could "represent" the state's project as an ideal religio-political model.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Qom attained a role as a transnational center for Shia Muslims, facilitated both through pilgrimage as well as government programs for foreign

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Mitchell, Timothy. "The Stage of Modernity." In *Questions of Modernity*, edited by Timothy Mitchell, NED-New edition., 11:1–34. University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

students at the city's religious seminaries for free or minimal cost. In the final part of the chapter, I examine the perspectives of foreign pilgrims and tie the city's transformation to circumstances beyond Iran's borders that made Qom – and the Islamic Republic model it represented – such an attractive destination for millions across the region.

#### Transnational Geographies of Shia Islam

While Iran is dotted by thousands of small shrines, the two grandest and most important holy complexes are in a category all their own. These are the shrines of Imam Reza in Mashhad – the 8<sup>th</sup> of the 12 Shia imams and the only one buried in Iran – and his sister Fatemeh Masoumeh in Qom. From simple tombs attracting pilgrims in the 900s, both cities developed over the centuries as various dynasties expanded the shrines and constructed infrastructure like caravanserais, bazaars, and canals. The cities expanded as funerary mausoleums and graveyards were built around the shrines, attracting burials from near and far based on the belief among Shia Muslims that saints confer blessings on those buried nearby.<sup>2</sup> Since the late 1500s, after the Safavids converted Iran to Shia Islam, Imam Reza's tomb emerged as an imperial shrine heavily patronized by authorities, most notably after a walking pilgrimage taken by Shah Abbas in 1601.<sup>3</sup> Qom's shrine grew in importance during the Qajar period in the 1800s, when Iran's capital moved to nearby Tehran, after which her tomb became a major object of state patronage as well.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In Qom, this development was particularly intense under Ilkhanid rule in the 1300s, when Mongol practices of ancestor worship are thought to have blended with existing Sufi and Shia veneration of the Prophet's family, producing a "boom" in shrine construction and patronage of tombs. See: Hillenbrand, Robert. "A Shi'i building boom in 14th-century Qum: the case of Bāgh-i Sabz towers." in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam.* Ed. Fahmida Suleman. New York: Palgrave, New York & Basingstoke, 2000: pp. 72-85. <sup>3</sup> Mawer, Caroline. "Shah 'Abbās and the Pilgrimage to Mashhad." *Iran*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2011, pp. 123–147.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Bazin, Marcel. "Qom, Ville De Pèlerinage Et Centre Régional." *Revue Géographique De L'Est*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1973, pp. 84.

The development of both Qom and Mashhad is indelibly tied to the shrines at their heart, which turned these cities into destinations for pilgrims, traders, refugees, and religious scholars alike. Both are part of a constellation of Shia "shrine cities" alongside Najaf, Karbala, Kadhemiyah, and Samarra in Iraq that attracted visitors from across a transnational Muslim sphere spanning South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> As major stops on caravan routes for pilgrims who stayed for weeks and months at a time, these cities were cosmopolitan entrepots, hosting large numbers of non-residents seasonally coordinated with local pilgrimages as well as events further afield, like the pilgrimage to Mecca, for which they served as pitstops. Many pilgrims eventually settled in these cities, drawing on their connections to elsewhere to develop successful trading networks. This situation changed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the British colonization of South Asia and then Iraq as well as the Russian colonization of Central Asia created increasingly fortified borders that limited overland mobility across the region.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the holy places of Qom and Mashhad became increasingly configured as "national shrines" tied to Iranian identity. This was reinforced by policies undertaken by Reza Shah in the 1920s, including banning Iranian travel to Iraq and encouraging Iranian clerics living there to move to Qom's religious seminaries rather than stay under British rule in Iraq. This led to the seminary's increasing surveillance by authorities, wary of the independence clerics had

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> These holy places are "Shia Muslim shrines" in the sense that they are administered by Shia Muslim religious authorities. However, historically, dividing lines between Shia, Sunni, and Sufi were not as well-defined as in the present, and these sites attracted a wide variety of pilgrims and visitors from across the broader region, particularly as they served as logical geographic overland entry points from South Asia and Central Asia toward Mecca, which hosted the yearly Hajj pilgrimage (a religious duty for all Muslims to undertake once in their lives). Worship at these shrines was thus historically a shared religious practice. This contrasts with today, where these cities are no longer stops on the route to Mecca and non-Shia Muslims largely overlook them as potential sites of worship.
<sup>6</sup> Policies by Iranian leader Reza Shah in the 1920s also contributed to this situation, as he barred Iranian travel to Iraq, made residency in Iran complicated for non-Iranians, and instituted policies like mandatory dress laws that imposed sartorial regulations on Iranian citizens and made life increasingly for non-Iranians. See: Shams, Alex.
"From guests of the Imam to unwanted foreigners: the politics of South Asian pilgrimage to Iran in the twentieth century." *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2021, pp. 581-605.

traditionally maintained in the shrine cities. This increased after a cleric named Bohlul led protests against Reza Shah's rule, first in Qom in opposition to a plan to demolish the shrine's cemetery and replace it with a park and later in Mashhad against the Pahlavi regime's enforcement of Western dress codes.<sup>7</sup> Clerical resistance to the new regime largely subsided after the latter protests were met with a massacre of protestors inside Mashhad's shrine in 1936.

Removed from transnational networks and pilgrims, Qom and Mashhad suffered economically in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rising prosperity tied to oil wealth beginning in the 1950s, however, revived their fortunes as Iranians took advantage of growing bus, train, and highway networks – and rising disposable income – to visit. In 1973, 1 million pilgrims visited Qom every year and 2 million visited Mashhad.<sup>8</sup> Anthropologist Marcel Bazin noted that the pilgrimage to Qom was "essentially an Iranian pilgrimage," with few visitors from elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

This was also when the first major government redesign of a shrine city as a tourist attraction began. In the early 1970s, under the orders of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi Shah, a large swath of dense urban fabric surrounding Imam Reza's shrine in Mashhad was bulldozed, including hundreds of homes, shops, cemeteries, shrines, mosques, and other historic buildings. For centuries, the shrine had been located directly at the city's heart. Mashhad's main bazaars led directly away from the shrine doors; its courtyards were the city's central gathering place. The shrine redesign, however, created a large barrier of grass and road that cut the shrine off from the city around it, leaving it isolated in a sea of cars.<sup>10</sup> In this conceptualization of monumentality, the preservation of the physical building was central, not its relation to the neighborhood around

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See Bohlul, Mohamad Taqi. Khāterāt-e Siāsi-ye Bohlul bā Negāhi beh Qiyām-e Gowharshād [*The Political Memoirs of Bohlul with a View toward the Gowharshad Uprising*], Hozur Press: 1387 [2008]; pp. 30-39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Bazin 87, 96.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The project's architects followed a dominant heritage paradigm for producing historical monuments by "encasing" by removing nearby buildings. See: Allais, Lucia. *Designs of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century*. The University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 4-5, 15.

it. This distinctly modern view of monumentality was dramatically different from traditional Iranian architectural aesthetics, which stressed the contrast between open courtyards lined by beautiful buildings, approached from within dense urban fabric, such as at the Safavid-era Naqsh-e Jahān Square in Esfahan or the courtyards of the shrines themselves.

Dariush Borbor, the plan's main architect, described the neighborhoods around the shrine – Mashhad's oldest, and, at the time, among the city's most impoverished – as "worthless" (*beh dard nakhwār*) and stressed that the goal of the plan was to make the shrine economically profitable (*sud-āvar*) as an attraction, namely through the construction of a mall and hotel complex beside it.<sup>11</sup> These would supplement and replace the variety of endowed community-based institutions such as hostels and soup kitchens that had historically taken care of the needs of pilgrims, many of whom arrived with limited resources in the expectation that they would be provided for on arrival.<sup>12</sup> In this new imagination of the pilgrimage, the shrine would be a profitmaking machine and mechanism of mass tourism.

Qom, however, remained a sleepy town unaffected by events in Mashhad. This would change with the protests leading to the 1979 revolution, when Qom's religious seminary played a key role as a hotbed of opposition against Pahlavi state repression. Ayatollah Khomeini, who was exiled from Iran in 1963 after a fiery speech given directly beside the shrine at Qom's Feyzieh seminary, returned in 1979 and set up his base in the city. In the following years, Shia Muslim clerics were championed as leaders of popular mobilization and Qom's seminaries were

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> These are based on comments he made at a public talk about the shrine that I attended in fall 2018 at *Khāneh-ye Honarmandān* [The Iranians Artists' Forum] in Tehran as well as an interview with him in the film *Nesyān*. <sup>12</sup> Various funds existed specifically to care for the needs of pilgrims, endowed by wealthy benefactors through the shrine. Some even specified the nationality of those to be cared for, such as an endowment for poor South Asians at the Mashhad shrine. See: Amirzadeh, Hassan. "*Asnādi az Komakhā-ye Māli beh Zā 'erān-e Mosalmān-e Shebh-e Qāreh-ye Hend dar Mashhad dar Dowrān-e Qajar*" [Documents related to financial aid to Muslim pilgrims from the Indian Subcontinent during the Qajar period], *Nashriyeh-ye Elektroniki-ye Sāzmān-e Ketābkhānehhā, Muzehhā, va Marākez-e Asnād Āstān-e Qods-e Razavi*: Vol. 4, No. 16-17, Fall and Winter 1391 [2012/2013].

portrayed as having been at the forefront of political resistance before and during the Revolution. The Fatima Masoumeh shrine even earned a place on the 5000 rial bill. The narrative of Qom as the cradle of Islamic revolutionary culture spurred government investment in institutions dedicating to promoting the new state's ideology worldwide, including the creation of scholarships for foreign students at newly-established centers like Mustafa International University.

Qom became an increasingly diverse and international city defined by the presence of seminary students and their families from across Iran and the world. As Iran's authorities began pouring money into the seminaries beginning in the early 1990s, they expanded their student numbers, reaching an estimated 300,000 people by the 2010s, or around 30% of the city's population.<sup>13</sup> This can be compared to around 6,000 seminary students in 1973, who along with their families would not have exceeded more than 2% of the population.<sup>14</sup> As pilgrim and seminary student numbers soared in the 1990s, shrine authorities began expanding the shrine, its courtyard, and its facilities in coordination with local and national officials. In the 2000s, these projects would grow into a broader plan to remake the city as a whole into a center of transnational pilgrimage and a showcase of the state's brand of Islamic revolutionary modernity, an embodiment of the Islamic Republic's ambitions to remake Iranian society and inspire the world. In the process, Qom would witness changes on an unprecedented scale reshaped the meaning of Qom's urban landscape and sacred geography in the process.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> For an overview of how government funding of the seminaries changed the dynamics, see: Khalaji, Mehdi. Nazme Novin-e Ruhāniyat dar Irān [*The New System of the Clergy in Iran*], Mardomak Press, Las Vegas, NV: 1390 [2011].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Bazin 103.

#### Building a More Perfect Shrine

Qom is defined by the shrine of Fatemeh Masoumeh at its heart. From a distance, only its golden dome is visible, slowly giving way to a panorama of soaring minarets, blue, pink, and yellow tiles with flowing Quranic and Persian calligraphy, and dazzling mirror mosaics that welcome visitors into the sacred threshold. The area has become the city's center, a fact reinforced by the 1930s gridded road network that radiates out from the shrine.<sup>15</sup> Since the 1990s, Iranian authorities in coordination with the shrine's leadership (*towliat*) have progressively expanded the shrine and its vast courtyard to encompass much of the urban fabric around it, part of a plan to accommodate and attract rapidly-growing numbers of visitors that has seen the shrine balloon to more than triple its previous size.

In the 1970s the shrine attracted 1 million visitors a year; today it sees 20 million. In the process, it has become increasingly crowded. The expansion has entailed constructing large new halls and chambers for pilgrims to rest in, with air conditioning, lighting and facilities such as large water fountains, restrooms, and a book and souvenir shop, along with expanded libraries, offices, and a museum. It has included the construction of large parking lots beneath the shrine as well as vast shopping complexes on it's edge, controlled by the shrine's *waqf* (endowment) and rented out to local shopkeepers. It has involved recurring and seemingly endless refurbishment of historic sections of the shrine, which has involved removing old features – including graves – and replacing them with completely new decorations. It also led to the razing of many of Qom's nearby historic neighborhoods. Many of the changes were welcomed by pilgrims as well as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The shrine historically sat at Qom's edge; the bazaar was its center, separated from the shrine by a large cemetery. This cemetery was bulldozed during Reza Shah's time, in the process connecting the shrine to the bazaar and resituating the bazaar at the center of the urban transportation network. For an in-depth history of the development of Qom's center, see: Gerāmi, Abul-Hassan. Mahallāt-e Qadimi-ye Qom [*The Old Neighborhoods of Qom*]. *Enteshārāt-e Nasāyeh*. 1394 [2015].

many local residents, who took pride in the shrine's increasingly modern, clean, and impressive appearance. But the destruction of buildings in and around the shrine provoked anger among heritage practitioners, who saw in the drive to modernize a disrespect for the site's past.<sup>16</sup> Those involved in the project, however, disagreed, arguing that the shrine's ability to provide for visitors was the most important aspect of the project. Many Qomis echoed these views, expressing pride in the beauty of the shrine; indeed, for them, this holy site was not a "nostalgic bearer" of tradition, but instead a living part of their lives, the graves hosting "coeval subjects" who existed in the present.<sup>17</sup> The greatest way to honor the saint, according to this logic, was to make pilgrimage as comfortable and beautiful as possible. Shrine expansion was a form of patronage honoring the saint; the proof of its success was the serenity pilgrims like Asra experienced when they sat in its courtyards and made use of its facilities.

The "renovations" were an opportunity not only to refurbish the site but also to improve it. One aspect of the work involved demolishing the ornamented vaulting (*moqarnas*) above major doorways around the shrine's central plaza to 'correct' them. An architect involved in the project explained that with computers it's easier to come up with the perfect equations for the *moqarnas*, which are based on geometrical proportions. Demolishing 200-year-old muqarnas perceived to have mathematical "flaws" was justified as preservation. Alongside these endeavors, some tiles with artistic features that seemed out of place to authorities – such as naked angels dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century – were removed, replaced with the logo of the Islamic Republic. But historic buildings are not just stone and carvings; their architecture produces a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> See for example this condemnation by a prominent local heritage page condemning the replacement of historic tiles in the shrine: <u>https://www.instagram.com/p/CbItOkPtGGO/</u>. Similar changes in Mashhad produced growing anger as well.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Chu, Julie. *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*. Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 50.

sense of connection to the past and create a different experience of space through their very aura of "pastness."<sup>18</sup> It is precisely the architecture that makes the shrine an overwhelming experience to enter; its historic nature structures an affective experience for the pilgrim substantively different when the hand-crafted details are replaced with machine-made tiles. Architects involved in the shrine's renovation felt they could improve and perfect this experience, recognizing the shrine's historic features as similarly being the work of fellow architects. "Renovating" the shrine was informed not merely by a desire to preserve but instead one that hoped to improve and modernize it.

The shrine – and the city around it – are the ideal site to showcase Iran's brand of Islamic modernity not only because of their weight as religious symbols but because they are visited by tens of millions of people every year. Just as dynasties that patronized the shrine historically crowned their new additions with inscriptions naming the royal benefactors, today the logo of the Islamic Republic, its flag, and huge portraits of its founder Ayatollah Khomeini and current leader Ayatollah Khamenei are pervasive in and around the shrine, making clear to pilgrims who is responsible for the facilities they enjoy. But if the renovations produce the shrine as a vast space for pilgrims to enjoy tranquility, just beyond its walls, vast swathes of dusty lots and the hum of construction cranes point to what was destroyed to make this vision of modern Islam come to life.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> See: Lowenthal, David. *The Past Is a Foreign Country - Revisited*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.



Figure 8

The shrine of Fatemeh Masoumeh as seen from a large parking lot nearby, which was built over a historic neighborhood that was bulldozed. The two wind towers to the right belong to one of the few old homes that was preserved and turned into a commercial building. (Photo: Alex Shams)

'Who can argue with Islam?'

The drive to expand the shrine entailed the eviction and removal of hundreds if not thousands of people living nearby.<sup>19</sup> These areas were home to old mud-brick houses crowned with  $b\bar{a}dgir$ , wind towers that cool homes below by funneling the desert breeze downward, a form of natural air conditioning. But year by year, growing numbers of these buildings were torn down, replaced first by parking lots and later by towering malls and hotels. Those who resisted the evictions found themselves alone in a sea of tourist parking, boxed in by a new highway, or with the sun blocked out by skyscrapers going up around them. Those attempting to stay had few legal options for opposing the transfer of their property after they got the knock on the door.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> The demolitions took place little by little over many years, and to my knowledge no exhaustive records were kept.



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The wind tower of an old home near the shrine, saved from destruction, but now surrounded by a large commercial building. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Arash was a Qomi in his late 20s who worked for several years leading Western tour groups as well as in city government promoting new projects around the shrine. He had watched with consternation only a few years before our interview as his grandfather had been forced to vacate his shop and home to make way for the shrine's expansion. His grandfather had inherited the land but lacked ownership documents; when, a few years prior, authorities had come and offered to help him "regularize" his title, he considered the matter settled. He later realized that the documents proved ownership of the shop itself (*sarqofli*), not the land on which it was built. This only came to his attention when authorities showed up a couple of years later with eviction notices and offered a paltry compensation sun, a low number justified by the fact that they were only buying what was built atop the land, not the land itself. For years, he had walked from his courtyard home to his shop and then on to the shrine for prayers, greeting neighbors along the way to the holy site where he was a *khādem* (lit. servant, meaning a shrine volunteer). But the entire neighborhood was bulldozed to pave the way for the expansion of the shrine's courtyard.

Hamid's grandfather spent the rest of his life in an apartment a few miles away. When asked, he considered the expanded shrine beautiful, and always said he was happy that people now prayed atop the place where his home was.<sup>20</sup> But Arash saw what had happened to his grandfather as a tragedy; the displacement had dispersed his social network across the city and left him stranded in an automobile-dominated neighborhood far away. He noted that his grandfather rarely visited the shrine anymore and was socially isolated. The connections his grandfather once had with his neighbors was severely weakened; the historical memory of the places their families had inhabited for generation was now erased from sight, only surviving in their stories. The proximity of Arash's grandfather's house to the shrine, once a blessing, had become a curse.

Arash understood his grandfather's passivity in the face of the shrine's expansion – or at least, his aversion to expressing bitterness – as an indication of the difficulty many older Qomis had in separating the shrine as a holy place from the shrine's leadership and the decisions they took, which he saw as informed in no small part by material interest. "Which one of these old guys is going to put up a fight, especially when it's representatives of the shrine of Fatima Masoumeh asking for their land? Who's going to block the way of Islam?"

Shrine and urban authorities saw development as necessary for the sake of ensuring pilgrims' access to the shrine, in the process prioritizing the needs of temporary visitors over residents who had long-term relations with the shrine, which was envisioned as a spiritual tourist attraction geared more toward visitors than locals. People like Arash's grandfather whose daily lives were intertwined with the shrine disappeared in this calculation. The expansion project also

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> A reminder that not everyone shares nostalgic conception of historic preservation and many might welcome "modernization" of their holy places. See Chu, Julie. *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*. Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 50.

introduced a new economic logic on a previously unimaginable scale. Although the shrine had always been a source of wealth through pilgrim spending in the shops and bazaars around it, this wealth had flowed through small-scale capitalist relations that benefited local merchants. But in the new Qom, state authorities were investing public money around the shrine by building malls. In these shopping centers, locals could rent stalls, replacing markets where they had previously owned their own shops. This thus represented a transfer of wealth from private citizens to the state and then on to parastatal entities, specifically construction firms linked to the Revolutionary Guards that were awarded many of the contracts. The transformation produced a neoliberal form of crony capitalist relations in how it used the "coercive power" of the state to redistribute wealth toward parastatal entities.<sup>21</sup> This is a transition not only of scale but of quality, one that represented the transformation of the economic model of the historic shrine-bazaar nexus and orchestrated the neoliberalization of the shrine through its conversion into a profit-making vehicle for parastate entities.<sup>22</sup>

Rather than being dependent on the rents of its endowments to provide for pilgrims, in this new model, the shrine is intended to produce a profit that will allow it to become selfsustaining and an engine for growth, development, and potentially limitless future expansion for the religious foundation that runs it as well as parastatal companies. As the numbers of pilgrims continue to grow, with 30 million expected to come by 2030, there is no reason not to expect that

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> For more on neoliberalism, see: Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005. On neoliberalism in Iran, see: Harris, Kevan. *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran*. University of California Press, 2017; Harris, Kevan, "The Rise of the Subcontractor State: Politics of Pseudo-Privatization in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45, 2013, pp. 45-70.
 <sup>22</sup> In recent years there has been growing interest in the topic of Islamic finance. In Iran, the entire banking system has been organized through Islamic means since the 1980s. However, when I spoke to Iranians about the fact that Islamic banks did not charge interest, many people pointed out that the Islamic banks found loopholes to charge interest. Although there is also an equity-based form of loan available through Islamic financing, in practice, interest (under other names) is alive and well in Iran. For more on Islamic banking, see: Rudnyckyj, Daromir. *Beyond Debt: Islamic Experiments in Global Finance*. The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

expansion and demolition will continue under the guise of 'renovation.' The alleys where shopkeepers once made a living selling goods to pilgrims based in simple lodging have been emptied of inhabitants, replaced by buildings where fees are paid directly to companies directly controlled by the shrine's endowment and which hand out contracts for new development to other companies linked to the Revolutionary Guards' economic wing.<sup>23</sup> The shrine as a result becomes an engine of increasing inequality, as parastatal entities come to dominate the pilgrimage trade that was historically Qom's primary economic engine. This horizon of forever growth had ramifications far beyond the shrine or its immediate neighborhoods; over the course of less than two decades, it dramatically transformed the entire city.

# 'Is Qom becoming Manhattan?'

The expansion of the shrine was just the beginning. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Qom's development became the pet project of President Ahmadinejad, who saw the city as an ideal space from which to introduce the Islamic Republic to the world. An engineer by trade, he focused on the role of infrastructure and devoted billions of dollars from the federal budget to projects in Qom, at the time flush with revenues from oil sales at record high prices. In the late 2000s, local authorities announced a series of projects that would transform Qom into a global city: a highway, a monorail, a subway, and an international airport, all intended to make visiting the city as easy and comfortable as possible. By upgrading the city's infrastructure, authorities recognized they could impress a highly a modern vision of Qom upon visitors, one that could

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> The Revolutionary Guards, originally set up as a military force parallel to the army, has emerged as the most important economic player in Iran since the 1990s. After the Iran-Iraq War, the Revolutionary Guards dispensed with their previous aversion to politics and the economy and began getting involved in reconstruction linked to the damage inflicted by the war on Iranian cities. This continued and accelerated long after these projects ended, with companies linked to the Guards coming to dominate large sections of the Iranian economy and receiving preferential treatment in the awarding of government contracts. Contracts for the expansion and renovation of the shrines, as well as the various other associated projects, in large part went to such companies.

also rebut stereotypes about Islam as a backwards faith, as exemplified by persistently negative jokes about the city among Iranians. This includes, for example, the label, "San Diego of Iran" – a pun on the Persian, *har sānti yeh goh*, i.e. "a pile of shit every centimeter," referring to the religious clerics' turbans on its streets.<sup>24</sup> Transforming Qom would allow the Iranian government to lure visitors with spending power, particularly attractive given how US economic sanctions had isolated Iran, and would help the state project "soft power." <sup>25</sup>

These infrastructural projects fired up the imaginations of Qomis who watched construction sites multiply across the city. Arash was one of those drawn in by this vision. He loved his hometown and had worked as a tour guide for years; he was excited and hoped that the projects would improve the city. He found work for a construction company and was hired to put up banners and posters around town with pictures of leading local religious clerics with statements in support of the subway. "The point was to convince the public that the projects had religious backing," congratulating locals on the new projects gracing their 'holy' city. But Arash acknowledged skepticism of the scale of the changes at the time. "A subway, an airport, a monorail. They had these dreams for what Qom could be and I liked to believe them. But I was confused at what they were building. Do we need all of this? Is Qom becoming Manhattan?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Although they have enjoyed near-total control of Iranian politics since the mid-1980s, many among Iran's cleric elite maintain deep anxieties about how Islam is perceived negatively, both on a global scale as well as among Iranians domestically.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Simultaneous with the beginning of these projects, Iranian state organs invested in a bevy of new satellite channels in different languages targeting audiences worldwide, most notably Press TV and HispanTV, and invested heavily in developing South-South cultural and economic ties.



Figure 10

Qom's built but non-functional monorail as it passes through the city above the Qom River. On the left, participants in a religious ritual head toward the shrine, the monorail towering above them. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Over a decade later, his skepticism was vindicated. Few of the projects had been completed. Along the lines where the subway was meant to run sat gaping holes at Qom's major intersections, ironically causing traffic jams. Even worse was the monorail, whose unfinished, hulking skeleton marred the holy landscape. Visitors to Qom once awaited the siting of the shrine's golden dome; because the saint is believed to hear and see those who come asking for blessing, the *gonbadnāmeh* – the moment when the dome is seen for the first time – signals the pilgrim's arrival and is marked by saying a whispered greeting from afar. Nowadays, the view of the dome is obstructed by the massive concrete pylons of the unfinished monorail beside the shrine, whose construction was halted in part because it runs directly into an area meant to be integrated into the expanded shrine. When first proposed, Ahmadinejad had argued a monorail was better than the subways for which his predecessors "thrown money into the ground" (*pul-e mellat rā zir zamin kardand*), implying that because the subways weren't visible and took so long to build, the money was being wasted and perhaps stolen.<sup>26</sup> But an above-ground monorail,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Ahmadinejad loved monorails and he even built one in Tehran, which was partially built and then had to be subsequently demolished.

he argued, would be a clear and visible sign of where the money had gone. Indeed, the unfinished carcass of the monorail leaves no doubt about the hundreds of millions of dollars spent. Attending to failed infrastructural projects, whose skeletons persist long after the celebratory news headlines have faded, alerts us to the "contradictions of progress;" an archaeology of ruins allows us to instead see its broken promises.<sup>27</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to see these projects solely as failures; for while they may not have lived up to their intended purpose, they entailed the disbursement of billions of dollars of state funds to various companies and corporations, creating private wealth out of public funds.

These megaprojects were part of a wider shift in urbanism worldwide linked to the production of a "neoliberal city." Part of state efforts to make urban economies competitive, these grand projects entailed turning Qom into a "global" city with a recognizable local brand, capable of luring international investment. This would occur through state investment in key megaprojects, which would give the impression of a place capable of attracting tourists, in turn boosting investor confidence in new projects. This required thinking about the city from the perspective of outsiders, in which how to sell the city is privileged above how it is used by residents.<sup>28</sup> The megaprojects enabled Qom to project the image of "being global" through spectacles of modernity, representing the city as having an international reach through feats of engineering prowess that evoked places like Dubai seen in the Iranian imagination as having successfully become gleaming centers of transnational financial capital and tourism.<sup>29</sup>

*<sup>&</sup>quot;Saranjām-e Janjālitarin Prozheh-ye Shahri-ye Ahmadinezhād," Mehr News Agency*, 16 Ordibehesht 1392 [6 May 2013]. <u>https://www.mehrnews.com/news/2048117/</u>سر انجام-جنجالی-ترین-یروژه-شهری-احمدی-نژاد-مونوریل-همچنان-روی/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Dawdy, Shannon Lee. "Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2010, pp. 761–793.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. Writings on Cities. Edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, Blackwell, 1996.
 <sup>29</sup> For more on Iranian imaginings of Dubai, see: Sarmadi, Behzad. "This Place Should Have Been Iran': Iranian Imaginings in/of Dubai." Ajam Media Collective, 20 May 2013, <u>www.ajammc.com/2013/05/20/this-place-that-should-have-been-iran-iranian-imaginings-inof-dubai</u>.

One of the few projects that actually got completed was a large highway, nicknamed "Haram beh Haram" (Shrine to Shrine) because it shot from the Fatima Masoumeh shrine to Jamkaran. Jamkaran is a place which, probably more than anywhere else in Qom, embodies the fusion of capital, state, faith and "qedāsatsāzy," the "production" of the sacred. Once an impoverished village on the city's edge, Jamkaran rose to national prominence in the 2000s. Shia Muslims believe that the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam will return to Earth with Jesus Christ to usher in the end times; a local legend in Qom says that this will occur at a small well near Jamkaran. This has for years inspired local devotees to pray at the well, even drawing visitors from other cities. But the myth took on national importance when President Ahmadinejad professed to believing the story and devoted funds for a huge mosque around the well, popularizing the site nationally and turning the well into the city's second most-important shrine. It became a main path through which tens of thousands from across the region come to pray every Tuesday night, when the prophesied return was predicted to happen. The Shrine to Shrine highway's construction entailed the destruction of hundreds of homes in the city center, resulting in a wide, well-lit, smooth expressway lined by hundreds of meters of dusty open land.

#### Qom, a Citadel of Faith and Consumption

But the destruction along the road's edges were selective; they allowed for a re-narration of Qom's landscape that "edited" it in such a way to tell a particular narrative of the city and its history.<sup>30</sup> Mosques and religious halls were saved from destruction, leaving them as lonely monuments stripped of surrounding. Near Fatima Masoumeh's shrine, a few streets were preserved as part of a tourist route that signposted a few major religious clerics' homes. At the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> For the concept of editing the urban landscape in the context of Shiraz, where similar events unfolded around Shah Cheragh shrine, see: Manoukian, Setrag. *City and Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, History and Poetry*. Routledge, 2014.

heart of this area was the home where Ayatollah Khomeini lived in Qom, a mud-and-brick house renovated and turned into a museum. The destruction staged Qom for tourists; its reshaping allowed for the creation of "monuments" almost out of thin air, equating the town's past with that of religious figures and obliterating continuities between the past and the present embodied in Qom's residents' presence in those spaces. The interventions were "aimed at 'historicizing' and 'modernizing' the area," and turning specific historical buildings into "tokens of national culture...[coinciding] with [their] abstraction into history" and separation "from the neighborhood." <sup>31</sup>

Rather than a city of diverse inhabitants with diverse views, Qom was re-narrated as a citadel of faith defined by clerical authorities' presence. Once the past is removed from the present, it becomes a canvas to sketch out fantasies on; those monuments chosen to remain become the reference for how to interpret what once stood around them. Ironically, these projects can sometimes leave discerning visitors with alternative impressions. Effat, a woman who had visited Khomeini's home in the 1980s and returned as a tourist in the 2010s, commented that the house had been dramatically spruced up since being turned into a museum. "It used to give you the feeling that he was a humble man living in a dirt home. But now it's so clean and pretty that you wish *you* had lived in this house!" But as one of the few Iranians who could recall the space before it was turned into a museum, hers was a unique perspective less visible to other visitors.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Ibid 115.



Figure 11

Tourists pose for pictures in the museum of the home of Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom. (Photo: Alex Shams)

These infrastructure projects do not just shape the way we understand space; they also transform the urban political economy. Jamkaran's rise triggered a simultaneous building boom. Not only was a grandiose new mosque capable of hosting hundreds of thousands built around the well; newly-cleared plots on the highway's edges became the target of intense speculation fueled by its proximity to the sacred. The land on the highways leading to Jamkaran was increasingly considered to be  $p\bar{a}k$ , ritually pure and imbued with holiness. The legend said that once the  $12^{th}$  Imam returned, Jamkaran would become Qom's new center, the place from which a new world government would rule. In anticipation, clerics and wealthier religious students bought up land nearby, seeing it as an investment whose return would come with the Messiah's arrival.

*"Ham por sudeh, ham savāb dāreh,"* I was told about purchasing in the area: "It's full of profit and also religious merit." Their investments were in turn driven by rapidly-rising government budgets dedicated to seminary students, including through preferential rates on loans that facilitated their ability to buy up the land.<sup>32</sup> This was the new transnational Qom; a site where state power invested millions around shrines and harnessed and amplified holiness as a tool to create wealth for the lucky few. The village of Jamkaran itself, a collection of decrepit houses clinging to the ancient mud-brick walls of a large Sassanian-era fort, was entirely cut off from the boom; marginalized by the highway's construction, the village sat dark in the shadow of the gigantic shrine and its massive parking lot that were lit up twenty fours a day.

As we discussed the massive changes across Qom, Arash lamented how much money was pushed into the shrines to attract visitors even as many Qomis remained deeply impoverished. "*Cherāghi keh beh khāneh ravāst, beh masjed harāmeh*," he told me, citing an old expression: "A light that is necessary for the home is *harām* [religiously forbidden] for the mosque." Although the idiom is metaphorical – meaning, help those close to you before going out and helping others – reflecting on the literal darkness of Jamkaran village in front of the bright lights of Jamkaran mosque, it felt strikingly – and literally – apt. Arash continued: "They don't understand that when you go and spend all of this money rebuilding shrines – when you take a holy thing and put all this money into it while doing nothing to help people's cost of living – people are going to end up hating that holy thing."

Analyzing these infrastructural projects and the itineraries they sculpted reveals the logics of the urban plans that reshaped Qom as well as the myriad connections, ideas, and plans they embodied. They also revealed the sheer power of the state to not only build but also destroy. <sup>33</sup> The projects' beneficiaries highlighted the growing role of parastatal entities in the nation's

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> For more on the various state benefits afforded to clerics and seminary students, see: Khalaji, Mehdi. Nazm-e
 Novin-e Ruhāniyat dar Irān [*The New System of the Clergy in Iran*], Mardomak Press, Las Vegas, NV: 1390 [2011].
 <sup>33</sup> Graham, Stephen, and Simon Marvin. *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2001, pp. 12; Larkin, Brian. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2013, pp. 327–343.

economy, as the large construction firms contracted were mostly connected to Iran's Revolutionary Guards, a military wing that has invested in and come to control large sectors of the national economy, especially through *Khatam ol-Anbia*, today one of Iran's largest construction companies.<sup>34</sup> The reshaping of Qom through a monorail, subway, airport, and highway entailed not just pulverization but also construction on a vast scale, collectively representing billions in public expenditure. This in turn triggered other investments, drawing in private actors as well.

Along major transportation routes, new forms of luxury infrastructure spread. Mehromah, ostensibly a rest stop just outside Qom but more akin to a mall, appeared, featuring foreign lifestyle brands like LC Waikiki (which, despite the Hawaiian name, is Turkish) and a food court with prices on par with Qom's fanciest restaurants.<sup>35</sup> Built in 2016, Mehromah would seem to embody the invasion of foreign consumerist ideals in a city known for austere religiosity, of a "materialistic hedonism" at odds with Qom's past as a simple and sacred place.<sup>36</sup> But commerce and pilgrimage have always been intertwined; a pilgrimage is often also a chance to shop, and in Qom the most common souvenir has always been *sohan*, a buttery saffron and rosewater infused brittle, with hundreds of shops located around the shrine and across the city.<sup>37</sup> The head of the wealthiest *sohan* brand, Mohammad Saedinia, was behind the Mehromah shopping complex; he

<sup>35</sup> Its location outside city limits allows it to stay open late into the night, unlike shops in Qom which are required to shut by midnight. These restrictions in cities across Iran date to government efforts to quash public protests in the wake of the contested 2009 elections. This reveals how efforts to limit night-time activities in cities is often closely tied to efforts to control public order. For more on the politics of nighttime leisure, see: Talebian, Kasra, and Müge Riza. "Mashhad, City of Light." *Cities*, vol. 101, 2020, pp. 102674.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Ostovar, Afshon. Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 146

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> For one of the few treatments of neoliberalism in Qom, see: Duaei, Kamaluddin. "Qom After Islamic Neoliberalism: A Narrative of the City in Limbo." *Middle East - Topics & Arguments*, ed. 12, no. 1, June 2019, pp. 55-65.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Although *sohan* is seen as a "traditional" Qomi treat, its history does not date back long; Bazin describes *sohan* as having been invented in the 1920s or 30s but having come to define the notion of culinary tradition in the city in the decades since. See: Bazin, pp. 99.

described it as filling a major gap: "the current dearth of suitable tourist centers," which he called "unbecoming" for Qom.<sup>38</sup> In his view, the complex was not only a tourist and job-creation project but also a contribution to the "resistance economy," referring to government efforts to strengthen domestic self-reliance amid US efforts to isolate the country's economy, and its construction was "rooted in our passion for the prosperity of our dear Islamic homeland." <sup>39</sup> But the reality of the resistance economy in practice was that is strengthened businesses with connections to the government or Revolutionary Guards, while undermining independent businessowners. While small shopkeepers in central Qom are pressured to forfeit their spots to allow for the shrine's expansion, the city's richest dealer has built a luxury mall oriented around an overpriced *sohan* shop. Mehromah thus embodies the new kind of luxury religious pilgrimage industry that both national and local authorities seek to attract with their infrastructural investments.



Figure 12

The food court at Mehromah. (Photo: Mehromah)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Duaei 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> As quoted in Duaei, Kamaluddin. "Qom After Islamic Neoliberalism: A Narrative of the City in Limbo." *Middle East - Topics & Arguments*, ed. 12, no. 1, June 2019, pp. 55-65.

## **Double-Decker Cemeteries**

The transformation of Qom into a landscape of profit didn't just affect holy spaces or those around them. They also entailed economic changes at cemeteries, which occupy a large proportion of central Qom due to its historic center as a place of burial for Shia Muslims from across the country and region. On a spring day in 2019, Zahra drove to visit her husband's grave at a cemetery in central Qom where a lack of available land means that burial plots can cost tens of thousands of dollars. Zahra counted herself lucky to have reserved a plot in the cemetery of a small local shrine where her husband was buried the year before. On that breezy April morning, Zahra arrived with a bottle of rosewater to wash the tombstone and a packed lunch and foldable plastic chair, planning to keep her husband company for a few hours. Upon entering the graveyard, she was shocked to see a dust cloud hovering above the loud whirring of industrial equipment. "I walked towards his grave but saw that the tombstones had been removed; it was just dust," she told me a few days later. Iranian cemeteries are filled with personalized tombstones laid flat, each telling a story; verses of Persian poetry, laser-printed images of the deceased's faces and flowers or golden-domed shrines are etched across them. "In the rest of the cemetery, where they had finished working, the gravestones were gone, replaced by flat, white stone." When Zahra asked cemetery guards what was happening, she was told the cemetery was being renovated and graves made uniform (*yeksānsāzy*). They reassured her that prior to the renovation they had mapped out the graves using modern technology – "with lasers" – to mark who was buried where. Once finished, they would etch names and dates on a layer of white stone across the cemetery to mark the plots. No photos, images, or poetry would be allowed. Zahra wandered among the graves, guessing where her husband's plot might be. Hoping she was in the right spot, Zahra unfolded her chair and spent the afternoon praying, construction sounds

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competing with her murmured verses. "What could I do?" she told me later. "They had already destroyed the grave."

Zahra's fate was shared by thousands across the country, as Endowments authorities launched a project in the late 2010s to "improve" (*behsāzy*) cemeteries around shrines. Justified publicly as a way to improve pilgrims' access by making the tombstones less of a tripping hazard, the project would essentially convert cemeteries around shrines into plazas where rituals and events could be held. This would make them easier to sit on and create more space for pilgrims to relax on; but they would more crucially, open up more space to hold large events at religious political holidays that would make space for hundreds if not thousands of people around shrines whose interiors only fit a few dozen people. This would allow the state to inculcate a specific vision of order and discipline, forbidding certain acts and encouraging others, turning the shrine rituals into a pedagogic space. It would also allow authorities to draw larger crowds to political celebrations of the anniversary victory of the Islamic Revolution, simultaneously sacralizing them by holding them in proximity to the saint's tomb.

Strikingly, these changes only occurred at cemeteries around shrines – cemeteries that were under the control of the Islamic Endowments' Organization (colloquially known as  $Awq\bar{a}f$ ). They did not affect privately-owned cemeteries unconnected to shrines. And even as shrine cemeteries were being pulverized, cemeteries dedicated to "martyrs" (*shohadā*) were hosting burials of fighters who were killed as part of Iran's military intervention in the Syrian civil war. They were buried with tombs adorned with their faces and images of the shrines they were said to have died defending – even as those with plots at shrine cemeteries found their loved ones' faces wiped off the graves. This situation points to the almost unrestricted leverage the

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Endowments authorities had in reshaping spaces under their control. But to focus only on the aesthetic changes is to miss the economic logic behind the project.

*"Awqāf* does what it wants. It follows its own rules." Architect Kaveh Mansoori had spent years researching and documenting Iran's historic cemeteries, the topic of his doctoral thesis, and he watched with dismay as the "flattening" (*sāfkāry*) projects struck cemetery after cemetery around shrines in the late 2010s.<sup>40</sup> He noted that martyr sections had been spared because they were technically under the control of *Bonyād-e Shahid*, a para-governmental organization tasked with governing martyrs' affairs. The charter of the Endowments recognizes them as the *towliat* (steward, i.e. authority) of shrines across the country, but because of this bureaucratic distinction, certain areas of the shrine cemeteries were spared. After an outcry was raised when Endowments' authorities began flattening martyrs' graves, Supreme Leader Khamenei directly intervened and said that martyrs' graves would not be subject to uniformization.

Mansoori linked the flattening project to financial motives: "Their goal is to sell graves. We have *zaminkhwāry* (lit. eating land, for over-development) and *kuhkhwāry* (lit. eating mountains, for mining). Well what *Awqāf* does is *qabrkhwāry* (eating graves)." At shrines, grave plots are sold for thousands of dollars, with major shrines where space is limited selling plots for astronomical rates reaching into the tens of thousands. Although burials are forbidden by law inside city limits, Endowments' authorities draw on legal loopholes to sell plots at shrines. But since there is increasingly limited space, they have found creative ways drawing on Islamic legal rulings to create new space. Namely, they draw on the idea that a body only exists for a certain

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> His dissertation can be found here: <u>http://dlibrary.aui.ac.ir/parvan/resource/357147/ حفاظت-از -گورستان-های-تاریخی-/40 his dissertation can be found here: مرون-شهر ی-به-مثابه-مناظر -فرهنگی</u>

time in a grave – 30 years.<sup>41</sup> After that, the body dissipates into the ground and is no longer present. Based on this Islamic ruling, Mansoori explained, "they've made the decision that it's okay to destroy the graves and re-sell the plot." By flattening cemeteries, authorities have been able to extend the sellable area – turning even fully-occupied cemeteries into financial opportunities. Mansoori had fought alongside other activists to pass a law that would prevent the flattening of cemeteries by giving cultural heritage authorities the right to intervene. But the Endowments' continued to carry out the projects where they had already begun.

What was so striking about the project was how it reflected a major transformation in the meaning of the *waqf*, the Islamic endowment, as an institution. Historically, *waqf* was an inalienable form of charitable endowment in perpetuity that was protected by the legal category it inhabited. Individuals might endow a field to benefit a specific shrine, thereby allowing all profits from whatever was grown on that land to be used to pay for upkeep of the shrine in the future. This was a common practice among wealthy individuals who wanted to share their income in a lasting way that was protected by Islamic law from outside interference. As Hussein Agrama and Nada Moumtaz have shown in the contexts of Egypt and Lebanon respectively, the *waqf* was widely-respected as an institution historically precisely because it was beyond the reach of the state and was unaffected by popular suspicion toward those in power.<sup>42</sup> But since the 1979 Revolution, most endowed properties across Iran have been centralized under the

<sup>41</sup> For example on Islamic legal precedents in Iran that mention this 30 year limit, see the rulings of Grand Ayatollah Makaram Shirazi, an important religious and political figure: <u>https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/891476/فنتار مشيراز ی-منطله-در -مور د-دفن-در -قبر -مر ده-دیگر</u> His rulings have been cited in various media as a rationale allowing graves to be resold after 30 years. See: <u>https://www.magiran.com/article/2386825</u> and <u>https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/180574/حساله-30-culle/2386825</u> and <u>https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/180574/culle/2386825</u> and <u>https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/180574/culle/2386825</u> is been occurring at least since the 2000s in Behesht-e Zahra, Tehran's largest cemetery, where it is done by making the graves two stories: <u>https://www.mehrnews.com/news/883750/-ull-0-60-culle-0-2000</u>. But the flattening of old cemeteries to create more space for new burials represents a new phenomenon. <sup>42</sup> Agrama, Hussein Ali. *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*. University of Chicago Press, 2012; Moumtaz, Nada. *God's Property: Islam, Charity, and the Modern State*. University of California Press, 2021. Endowments' organization. In the 1980s, a law was passed stipulating that all endowments that lacked clear trustees – a majority, including most shrines, mosques, and other such institutions – would be administered by the Endowments Organization, which was merged into the Pilgrimage, Endowments, and Charity Organization.<sup>43</sup> Later, it was moved into the Ministry of Culture. But the Endowments' organization is directly controlled by Supreme Leader Khamenei through a clerical leader that he appoints, making it unaccountable to anyone but him. In the decades since, the Endowments' organization has acquired vast properties across the country.

Islamic endowments have thus been subjected to the same process of rationalization as other aspects of Islamic law – a process that scholars have argued, "rather than having the expected and oft-cited effect of sacralizing the state, has resulted in an unintended, opposite situation, rendering religion subservient to the state." <sup>44</sup> While some scholars of Islamic endowments have argued that the waqf has impeded capitalism in the Middle East, in Iran, it seems, the waqf is central to capitalism's spread. Since the 1980s, Iranian authorities have drawn on the concept of *maslahat* – public interest or "state expediency," here meaning the idea that specific aspects of Islamic law can be overridden in government decision-making for the sake of the preservation of the system – to implement rulings that otherwise might have been frowned upon by Islamic jurors.

Because in Iran *maslahat* has become identified broadly with the political system, its needs, and its interests, it allows an expansive definition that can permit a wide variety of interventions in the public sphere. Destroying graves and interring multiple corpses in single

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> For more on the history of waqfs in Iran, see: Ali, Syed Nazim, et al. "Waqf in Iran: An Overview of Historical Roots and Current Trends." *Waqf Development and Innovation Socio-Economic and Legal Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 2022, pp. 192-206; Hosen, Nadirsyah, and Hossein Esmaeili. "Property Law and Trusts (Waqf) in Iran." *Research Handbook on Islamic Law and Society*, Elgar, Cheltenham, United Kingdom, 2018, pp. 178–198.
 <sup>44</sup> Kazemipur, Abdolmohammad. *Sacred as Secular: Secularization under Theocracy in Iran*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022: pp 71.

plots can be justified here because the financial profit accorded to the Islamic Endowments Organization will allow shrines in general to function better and will also promote the Islamic political system (i.e. the Islamic Republic) more widely – thus benefiting the public good. By making the political system synonymous with the public good, this interpretation of *maslahat* allows for a wide range of actions. Contrary to Orientalist claims that Islamic law is unchanging, it also shows the dynamism of the Islamic Sharia legal codes (*feqh-e puyā*) – in this case, drawing on Islamic law to help expand the authoritarian bent of state organs. But as *Awqāf* has enjoyed a much freer hand to extend its control and reshape shrines, their cemeteries, and their endowments, it also created widespread popular suspicion toward endowments in general.<sup>45</sup>

Not long after I spoke to Zahra, I met Karim as I walked through a cemetery at Imamzadeh Seyyed Ali shrine in Qom on a windy spring day. The cemetery had already been flattened; Karim was seated atop the newly-laid white stone that covered all the tomb's graves. With green, red, black, and yellow paint at his side, he carefully colored in the name and dates that had been mechanically etched onto his father's grave, outlining its edges with a border and bouquets of flowers.



Figure 13

Coloring in the text on a tomb to make it more visible after the original was flattened by authorities and replaced with flat white marble. (Photo: Alex Shams)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> At shrines across the country in 2019 and 2020, I witnessed large banners encouraging Iranians to endow property to benefit the shrines, suggesting that authorities were concerned that they were failing to do so.

He complained that the stone was cheap – far cheaper in quality than the gravestone he had spent a large sum buying, but which had been destroyed in the flattening – and that the etching rubbed off easily, making names and dates hard to read even only a few months after it was built. "When this stone breaks, they have to replace it, and then they will make more money from it again," he said, shaking his head as he looked at his father's grave. As people walked around us, looking for loved ones and stepping on the lightly-marked gravestones, Karim noted sadly, "They've turned the graveyard into a park." <sup>46</sup> He then looked up at me, adding: "Just one of the many blessings [*ne`mat*] brought to us by the Islamic Republic."



Figure 14

Searching for loved ones' graves at a cemetery under construction in Qom. (Photo: Alex Shams)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> The conversion was particularly ironic given that the conversion of a cemetery to a park in Qom was one of the original events that led to public protests against the rule of Reza Pahlavi in the 1930s. See: Bohlul, Mohamad Taqi. Khāterāt-e Siāsi-ye Bohlul bā Negāhi beh Qiyām-e Gowharshād *[The Political Memoirs of Bohlul with a View toward the Gowharshad Uprising]*, Hozur Press: 1387 [2008].

## **Re-Narrativizing History**

The transformations of urban space across Qom's urban fabric had spillover effects that spread rapidly across the city, reshaping how Qomis understood their hometown. Modernization projects targeting local shrines unmoored them from the neighborhoods their identities were tied to and re-oriented them toward foreign visitors, mimicking events at Qom's central shrine. To understand how this process unfolded, we must first stop at a major Qomi landmark: Gozarkhan Bazaar. While the Mehromah mall outside town caters to moneyed Iranians, Gozarkhan Bazaar, just south of Fatima Masoumeh's shrine, is the heart of Qom's historic transnational pilgrimage industry. It hosts dozens of small hostels, cafes, and shops crowded together down a few alleyways, oriented toward working-class Iraqis, who are the best-represented nationality among foreign pilgrims with around 4 million visiting Iran every year.

At the intersection with Revolution Avenue, touts yell out destinations for shared taxis in Arabic, including Iraqi border towns or Mashhad in eastern Iran. Others offer local tours with the pitch, "*mazārāt, shalālāt*" – "shrines and waterfalls" – in and around Qom. But not all Iraqis here are tourists. Gozarkhan is home to Qom's historic Persian Iraqi community, comprised of refugees deported from their homeland in the 1970s and 80s. In Iraqi shrine cities like Najaf and Karbala, where Iraqis and Iranians mixed for centuries, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis accused of having Persian ancestry were expelled by Saddam Hussein. Those who could prove their ancestry were given Iranian citizenship and many settled in Qom, revitalizing older neighborhoods beside the shrine. In 2003, following the US invasion of Iraq, the border reopened and millions of Iraqis and Iranians began crossing both ways every year.



Figure 15

Pilgrims and locals walk through the entrance to Gozarkhan Bazaar (Photo: Alex Shams)

As Iraqi tourists flooded Qom, local Iraqis opened shops catering to them, serving as a bridge between their two homelands. Iraqi visitors are increasingly joined by Shia Muslim pilgrims from other Arab countries like Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Lebanon, as well as Indians and Pakistanis. The reshaping of Qom is intended not only to entice Iranians but also to draw on the region's much larger Shia Muslim communities, numbering more than 200 million people. While Fatima Masoumeh's shrine may be the key site bringing them to Qom, attracting them to stay longer requires other attractions.

The shrines that touts advertise include Chehel Akhtaran, one of many smaller shrines scattered across Qom's urban fabric. Chehel Akhtaran, meaning Forty Stars, is known among Qomis for helping those in need. The neighborhood surrounding the shrine prides itself for hosting Qom's most impressive commemorations during Muharram, when hundreds gather to beat drums, chant mourning songs, and carry large metallic banners called `*alam* for large crowds, who collect free food and sweets distributed from front yards. Arash was one of those

who used to visit during the holiday. "We came here every year, going door to door and seeing friends, eating and hanging out on the way" during the commemorations, he explained.

But the neighborhood has been devastated as authorities expanded the shrine to make room for tourists since the mid-2010s. When I visited in 2019-20, the shrine was surrounded by a large, windswept parking lot. At one corner, a tiled mural of a knight that once decorated a home sat forlorn and exposed. "The people I knew who lived here used to come back for Ashura. They tried having the rituals here like they used to, but it's a miserable place because it's so dusty," Arash explained. Holidays are more than just the theological meanings they hold; they're also about rituals that bring people together: the parades, the chants, the food, the gatherings that bring a shrine to life. Today, in their place, sits an expanded and ornately renovated shrine, a commodity to be consumed by temporary visitors.<sup>47</sup> Instead of a community, it has a parking lot.



Figure 16

Left: Tilework that once decorated the interior of a now-demolished home near Chehel Akhtaran shrine, now exposed to the street that replaced the building. Right: The large parking lot that replaced much of the neighborhood around Chehel Akhtaran shrine. (Photo: Alex Shams)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Once considered beyond the realm of financial exchange, these shrines have been transformed into commodities producing value – not for the community around them, but for those invested in their renovation. See Chambers, Erve. *Native Tours: The Anthropology of Travel and Tourism*. Waveland Press, 2010; pp. 94.

The neighborhood's displacement is not only about the homes they gave up or the holidays they marked; it also means the displacement of alternative interpretations of the site and its meaning. The holy site is composed of two attached shrines; one is dedicated to the "Forty Stars," forty female saints buried together, while the other is dedicated to *Musa Mobarqa*`, Moses the Burqa-Wearer. The renovated shrine complex emphasizes the tomb of the 40 women, stressing their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad and implying that they are linked to the Battle of Karbala, integrating them into the pantheon of orthodox imamzadeh shrines. It also describes *Musa Mobarqa*` using an official name and emphasizing his lineage to the Prophet through his father Imam Javad. For locals, the more prominent story was previously that of Moses the Burqa-Wearer. According to the legend, Moses was a local man famed for his incredible beauty. It was said that Moses could not walk through the bazaar without provoking the lust of men and being propositioned by them. Moses took to wearing a burqa so that his beauty would not provoke others into sin, leading to his nickname.

The story may sound odd given contemporary gender norms, but there is a long tradition of homo-erotic norms and literature in Iran and the broader Islamic world.<sup>48</sup> Musa was not the only handsome young man who stayed veiled in public; the son of Syrian mystic Muhammad ibn Iraq reportedly wore the veil for many years "to keep people from being enchanted by him." <sup>49</sup> In 19th century Iran, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi has argued that norms around beauty were "not

<sup>48</sup> For more on sexual politics in modern Iranian history, see Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. University of California Press, 2010. One of the most well-known Islamic tales, tells the story of Zulaykha and Yusuf, the Prophet Joseph and the only figure in the Quran to get his own *surah*, describing him as the most beautiful man ever created by God, and thus tempting the Queen Zulaykha into sin. See: Najmabadi, Afsaneh. "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story'?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies*: Vol. 29, No. 4 (Nov., 1997), pp. 485-508.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> El-Rouayheb, Khaled. *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*. University of Chicago Press, 2005: pg. 31. Thanks to Alexander Jabbari for pointing this out.

distinguished by gender," and "love and desire ... could be generated in a man at least as easily by a beautiful young male as by a young female." <sup>50</sup> "Not only was it assumed that desire could be aroused by any beautiful face, male or female," she argues, "but such desire was not considered improper or sinful in itself." <sup>51</sup> In this context, the tale of Moses the Burqa-Wearer is not particularly shocking.

But in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century these norms of homoerotic behavior and the tradition of homoerotic literature that reflected them came under attack. This in part had to do with the influence of European visitors; by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian intellectuals were "acutely aware" that Europeans understood homoerotic love as a "vice." <sup>52</sup> Gradually, the extensive tradition of homoerotic poetry that is central to the Persian canon was written out of literature and memory, making invisible much of the works of seminal Persian poets.<sup>53</sup> Homoerotic behaviors and norms, a major part of Iranian masculinity culture for centuries prior, became increasingly characterized as sinful and something to be kept hidden – and specifically, as something anti-modern. Increasingly, "homoeroticism and same-sex practices came to mark Iran as backward;" in this context, "heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of 'achieving modernity." <sup>54</sup> By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "many of the accounts of male homosexual liaisons became embedded in the political critique of one's opponents, or within the moral critique of 'a country in decay."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Najmabadi, Afsaneh. Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity. University of California Press, 2010, pp. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Ibid 17-18

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 32-34

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Jabbari, Alexander. "Erotics: From Bawdy to Bashful." *The Making of Persianate Modernity: Language and Literary History between Iran and India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2023, pp. 77–106.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Najmabadi 3

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Ibid 23

The story of the shrine of Moses the Burga Wearer is a testament to an earlier way of imagining and describing gender and sexuality that persisted in a religious tale, even when norms changed and descriptions of tempting male beauty disappeared from public discourse.<sup>56</sup> Since shrine narratives reflect assumptions and ways of thinking from earlier periods of time, they can preserve stories that conflict with norms of the present. In Qom, the tale of Moses the Burga-Wearer continued to be told and retold, reproducing an earlier imaginary of gender and sexuality in Iran that by the early  $21^{st}$  century seemed anachronistic – and for some, shockingly out of place. Indeed, although homoerotic behavior, norms, and humor is widespread in contemporary Iran, it is considered inappropriate for the public sphere, even as it is seen as relatively unremarkable among homosocial groups of young men or women. Yet, although the story of the shrine of Qom had persisted for centuries, the imposition of a new official narrative – and the displacement of hundreds of people around the shrine who would have been familiar with the old narrative – imperiled the longevity of the oral traditions. Neighborhoods are not just collections of houses; they are home to ways of life and stories that survive through horizontal connections between neighbors. But with the modernization of Qom's shrines, these neighborhoods were increasingly being scattered to the wind, as were the ties and tales that linked them.

A striking thing about the expansion of various shrines around Qom is that they were not, by and large, particularly in need of renovation. Chehel Akhtaran had not been falling apart before; it was a perfectly functional shrine. In claiming to protect, restore, and defend religious sites, the projects created an opportunity for the intervention of the Endowments organization to produce something quite new. A clerical official in the organization, Hojjat ol-Eslam Khodaiy,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Another striking example of this phenomenon is the shrine of Madholal Hussein in Lahore, Pakistan, where a Muslim saint and his male Hindu lover are buried together. Their love is commemorated in poems associated with the shrine and the site is known as a refuge for queer devotees. In Qom, in contrast, while the story circulates, its details and implications were not generally referenced in rituals or practices as far as I know.

elucidated three rational for modernization of shrines that did not require urgent renovation. He argued that these renovations were necessary to create a solidly-engineered "construction base" for shrines to avoid unexpected costs that may arise from potential collapse in the future. He then described the need to "attract pilgrims," and lastly to ensure the role of the clergy (like himself) in "introducing the Family of the Prophet to society by emphasizing their [rightful] place." <sup>57</sup>

From the perspective of the religious authorities, proper imamzadeh shrines were those belonging to the Prophet's family fleeing Karbala. Shrines of unclear lineage were assimilated into this narrative. Chehel Akhtaran fit more closely with the narrative, even if it was not clear who the 40 women were or how they died, as labels at the shrine attest. De-emphasizing the popular narrative of Moses the Burqa-Wearer's life and instead emphasizing his Prophetic lineage fit with state authorities' focus on 'correcting' improper forms of religious piety and ensuring the rationality of religious faith. Moral reform has become an explicit part of the project of socially engineering a modern Islamic society since 1979. This has required a broader "rationalization and authentification" of Islamic practices – a reformation of Islam from the inside to cleanse it of perceived irrationality, including by "demarcating and excluding superstition, engaging with science as a resource, and instrumentalizing the metaphysical in the service of moral reform."<sup>58</sup> Shifting the shrine's narrative also allows for it to be enveloped into the state's own religio-political ideology, focusing on Karbala and the lineage extending to the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> "*Rāhhā-ye Tabdil-e Boqā` Motabarakeh beh Qotb-e Farhangi* [Paths toward converting shrines into Cultural Poles]," 28 Tir 1397 [19 July 2018], *Hawzah News*. https://www.hawzahnews.com/news/456367/-راه-های-تبدیل-بقاع-متبر که-به-قطب-فر هنگی

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Doostdar, Alireza. *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny*. Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 232-4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> They thus accompanied a host of new such combined religio-political rituals in public life, such as praising the state's political authorities and chanting against the state's enemies at Friday prayers, broadcast weekly on TV.

The cleric's first point, however, is a crucial one: because the shrines are old, they could one day possibly collapse, and to prevent that, they need to be pre-emptively destroyed and rebuilt in the present. This neoliberal logic is focused on "governing uncertainties, possibilities, and future risks" and eliminating the possibility of the unexpected: of history to happen.<sup>60</sup> The patina of age that has accumulated must be wiped off and replaced by brand-new tiles. But it is precisely patina, "the look of age [that] ... acknowledges the depth of social stratigraphy" and reminds us of an "other time" outside the present, of links to the past and the dead; its removal erases the past/present distinction, creating a world that may be enchanted but is forever present, which has never been other than what it is now. <sup>61</sup> Keeping Iran's shrines forever-new ensures that Islam appears forever-modern; and that the Islamic Republic's political order appears as a natural part of the landscape, not a political phenomenon potentially subject to change.

But the feasibility of perpetual renovation – and the projects of moral reform enacted in urban space – relies on the sale of the substance that powers Iran's economy: oil. The belief that oil profits will always continue is its own kind of enchantment, albeit a capitalist one: the ideology of oil as commodity that produces the future as a "limitless horizon of growth" and income for those lucky enough to live atop it.<sup>62</sup> The project of renovating shrines makes sense as a kind of investment: why let people live near an attraction if you can make more money turning their houses into a parking lot for visitors willing to buy things? Authorities thus transform the city from one for locals into one for visitors, focusing on the profit to be derived from exhibiting this site to those willing to spend money, if not at the site itself, then in visiting Qom.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Bogaert links this way of imagining urban projects to Foucauldian biopolitics, focused not on domination but on representing power as seemingly permanent as to convince subjects that it is such. See Bogaert, Koenraad. *Globalized Authoritarianism: Megaprojects, Slums, and Class Relations in Urban Morocco*. University

of Minnesota Press, 2018, pp. 227.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Dawdy, Shannon Lee. Patina: A Profane Archaeology. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Mitchell, Timothy. Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil. Verso, 2011, pp. 142.



Iraqi pilgrims take a selfie at the Fatemeh Masoumeh shrine in Qom. (Photo: Alex Shams)

But what happens when the money run out? It's not a coincidence that these projects were largely conceived during President Ahmadinejad's reign, when oil prices were at record highs and Iran's economy expanding rapidly. By the time work commenced in earnest, the forecast was different. Starting in 2011, Obama implemented sanctions to undermine Iran's economy; in one week, the value of Iran's currency plunged by two-thirds. Trump did it again in 2017, with a similarly devastating collapse in the rial's worth. These economic shocks coincided with a major drop in oil prices since 2017, cutting state budgets more than half, leading to the indefinite halting of projects across the country. It affected shrines too. Not far from Chehel Akhtaran, a small local shrine named Ali ibn Musa al-Reza was demolished in 2017, with promises it would be rebuilt bigger and better.<sup>63</sup> When I visited in 2019, nothing was left of the structure, just the tomb, surrounded by rubble. When the budget for rebuilding shrines was cut,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> "Vazi`at-e Nāmonāseb-e Yek Emāmzādeh b`ad az Takhrib dar Qom [The Unsuitable Condition of a Shrine after Destruction in Qom]." Tabnak News Agency, 25 Dec. 2018, www.tabnakmazandaran.ir/fa/news/694862/وضعیت-/-در-قم يامناسب-يک-امامزاده-بعد-از-تخريب-در-قم

reconstruction was halted. Signs advertising the shrine pointed to a destroyed place, a saint who can no longer welcome visitors. The drive to avoid future costs left the present in ruins.



Figure 18

Ali Musa ibn al-Reza shrine in Qom. The shrine was demolished and, at the time this photo was taken in late 2019, remained in this condition. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Back at Chehel Akhtaran, the alternative narrative of Moses the Burqa Wearer is erased in the official branding of the shrine. Transnational pilgrims come to Qom looking for the tombs of saints to pray at; the tale of a beautiful man from centuries past hardly fits their idea of what those saints' stories should be. Its success as a stop on transnational pilgrimage itineraries is clear: buses and taxis with Iraqi pilgrims stream in and out. Welcome signs in Arabic, Urdu, and English, beside Persian, signal the new transnational orientation; when I entered in the early afternoon, a man at the door greeted me first in Arabic, suggesting he expected Iraqis more than Iranians. In 2019, as I watched Iraqi pilgrims visit the tombs, a woman who had just finished praying approached me and in Arabic asked, "Which imam is this?" Because the tombs of the Prophet's descendants are considered holy in general, the question of who was buried there did not matter; it was only after praying that it occurred to her. Transforming the shrine into a monument, one defined by a broad narrative and removed of the specificities of the place and the people who sustain it, made it fit perfectly into a transnational religious pilgrimage itinerary in which each place is merely a quick stop on an itinerary. Chehel Akhtaran's success at becoming part of foreign pilgrims' itinerary came at the cost of its integration into the life of a community. As the meaning of Qom changed and its transformation into a holy land continued apace, its inhabitants would have to be re-engineered as well. The drive to make its shrines and monuments tourist-friendly meant subjecting them to a unified narrative process. It would also mean removing those inhabitants who conflicted with authorities' vision of the town as a family-friendly leisure destination.

### Martyrs and Wanderers

At Qom's southern edge, before you reach the Jamkaran mosque complex, is a large mountain known locally as *Kuh-e Khezr*, Khidr Mountain, a small shrine sitting perilously at its rocky top. Khidr is a mystical figure associated with wanderers and journeyers; shrines to him can be found across the Middle East and South Asia, especially on mountains and well-traveled routes, where they offered a refuge for travelers. In contrast to mosques, led and guarded by religious clerics, smaller shrines have historically catered to marginalized groups in society, a place for women to gather and Sufi mystics living on society's edges to pray and collect alms.

The humble holy site above Qom was no exception. With a stunning view over the city and a steep mountain path making it hard to reach, it attracted mystics, as well as those escaping from the constricting rules below. It became known in Qom as a place where unreputable types, like drinkers, smokers, and drug users, gathered and passed the time. In the 2000s, local authorities asserted control, expanding the shrine, adding lights and security guards, and carving a large, easy-to-walk staircase facilitating the general public's access. As places like Khidr

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become organized within state religious bureaucracy, they become increasingly policed; their edges secured, their visitors watched. At Khidr, new plastic placards were erected instructing visitors to respect religious norms of propriety because they are in a "sacred place." No matter that Khidr does not quite fit the norm of a shrine; it is dedicated to a legendary holy man said to have merely passed through here, not a grave of the Prophet's descendant.<sup>64</sup>

New banners, however, impress upon the visitor that the shrine is not really about the wandering holy figure it is named after. Instead, they draw on a quote from the early Islamic leader Imam Ali, in which he is said to have urged his followers to move to a place (identified on the banner as Qom) and mentioned a white mountain above a mosque. Beside the quote, a caption explains that the mosque is Jamkaran, whose massive, new complex can be seen in the distance, and in parenthesis explains that the mountain is Khidr Mountain, hence the need for religious propriety. Efforts to assimilate the site do not end there.

At the foot of the mountain, a large modernist structure has been erected: a tomb for "unknown martyrs." Any visitor now must pass this monument, home to the bodies of several Iranian soldiers who died in the Iran-Iraq War but whose remains were found decades later. Beside them is a gift shop selling trinkets, war-themed children's toys, and framed pictures of other war martyrs, as well as leaders like Ayatollah Khamenei and General Qassem Soleimani, assassinated on US President Trump's orders in January 2020. Khidr Mountain goes unmentioned. Instead, the martyrs' tomb serves to consecrate the site not just as a holy one but as one linked to both nation and faith, emphasized by the staging of rituals recalling those at shrines, such as "ghobārruby," the yearly "dusting off" of the tombs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> In the Islamic tradition, Khidr is often described as a Prophet as well as a teacher to Prophets. The location of his tomb, however, is a matter of debate.

Locals visit and pray at the site, clearly moved. By virtue of the martyrs' identity being unknown, they are available as kin to those who visit, many of whom may have lost loved ones in the war. The burial of these bodies was part of a larger project beginning in the mid-2000s, when authorities began erecting martyrs' tombs in university campuses and public spaces.<sup>65</sup> Across Iran, these new monuments received mixed reactions, including from families of those who died in the war; while some embraced the sites as important reminders for society, others viewed them cynically as lip service from a state they felt betrayed the legacy of those martyrs.<sup>66</sup> Others saw them as a kind of civic honor, one that might lead to more state support for local infrastructure.<sup>67</sup> In a new suburb of Qom oriented toward seminarians called Pardis, another "unknown martyrs" tomb has been erected to consecrate what was once a patch of desert.

Around Khidr Mountain, the building of the monument was accompanied by improved roads and a plaza beside the shrine where families could picnic. This highlights how much shrines and monuments were a type of infrastructure, pointing to the state's presence in people's everyday lives, recalling the "infrastructuralization" of state power.<sup>68</sup> It also points to how this narrative came to occupy public space, allowing for the holding of commemorative events where crowds can gather and narratives of war and sacrifice can be rehearsed in mass events. It also has a moralizing power. For decades, it has been common in Iranian political discourse to urge listeners to "remember the martyrs" as a way of enjoining them to support the state or to observe

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Talebi, Shahla. "From the Light of the Eyes to the Eyes of the Power: State and Dissident Martyrs in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *Visual Anthropology* vol. 25, no. 1-2, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Compare Rose Wellman's interlocutors in a rural town near Shiraz with an unidentified woman she mentions being prevented from speaking with, or Tehrani families who looked askance at what they considered propaganda. See: Wellman, Rose. *Feeding Iran: Shi`i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic*. University of California Press, 2021; Saeidi, Shirin. "Creating the Islamic Republic of Iran: Wives and Daughters of Martyrs, and Acts of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2010, pp. 113-126: pp. 116.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Wellman, Rose. *Feeding Iran: Shi`i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic*. University of California Press, 2021, pp. 563.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Chu, Julie. "When Infrastructures Attack: The Workings of Disrepair in China." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 351-367.

proper moral conduct. Physically placing those bodies in public places made it logical to demand proper conduct on "sacred ground" – just as the new signs erected around Khidr's mountaintop shrine demanded of visitors. And removing a space for social outcasts to gather seemed to speak of a new geography "befitting" *Qom-e Moqaddas*, Holy Qom.

Qomis themselves have pushed back against state efforts to inscribe a hegemonic identity on the city, through everyday acts such as a refusing to deploy the state's naming practices. Most notable among these is an unassuming square in a wealthy neighborhood called Salarieh. If Qom has an uptown, it's here, where the boutique shops and chic fast food joints oriented toward moneyed locals are located. At its heart is a roundabout surrounded by a dozen or so ice cream shops. A decade ago, these ice cream shops were where bored young people hung out. The area, known as Falakeh-ye Bastani - Ice Cream Roundabout - became such a scene that on weekend nights, it hosted traffic jams where drivers and passengers flirted, chatted between cars, and passed each other phone numbers through windows. Night time cruising is a favorite pastime in Iranian cities, and most towns and cities have well-known spots, or several, where young people gather. For years, Ice Cream Square was Qom's top spot for late night flirting. Local authorities, however, were disturbed by the phenomenon and prepared two urban interventions. First, the street leading to the roundabout was converted from a two-way street – which allowed the gaze of passing cars to meet – into a one-way street, making it harder to see who else was going in circles, and forcing cars to drive through faster. Secondly, the roundabout was officially named Falakeh-ye Shahid Dastgheib – Dastgheib the Martyr Roundabout – in an attempt to impose propriety by defining the space through state-sanctioned martyrs' sacrifice. But young people continued frequenting the square, figuring out ways around the barriers. And the new name was turned into an object of derision. Young people mockingly integrated the state's naming

practices and christened the area: *Falakeh-ye Shahid Bastani*, Ice Cream the Martyr Roundabout.<sup>69</sup>

Even the massive infrastructure projects linked to the shrine opened new opportunities for quiet Qomi resistance. When I asked Arash if he could point to any positive examples from the many infrastructural projects around Qom, he thought long and hard. After a long pause, he answered: "The *haram be haram* road is the only long, straight road in Qom, and the police don't bother you if you drive back and forth on it. When there's a holiday, they cover it with crazy, bright neon stringed-up lights. I'd go with my friends and we'd light a few joints, smoke them, and spend hours cruising up and down. That was the main positive."

## Conclusion

For visitors from elsewhere, the struggles over the meaning of Qom as well as the dynamics of contestation of its space are largely invisible. Instead, their experiences reflect the situations in their homelands and the respite Iran can offer from the pervasive sense of insecurity and threat that defines life for Shia Muslims in many neighboring countries. What they see on their brief trip plays a major role in defining their understanding of Iran: well-paved highways, sparkling clean courtyards, a litany of holy sites tied to their faith's ancient martyrs, and giant portraits of Iran's political leaders. The tremendous amount of money that Iranian authorities – local, national, and at the shrine – have poured into remaking Qom is an investment in these pilgrims' experiences, geared not only toward ensuring they enjoy themselves and encourage others to visit as well, but also toward providing a positive image of the Islamic Republic's unique political experiment. Convincing other Muslims, especially Shia Muslims, of the success

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> The name sounds less clumsy in Persian as it directly follows the state's naming practices. For example, *Metro Shahid Hemmat* (Hemmat the Martyr Metro Stop), *Khiābān Shahid Mottahhari* (Mottahari the Martyr Street), etc, where the word "martyr" acts grammatically as a title, in the same way that "Mr." or "Dr." could be used. In English, however, because "martyr" never precedes a name, it doesn't have quite the same ring.

of the Iranian government's efforts to build a modern Islamic society and political system by encouraging tourism has become a pillar of state policy since the 2000s.

Whether they are in fact convinced by what they see, however, remains another question. Pilgrims come with their own complicated investments tied to the ongoing battles within Shia Muslim communities across the region over the shape of their political futures and their relationships to Iran and its political model. Since 1979, these communities have been riven by conflicts over how to relate to the revolutionary political Islam that became the Iranian state's *raison d'être*. In South Asia, for example, this has taken the form of a growing divide between more traditional, conservative approaches to faith that stress these communities' immediate surroundings and those who embrace the revolutionary model and its image of a transnational Shia Muslim community. Qom has played a central place in these battles over Shia imagination, as its seminaries have attracted thousands of students from across Pakistan, India, and Kashmir, many of whom returned to their homelands and led political struggle, such as Syed Arif Hussain Al Hussaini, known as the Khomeini of Pakistan. Some, like Jawaad Naqvi, have even set up their own seminaries modeled on those in Qom.

The spread of religious education has been particularly pronounced among supporters of the Iranian model in Pakistan. Religious women have drawn on Iranian support for women's right to study and work to assert their own right to overturn existing social norms that once blocked their access.<sup>70</sup> Prior to the Revolution in Iran, many religious families prevented their daughters from attending higher education, justifying their decision through religion. However, because the 1979 Revolution came to be understood by them as a religious revolt in which the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> In many parts of South Asia, this has translated into competition between supporters of Iran-based and Iraqi-based clerics, manifesting in self-differentiation through lifestyle and ritual practices. See: Gupta, Radhika. "Experiments with Khomeini's Revolution in Kargil: Contemporary Shi'a networks between India and West Asia." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 48, 2014, pp 370-398.

leader Ayatollah Khomeini had urged women to take part by protesting and, later, by studying and working to contribute to the nation and to Islam, the social barriers previously justified through religion against women's access to the public sphere largely collapsed.<sup>71</sup> For Pakistani women from conservative families, reference to Iran was also an opportunity to push for more rights within their own context, pointing to the complex gender politics of the Iranian model of Shia Islam as it crossed borders.

These debates have even spread into the realm of religious culture, with supporters of the Iranian model in South Asia such as Nadeem Sarwar adopting Iranian-style *noheh* ritual chanting, provoking debates about to what extent integrating "foreign" religious models is acceptable. These controversies are particularly fraught given how many South Asian Muslims blame the "Saudization" of Sunni Islam in the Subcontinent for fueling sectarianism and religious intolerance against them. But to blame Saudi Arabia or Iran for transformations in local South Asian Islams would be to deny the agency of members of these communities in evaluating different options and advocating for their own religious beliefs. Their choice to embrace a particular path, message, or interpretation is often a result of personal experiences that have led them to do so. And experiences on pilgrimage to the Middle East are a central way that South Asian Muslims have come to reflect on varieties of religious and political practice, with places like Qom becoming a "problem-space" through which to think through their own commitments to liberalism, secularism, and religious politics in their own countries.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> For more on this topic from the perspective of the Iranian women who experienced these changes, see: Shams, Alex. "If Not for the Revolution: How Higher Education Became an 'Islamic Right' for Religious Iranian Women." in Rezai-Rashti, Goli, et al (ed). *Women, Islam and Education*, Routledge, London, 2019, pp. 103–121. <sup>72</sup> While an Iranian-style Islamic Republic may be feasible in Iran, a Shia-majority state, South Asian pilgrims' minority status back home means that their debates are limited to the future of their own communities, not the nation-state as a whole. Although in the 1980s, there was a time when some Shia Muslims in Pakistan, for example, supported the Islamicization project of the state under dictator Zia ul-Haq, as the strongly Sunni bent of this project became clear, many Shia Muslims remained or became staunch advocates of secularism, focused on internal



Women walk in a plaza just outside Fatemeh Masoumeh shrine in central Qom. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Hoda, an Indian woman in her 20s who visited Iran with family members on pilgrimage, mentioned that her mother was deeply dismayed when the tour group they were a part of visited the shrine in Qom and noticed huge portraits of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei adorning the walls. A staple of all public spaces in Iran, these framed portraits' presence in the shrine was an affront to her mother, who saw her Shia Muslim faith defined not by these clerical-cumpolitical leaders but through her personal piety and devotion, particularly as a minority-within-aminority back in India. Witnessing the portraits inside a religious shrine that, in her opinion, should by its nature be open to all believers and not restricted based on one's political allegiance unnerved her mother, whose political consciousness was formed by being a member of a middleclass, liberal family in a country where fears of Hindu supremacist political dominance pushed

community affairs, or moved toward interfaith work in the context of a secular state and religiously plural society. This is another complicated facet of South Asian pilgrims' evaluation of Iran as a political model.

minorities like Shia Muslims to embrace political secularism. For others, however, these same images triggered no response. When I discussed them with Mehreen, a university student in Lahore, Pakistan, she mentioned that she had grown up in a household where both portraits were present and that most other homes of Shia Muslims she knew had them as well. The idea that Khomeini and Khamenei were political figures– and not just religious clerics that members of her community revered – had never occurred to her until I brought up that the portraits could trigger complicated feelings for Iranians depending on their own political persuasions.

Among Shia Muslims that have adopted Iranian political ideology as part of their approach to their faith, these portraits had become symbols of identity more than anything else. But they could also be redeployed creatively in ways that would be theoretically banned in Iran itself. At the door of the Shia religious complex Bara Imambara in Lucknow, India, for example, their portraits are placed among a mix of other Shia religious scholars, like Ayatollahs Sistani and Shirazi, who are unreceptive or even opposed to Iran's politico-religious system. The Iranian government may try to draw on its image as a Muslim holy land to position itself as the sole bearer of this sacredness for a transnational audience – but what that audience does and how they interpret that positioning is another matter.

Shia Muslims from across the region are not the only ones moving. As Iranians themselves travel to Shia shrines in nearby countries, they come face to face with different narratives about their place in the region. Just as non-Iranians' understandings of their homelands and its relationship to Iran are shaped through transnational pilgrimage to Qom, Iranian travels abroad shape Iranian tourists' view of their homeland. It is now to those travels that we turn.

# Chapter 3: Defending the Shrines, Militarizing the Thresholds, Sectarianizing Pilgrims

It was the first time I had ever been to Karbala. For years, my heart wanted to go. But last year, at last, I was called upon to go. ... The people in Iraq gave us free food everywhere on the pilgrimage as we walked to Imam Hussein's shrine. With their entire beings, they sought to lessen the exhaustion of the trip for us. From all over the world, people came to see [Imam Hussein]. No one could stop us. ... When I was at the shrine, I looked around, and I thought, what would I have done if I were at [the battle of] Karbala with them? I would have been imprisoned too! ... When we were on the plane [back to Iran], the pilot took me into the cockpit and pointed between Karbala and Najaf and told me, 'We don't pass over that area when we fly because ISIS is there.' And I was shocked because that's exactly where we had been! ... Would I go again? Of course! In a second.

On a fall afternoon in 2018, I sat around the TV at my grandmother's home in Tehran as

Iranian actress Afsaneh Baygan described her experience on a pilgrimage to the shrines of southern Iraq the year before. In the weeks leading up to the Arbaeen holiday, Iranian government channels broadcast hours of programs encouraging Iranians to travel to Iraq for the occasion, when around 20-25 million people gather in Karbala to commemorate a 7<sup>th</sup> century battle in which much of the Prophet Muhammad's family was killed or taken captive. The pilgrimage involves a week of walking between the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, and local Iraqis offer food, drink, and lodging for free along the route to pilgrims. Baygan went as part of an Iranian-government organized tour for artists and actors, and her interview was broadcast to encourage Iranians to follow in her footsteps.

"What is she talking about? ISIS between Najaf and Karbala? That doesn't make sense!"



Figure 20

A promotional photo of Baygan showing her at the studio during the filming of the interview, with a background showing the Arbaeen pilgrimage. (Source: IRIB)

As the interview aired, my aunts and cousins, many of whom had been to Iraq on pilgrimage previously, interrupted to comment. Baygan's melodramatic flare had pushed her to exaggerate; while ISIS operated in much of Iraq in the mid-2010s, it never had much of an active presence on the road linking the two holiest shrine cities in southern Iraq. At the same time, however, the danger she described was a very real part of the pilgrimage. Car bombs and attacks targeting Shia Muslim pilgrims visiting the sacred places of Iraq – a circuit of four cities including Karbala and Najaf in the south and Samarra and Kadhemiyah near Baghdad – had become a regular event ever since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, setting off a period of instability, civil war, and sectarian violence that has ebbed and flowed until the present. For pilgrims, this threat was part of the experience of pilgrimage but was mostly experienced indirectly; understanding of the dangers faced along the journey was manifested through the checkpoints, concrete walls, and armed and masked soldiers they saw during their pilgrimage.

Despite the threat of violence, Iranian pilgrims began visiting Iraq in large numbers only weeks after Baghdad fell to US forces. Under Saddam Hussein, tensions between the two countries had largely limited pilgrimage to Iraq, with the few Iranians who were allowed to enter forced to go on strictly-organized trips, constantly accompanied by Ba'athist government minders. But these rules were lifted after the US invasion. By 2020, at least 5 million Iranians visited every year. This made Iraq the most popular destination for Iranian travelers, in large part because of the annual Arbaeen pilgrimage where food, drink, and lodging were all provided by Iraqi hosts for free. In the mid-2000s, bombings launched by Al-Qaeda and ISIS frequently hit the shrines and killed hundreds of pilgrims, events closely covered in Iranian media. The situation had improved by the late 2010s, but even in 2016, only a year before Baygan's trip and two years before my own, an explosion targeting Shia pilgrims as they returned to Iran killed nearly 80 people. For Iranian pilgrims, coming from a country where such violence was largely unheard of, these were shocking events. The feeling of danger – or the perception that it was close by - is a central part of the experience of being an Iranian on pilgrimage in Iraq, one reinforced by the presence of security infrastructure tied to the shrines. And as the broadcasting of Baygan's testimony makes clear, the feeling of danger was central to how the Iranian government promoted the pilgrimage as a spiritual experience to domestic audiences.

This sense of danger, I argue in this chapter, was not merely a natural result of the possibility of attack, but also a fear that was constructed and reinforced through the architecture and planning of the holy cities since 2003, in which the Iranian government, the US military, and the Iranian paragovernmental *Setād-e Bāzsāzy-e `Atabāt-e `Āliyāt* (The Headquarters for the Reconstruction of the Holy Thresholds, or "Setad" for short), alongside Iraqi authorities, all played a role. Fear became a way of shaping the city through its very architecture – and even as

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threats subsided, the architecture of fear and the "security affects" it created remained, producing a landscape defined by the ever-present possibility of terror.<sup>1</sup> I argue that for visiting pilgrims, who were attracted to these sites because they marked the locations of the battles of early Islam in which major Islamic figures fell as martyrs, the possibility of violence in the present reinforced the hallowed nature of the sacred journey, a fact that Iranian government media capitalized on and promoted as an ideal affective relationship that bound Iranian pilgrims to Iraq's sacred geography. This in turn allowed Iranian pilgrimage to Iraq to contribute to a growing sense among religious Iranians of sectarian identification and fear of being targeted as Shia Muslims, even though such violence was rare back in Iran (where Shia Muslims were an overwhelming majority).

This fear became a major factor in reshaping the urban landscape of Shia Muslim sacred sites across the region, fuelling a cycle of securitization and sectarianization capitalized on for geopolitical aims by Iranian authorities. The militarization of shrines through architectural and urban planning interventions was initiated by US military forces during the occupation in the 2000s, but the tactics, mechanisms, and physical construction have since been adopted by Iranian entities that have maintained the Shia Muslim shrines as militarized enclaves. In the process, these holy places have become increasingly sealed off from the cities around them, producing a geography of forever war defined by the constant presence of military technology, concrete blast walls, and armed soldiers – all of which, in turn, fuel a sense of fear among pilgrims. This affective sense of threat to pilgrims, in turn, is reproduced discursively through Iranian government-linked media as a central part of the experience of the pilgrimage for domestic Iranian audiences, creating a heightened sense of meaning and political importance around the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Masco, Joseph. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Duke Univ. Press, 2014.

pilgrimage. This bolsters the legitimacy of the Iranian state's own military interventions in the region (primarily in Iraq and Syria), which is packaged collectively in official discourse for domestic audiences as "The Defense of the Shrines," and labelled as an Iranian government effort to protect minority Shia communities from forces that wish to destroy them. In this chapter, I show how the militarization of urban space is central to the production of an affect of threat that mobilizes a sense of fear in pilgrims and is magnified by state media, galvanizing support for military intervention abroad. This fear is central to Iran's government self-cultivation as a protector of Iranians and of Shia Islam amidst the regional US-led War on Terror. I argue that it has been key to how religious Iranians see the region as well as government supporters understand their politics, and as a result has become a central facet in the production of Iranian identity and political horizons in the last two decades. The fear of Iran becoming Iraq, or Syria, has become central to political claims in Iran, and thus understanding how millions of Iranians experience visits to Iraq is key for understanding how they understand themselves and their political commitments. At the same time, Iranians' experiences in Iraq often contradict in the official narrative, revealing meaningful tensions between the goals of the state's project and how Iranians perceive and live them.

I first sketch out a brief historical perspective on the politics of Iranian pilgrimage in Iraq and urban planning in the holy cities. I then turn to Iranian accounts of pilgrimage in the 2000s and the affective dimensions of these accounts as reproduced in Iranian official media. I examine how the US occupation reshaped Iraqi urban space and then trace the creation and actions of Setad, The Center for the Reconstruction of the Holy Thresholds, the Iranian para-governmental organization that coordinates the massive construction projects that have spent billions of dollars to renovate, expand, and protect Shia shrines inside Iraq. I finish by discussing these projects'

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effects on the cities around them, as well as their unexpected consequences, including Iraqi protests and Iranian conspiracy theories.

## Politics of Pilgrimage

At Iraq's shrines are buried numerous members of the Prophet Muhammad's family, who according to the Islamic tradition, arrived there fleeing persecution at the hand of the corrupt leaders who took the mantle of early Islamic leadership. They died at different sites, from Karbala and Najaf in the south to Kadhemiyah and Samarra near Baghdad in central Iraq. Although the narrative is shared by all Muslims, the tradition of worshiping at the shrines and the veneration of each of them as saints is particularly strong among Shia Muslims. The first evidence of shrine pilgrimage at these sites dates to the 900s under the Al-e Buyid dynasty, which positioned itself as a successor to the rebellion of the Prophet's family. But they did not become major sites of mass visitation until the 1500s, when the Safavid Empire took control of Iran and parts of Iraq and began to convert much of the population from Sunni to Shia Islam. The Safavids expended great effort to conquer the shrine cities from the Sunni Ottoman Empire, but after failing to control them, an agreement made them the primary patrons of the shrine cities. As a result, they invested heavily in building urban infrastructure in the cities to facilitate pilgrims, including water canals and guesthouses. This process continued under the Qajar dynasty in the 1800s, when according to agreements with the Ottoman Empire, which exercised political control, Iran continued to be the shrine cities' main patron. In many of these cities, large numbers of residents came to be of Iranian origin, reflecting the many pilgrims, seminary students, and businesspeople who settled in them over time.

The situation dramatically changed following World War I, when the British and French divided much of the Ottoman Empire between themselves and Britain assumed colonial control

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over the newly-created state of Iraq. The borders between Iran and Iraq became increasingly important as the British asserted their control over Iraqi territory and Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iran's modernizing ruler at the time, responded in kind. Over strong protests, the British negated any special Iranian role in the shrine cities and began arresting and deporting residents of Iranian origin who refused to send their sons for conscription in the newly-created armed forces. Although tensions waxed and waned over the course of the 20th century, pilgrimage became a key battleground on which political battles were fought. As a result of tensions between the British government in Iraq and Iran, Reza Shah banned Iranian pilgrimage to Iraq for numerous years. Although eventually lifted, these foreshadowed further limits for decades to come.<sup>2</sup> The shrine cities' economies, largely based on pilgrim expenditures, were depressed as a result.

Pilgrimage is never just about the actual act of pilgrimage; it involves seeing a place and learning about it as well, as well as meeting with other pilgrims. For most visitors, pilgrimage is one of their few opportunities to visit another country, and thus an opportunity to develop a deeper of the world outside of their homeland. Additionally, for many pilgrims these trips are economic, too. Many Iranians historically would bring goods with them from Iran to sell in the markets around Iraq's shrines or buy fabric in Iraq to sell back home. For Iranians, these trips could combine *ziārat* (pilgrimage), *tejārat* (commerce), and *siāhat* (tourism). At a time when political limits restricted contact between Iranians and Iraqis, pilgrimage was one of the few avenues for interaction. The effect of these limits even circulated in Iraqi popular culture. A popular expression in southern Iraq to express happiness at a rare, fortuitous event previously

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For more on the politics of pilgrimage in Iraq's shrine cities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, see: Cole, Juan. *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2002; Jabar, Faleh. *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq.* London: Saqi, 2003; Nakash, Yitzhak. *The Shi'is of Iraq.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994; Shams, Alex. "From guests of the Imam to unwanted foreigners: the politics of South Asian pilgrimage to Iran in the twentieth century." *Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 57, no. 4, 2021, pp. 581-605.

thought impossible is '*Ajami wa lazam shibāch al-Kādhim* (عجمي ولزم شباج الكاظم), meaning, "A Persian holding on to Kadhem's window," referring to an Iranian being able to pray at the shrine of Kadhemiyah near Baghdad. In the 1960s and 1970s, limited numbers of Iranians were able to make the pilgrimage. They were, however, accompanied by minders from SAVAK, the Iranian secret service, who kept a close on their movements. In the late 1970s, political tensions between Iran and Iraq cut pilgrimage off again. Iraq's government also deported hundreds of thousands of residents of the shrine cities suspected of having Persian background.<sup>3</sup> Thus the Persian Iraqi communities that once connected these geographies largely fled to exile in Iran. In the 1990s, pilgrimage restarted in limited numbers again; this time, pilgrimage groups were accompanied by minders from Iraq's ruling Ba'athist party, who viewed Iranians with deep suspicion and feared they might attempt to contact Iraqis. Iraqi police closely surveilled foreign pilgrims and intervened to limit their interactions with Iraqis.<sup>4</sup> As a result, from the 1960s onward, very few open interactions between Iranians and Iraqis were possible on these pilgrimages.<sup>5</sup>

## Post-2003

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 dramatically shifted the political landscape. In a supreme irony, the invasion constituted a watershed in Iraqi-Iranian relations for the better and facilitated the rise of political actors tied to Iran in Iraqi politics, including many who had lived there in exile for decades. Thousands of Iraqis of Iranian origin who had been expelled under previous governments began returning. So did thousands of Iranian pilgrims.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See: Hamdan, Faraj Hattab. "The Development of Iraqi Shi'a Mourning Rituals in Modern Iraq: The 'Ashura Rituals and Visitation of Al-Arb'ain." *Arizona State University*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012: pp. 74. It is difficult to estimate how many people were affected by these deportations; beside the 1969 deportation, there were numerous episodes of mass deportation in the 1970s and 80s, with the majority of affected individuals being forced across the border to Iran.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For example, see: Hoover Institute, Ba'ath Party Archives, Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, Box: 3134, Batch - 3134 0002. 01 3134 0002 0145-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Based on interviews, I know that some Iranian pilgrims developed positive relationships with their Baathist minders during pilgrimages, but these encounters were severely constrained by political circumstances.

Maryam was one of them. About a year after the US invasion, as reports circulated in Iran that pilgrims could now easily acquire visas, Maryam, who was in her early 20s and a devout Muslim, suggested to her mother that they join a religious tour to visit Iraq. She remembered how exhausting the trip had been – it was overland by bus and took more than twenty four hours – but she contrasted the hardship with the sense of inner calm she felt upon finally entering Imam Hussein's sanctuary at Karbala, surrounded by thousands of other pilgrims. "I felt a peace there I had never felt before," she told me as I spoke to her a decade later. "I'll never forget it."

"But weren't you scared at all? Wasn't there a war going on?" I asked her in our conversation more than a decade later.

"When you're there, you're not afraid of anything," she answered. "Only a few hours before we went, a bomb exploded in the shrine. But when we passed through it was all normal again. It was scary to think a bomb had just gone off and killed people there. But you feel protected at the shrine."

Maryam's experience of pilgrimage at the shrine reflects a common one in the early-2000s. Starting in April 2004, when Al-Qaeda bombed the shrine of Karbala and killed nearly 300 people – including dozens of Iranians – the shrines, the cities around them, and the buses that brought pilgrims from Iran became targets. Pilgrims from Iran knew the possibility of death followed them along the road. And yet, they went in the millions, year after year. The threats facing pilgrims were amplified by Iranian state media, which positioned the pilgrimages as a form of defiance against "terrorist groups" that sought to kill Shia Muslims for the fact of being Shia Muslims, adopting the language of the US-led "War on Terror" to describe these attacks.

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I argue that the Iranian state's promotion of pilgrimage in this way was intended to produce a heightened sense of Muslim, and Shia Muslim identity in particular, among Iranians. It was also intended to build ties between Iranians and Shia Muslims in Iraq through the production of a transnational Shia Muslim identity that could bind the two together. This was crucial because Iraq for decades was Iran's main enemy; this enmity culminated in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War in which 1 million were killed following Saddam's invasion of Iran. The war's effects were still felt years later among the many Iranians who were left disabled or without loved ones.<sup>6</sup> The US invasion, ironically, created the opportunity to paper over this past by removing Saddam from power. And pilgrimage, as a heightened emotional experience that can serve to bind together worshipers in a sense of common faith, became a central conduit for it.

As opposed to US analysts who in the 2000s tended to view sect and religious identity in the Middle East as categories of primordial belonging, I draw on an understanding of religious and sectarian identity as a dynamic process.<sup>7</sup> Identity is a political project, whether it be imagining oneself as part of a transnational Shia community in the 2010s, a member of the Iraqi or Iranian nation in the 1980s, or, for that matter, as a supporter of the Communist party in the 1970s, when leftism was a major opposition force in both countries. In order to construct a transnational Shia identity, an affect of being targeted specifically as a Shia Muslim was promoted by the Iranian state through mass publicity, as demonstrated through the emotive testimony of Afsaneh Baygan on state TV, one of many such examples on Iranian state channels. This is a departure from pre-2003 Iranian state ideology, which focused on pan-Islamism and de-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> In Chapter 5, I discuss the complicated baggage this war left Iranian pilgrims and Iraqi hosts with even decades later.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See: Haddad, Fanar. *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*. Oxford University Press, 2011; Makdisi, Ussama Samir. *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon*. University of California Press, 2000.

emphasized Sunni-Shia divisions, as part of a strategy to position itself as a leader of the entire Muslim world. But the framing of Iran-Iraq relations – and the necessity of Iranian military intervention in Iraq to protect shrines from attack, to be discussed later – increasingly positioned Iran as the defender of beleaguered Shia minorities in the face of attacks by their co-religionists.

Sectarianism is a product of sectarianization, "a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers." <sup>8</sup> Sectarianization has been used as a political strategy by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, including by "deliberately [manipulating] sectarian identities ... as a strategy for deflecting demands for political change and perpetuating their power." <sup>9</sup> But this "manipulation" is not always directed from above and planned intentionally. Indeed, in this chapter I will show how events beyond Iranian authorities' control, specifically the US-led War on Terror, led to actions in response to the militarization of the region that in turn fueled and contributed to this process. Iran's security strategy in the region "has often taken the form of financial and military support for politically responsive cosectarians" and in the process has "dovetailed with crises of security, trust, and legitimacy in weak states, ultimately galvanizing the logic of sectarianization in local and region-wide conflicts." <sup>10</sup> These crises are inseparable from US imperialism's legacy, especially the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As attacks on Shia Muslim holy sites and pilgrims in Iraq multiplied, they fueled a sense of "sectarian identification" among both Iraqi and Iranian Shia Muslims, which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Hashemi, Nader & Postel, Danny. "Introduction: The Sectarianization Thesis." In Hashemi, Nader & Postel, Danny, eds. *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., London, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Sadeghi-Borujerdi, Eskandar. "Strategic Depth, Counterinsurgency, and the Logic of Sectarianization: The Islamic Republic of Iran's Security Doctrine and Its Regional Implications." In Hashemi, Nader and Postel, Danny, ed. *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, Hurst & Company, London, 2017.

was in turn were amplified by Iranian state media in ways that positioned Iran as a holy land protected by the Islamic Republic (unlike neighboring Iraq, which lacked such a government).<sup>11</sup>

Understanding the myriad top-down and bottom-up processes that produced this situation helps us understand better the "the seductions of authoritarian politics" for ordinary people.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, to understand and examine sectarianization, I examine how "very real terrorist violence" was harnessed to a "conceptual project that mobilizes affects (fear, terror, anger) via imaginary processes (worry, precarity, threat) to constitute an unlimited space and time horizon for military state action," producing a "national security affect." <sup>13</sup> As anthropologist Joe Masco notes, "What a national community fears and how it responds to those fears are cultural forms as well as technologically mediated processes, the basis for a domestic politics as well as a geopolitics," and thus we must understand how "historically crafted images and logics of imminent danger allow feelings to be nationalized and directed to produce antidemocratic actions and policy." <sup>14</sup> But "one can be afraid only of that which one knows to fear." <sup>15</sup> For Iranians, I argue in this chapter, it is on pilgrimage and by consuming media about pilgrimage that they come to know this specific form of sectarian fear. These experiences, in turn, play a key role in the constitution of Iran's Islamic Republic as a "counterterror state."

Pilgrimages to Iraq carried strong political connotations because for years they had been banned under Saddam Hussein. Saddam's regime opposed any form of independent social or political organizing. In southern Iraq this meant that popular religious rituals like the pilgrimages

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Zeno, Basileus. "The Making of Sects: Boundary Making and the Sectarianisation of the Syrian Uprising, 2011–2013." *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2022, pp. 1040–1060.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Wedeen, Lisa. *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*. The University of Chicago Press, 2019: pg. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> This description is of post-9/11 United States but describes well the situation in post-2003 Iran as well. From Masco, Joseph. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Duke Univ. Press, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Ibid: 3, 7

<sup>15</sup> Ibid: 14

– organized through the grassroots participation of local social and religious clubs that ensured provision of food, drink, and lodging for pilgrims – were targeted at times of heightened political tensions. Throughout the 1990s, the Ba'athist government stationed police all around the holy cities to prevent people on walking pilgrimages, which they considered "uncivilized" threats to Iraq's security; after detaining pilgrims, police were instructed to explain that these pilgrimages were "un-Islamic" and a "Persian innovation" used by Iraq's enemies to undermine it.<sup>16</sup> These were accompanied by mass education campaigns and efforts to detain and interrogate those who provided food and drink to pilgrims.<sup>17</sup> Iraqi authorities suspected, probably correctly, that underground opposition groups organized the seemingly spontaneous mass participation in walking pilgrimage.<sup>18</sup> Due to the nature of pilgrimage – a mass emotional gathering that brought together people from all over – as well as the significance of the events marked during the pilgrimages, namely the Battle of Karbala, narrated as a struggle between forces of good and an oppressive, unjust ruler – the pilgrimages were highly regulated and often outright banned.

The shrines even became centers of organizing during moments of dissent against Saddam's rule. In the early 1990s, a rebellion swept the South that included large rallies in the shrines, which acted like public spaces. In subsequent years, Saddam ordered the razing of large chunks of urban fabric around the shrines. This urban planning was presumably intended to expand pilgrim access but more likely carried out to ensure easier police and military access and surveillance over the shrines. As a result of years of restrictions, when Saddam fell in 2003, the pilgrimages became a locus of emotional outpouring for Iraqis, joined by Iranian tourists. Iraqis,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> More on this in Chapter 5. Source: Hoover Institute, Baath Party Archives, Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, "Letter from Baath Party Iraq - Tanzimat Baghdad al Karkh," Number- 002/2 - Date: 5. 1997. To: Qiyadaat Forou' Tanzimaat Baghdad al Karkh. 01\_3134\_0002\_0008.jpeg

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ibid, 01\_3134\_0002\_0089.jpeg - 0091.jpeg

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Ibid 01\_3134\_0002\_0125.jpeg

liberated from years of dictatorship, saw the pilgrimages as acts of defiance against the defeated regime – a narrative quickly adopted by the Iranian government as well.

## Encountering Occupied Iraq

A third actor present in Iraq added to the heightened drama of the pilgrimage and the reshaping of the shrine cities: the US military. At the time of the 2003 invasion, numerous US government officials asserted that they viewed invading Iraq as a first step toward invading Iran. Despite Iran having helped the US during the invasion of Afghanistan (which removed the Taliban, another foe of Iran), George Bush labelled Iran part of the "axis of evil" and Republicans suggested that Iran would soon go the way of Iraq. A common expression in DC made this clear: "Boys go to Baghdad. Real men go to Tehran." These threats were taken seriously in Iran. Iranian media focused on US military actions in Iraq, producing fear – especially as evidence of atrocities against Iraqi civilians, such as torture in Abu Ghraib prison, came to light and were widely covered, including in large murals erected in Tehran.

The first time Ehsan visited Iraq was in 2005, when as a 20-year-old he accompanied his parents and brothers from Tehran on pilgrimage to Karbala. The most vivid memory he had of the trip, he told me when I interviewed him more than a decade later, was the presence of American soldiers who carried out security checks at the border. Heavily armed and accompanied by rottweilers, the US soldiers resembled something out of the Hollywood movies he had seen. "They were barking at everyone. The soldiers yelled a lot at people. It was very scary. And imagine what it felt like for all the people who had come on pilgrimage to have big dogs going all over their luggage," he continued, highlighting the aversion among religious Iranians toward dogs, considered ritually unclean. Ehsan mentioned that one of the young men

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with the tour group was taken away and detained by the soldiers, a fact that scared him since the boy seemed to be about his own age.

Despite those moments of fear, encounters with the US military can also have unexpected consequences. This is embodied by the strangeness of Ehsan's feeling that he was in a Hollywood movie (exciting!) but on the wrong side of the storyline (suspected terrorist, not heroic soldier). One of the souvenirs Ehsan brought home was a pair of US military boots purchased near the shrine in Karbala. Due to the US occupation, surplus US military gear circulated widely in Iraqi shops. Iranian tourists, especially young men like Ehsan, prized them for their high quality. The fact that these objects were somehow contraband, symbols of a force maligned by Iranians' home government, perhaps added to the appeal. Even though the US didn't end up invading Iran, the US war machine still made it to Iranian homes, albeit as pilgrimage souvenirs that linked Iraq to ideas of the Wild West. They also flooded Iranian shops. A woman who purchased a US military knife with dried blood on it told Farideh Sakhaeifar, an Iranian artist who did a project about US military gear in Iran, that she enjoyed the feeling that the object was clearly not meant to be in Iran or to be consumed by someone like her.<sup>19</sup> Other young people Sakhaeifar interviewed described how owning US military uniforms gave them a sense of power and invincibility. The narratives promoted about pilgrimage to Iraq in the Iranian government media, for obvious reasons, did not focus on these unexpected attachments.

Officially-promoted perspectives instead tended to focus on the expected expansion of Iran's role in Iraq and the development of ties and tutelage with this 'brotherly' but backwards nation. Many politically influential Iranians traveled to Iraq in the 2000s. Their views on the pilgrimage circulated in media reports and interviews as well as books. One of these was a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Sakhaeifar, Farideh. "Acquired from the above by the present owner. 2014" <u>https://faridehsakhaeifar.com/section/389646-Acquired-from-the-above-by-the-present-owner-2014.html</u>.

travelogue entitled "Journey to Occupied Iraq," by Masih Mohājeri.<sup>20</sup> In some ways Mohājeri was a typical Iranian pilgrim, anxious to discover what lay behind the curtains of Saddam's Iraq and to connect with ordinary Iraqis now that government minders did not insist on following all Iranian visitors every step of the way. But in other ways, Mohājeri was an extraordinary traveler. He was editor-in-chief of *Jomhuri Eslāmi* (Islamic Republic) newspaper, widely circulated in Iran. His accounts were first published as instalments in the paper before being published as a book in 2008. Mohājeri's words likely shaped the views of ordinary Iranians and policymakers alike; he went on to hold government positions, including as President Rouhani's liaison with universities, and was cited in the media as an expert on Iraq. The book sold numerous printings and probably shaped government policies, particularly his extensive recommendations for how the Iranian government must intervene to improve pilgrims' access to the shrines.

The book takes the form of a travelogue over three pilgrimage trips to Iraq's shrine cities. The first trip takes place soon after the invasion, when bombings were just beginning, while later trips occur amidst the sectarian civil war that erupted in 2006. Mohājeri portrays Iraq as a "raw" place that needs to be reshaped and remade in Iran's image; he believes Iran must intervene immediately to protect the Shias of Iraq and help them modernize and establish a functioning religious state and society. In his words, Iraq "needs an Imam Khomeini" (*yek Emām Khomeini kam dārad*) to rescue it, referring to Iran's Supreme Leader in the 1980s who was also a major figure in the 1979 Revolution.<sup>21</sup> The text describes his encounters with ordinary Iraqis, who he depicts as simple and poor but good people, although he critiques them for overcharging

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Mohājeri, Masih. Safar beh `Arāq-e Eshghāli [*Journey to Occupied Iraq*]. Sāzmān-e Enteshārāt-e Ruznāmeh-ye Jomhuri Eslāmi [Jomhuri Eslāmi Newspaper Publishing Organization]. 1387 [2008].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid 113.

pilgrims.<sup>22</sup> He frequently describes the sectarian violence that frames his trip, always in the distance, visible through the security infrastructure developed to fight it: "the sound of explosions and flight of helicopters in Baghdad's sky tell the story of intense insecurity." He notes how some shrines were off-limits due to perceived danger, a fact he links with Sunni Muslim inhabitants.<sup>23</sup> He also mentions the looming figure of US soldiers, whose violent acts he describes based on stories he hears from Iraqis and his own experiences at checkpoints.<sup>24</sup> He only interviews Shia Muslims, a majority in the regions he visits but only around sixty percent of the total population, erasing Iraq's diversity. In doing so, he reduces Iraq to the holy shrines and the people around them, producing Iraq as a Shia Muslim brother nation, with the rest of the population as marginal.

Importantly, he calls for Iran's government to step in and invest in a large project to renovate the holy shrines, arguing that no price is too high to pay to show devotion to Islam's early leaders by improving pilgrim access to their tombs. He repeatedly describes the miserable state of the shrines, emphasizing how crowded they are, how chaotic the management is, and the poor state of facilities for pilgrims. He sees the physical environment – and lack of top-down supervision – of the shrines as responsible for allowing Islamically "incorrect" practices, such as bowing at the door, crawling to the tomb, or spending too much hanging on the tomb in tears and prayer. He argues that reshaping the shrine and bringing it under Iranian control would help address this spiritual "poverty" and "deviance" among pilgrims and would help the shrines reflect the fact that "religion and Islam are logical and the most logical part of Islam is the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> He is also prone to exaggeration. At one point he even compares Iranian tourists to Imam Ali for being oppressed in response to being overcharged by an Iraqi driver for a minivan ride. He frequently draws parallels between Iraqis in the present and those residing near the battlefield of Karbala who "failed" Imam Hussein by failing to defend him centuries ago. Ibid 115.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Ibid 43-4; 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Ibid 38.

interpretation that Shi'ism has of Islam," referring to a concern that non-Shia Muslims would deem Shia Muslims as superstitious for engaging in what he sees as incorrect practices.<sup>25</sup>

Mohājeri argues that due to the tremendous poverty and lack of resources in Iraq, the Iranian state must take a central role. "We must do in Karbala what was done in Mecca, Medina, and Mashhad," highlighting the urban planning model and mindset to which Qom would be added as well.<sup>26</sup> Noting that due to "our love for Imam Hussein this must be undertaken no matter the cost" and that the invasion and instability presented Iran with a "historic opportunity" to intervene, he stresses that the areas around the shrines – densely packed historic cities – must be bulldozed to resemble the battlefield that existed at the time of the battle of Karbala, with only the "spiritual historic ruins" remaining.<sup>27</sup> "The image you have of the shrines is shaken when you see them," he writes. "If only these places were kept in the open in a natural state, just as they had been left in 61 Hijri [i.e. the Islamic year when the Battle of Karbala occurred], then you could find the [divine] sign you are looking for." His call for the shrines to be rid of their surroundings and presented as historic monuments lifted out of the past echoes British colonial authorities' actions in 20th century Palestine, where the existing Arab city of Jerusalem was seen as a nuisance and impediment to access to its ancient monuments, and as a result of which neighborhoods were cleared to give the city a "Biblical" appearance.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Mohājeri's call for the demolition of urban areas surrounding the shrines and their replacement with a landscape resembling a "battlefield" that highlights the ghorbat (estrangement) of the Imams at the time of their death is a suggestion to obliterate the (Iraqi) city in order to curate an experience of war for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Ibid 98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Ibid 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Ibid 63-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Weizman, Eyal. Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation. Verso, 2017: pp. 27-31; 51.

(Iranian) pilgrims.<sup>29</sup> This destruction of the urban landscape to expand the shrines is precisely what would come to pass in the years that followed.

In calling for Iran to take a central role as custodian over Iraq's Shia Muslims – who he equates with Iraq as a whole – Mohājeri draws on a discourse that would come to dominate in Iran. His calls for the creation of an Iranian governmental organ to administer the holy sites of Iraq – one that would exist in parallel to and shadow Iraq's own institutions – came to fruition as well. But it was only possible because of the extreme instability and violence that had overtaken Iraq in the wake of the US invasion. In order to understand how the invasion had reshaped not only the possibilities for pilgrims and planners but also the shrine cities themselves, we now turn to an account of how the war unfolded – and how Iranian witnesses to the warfare took a leading role in the process of expanding the shrines, learning from US military strategies and deploying them themselves long after US soldiers had left the field.

## The War of Concrete

On June 5, 2003, US President George Bush declared that the Iraq War was over and had been a resounding victory for the United States under a huge "Mission Accomplished" banner aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln. While US forces had managed to defeat Saddam Hussein's regime on the battlefield, they had little plan for what would follow. As US military authorities governed Iraq with increasingly arbitrary rules and violent repression, resistance against the occupation began to build from different sectors of Iraqi society. Twelve days after being appointed by Bush to rule Iraq as head of the so-called "Coalition Provisional Authority," Paul Bremer dissolved the Iraqi military, firing hundreds of thousands of men with arms training and leaving them unemployed at a time of severe economic contraction. As anger and resentment

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Mohājeri, 66.

grew among Iraqis at a military occupation with no end in sight, many began joining armed resistance groups to expel what they increasingly considered a colonial force, a view given legitimacy by how quickly authorities ensured oil production resumed while economic and political progress stagnated. In the months that followed "Mission Accomplished," these groups began attacks on occupation forces. Iraqi fighters used their knowledge of terrain to their advantage, provoking firefights in urban areas from which they could flee as necessary to protect themselves. The US-led coalition, meanwhile, responded in a pattern reminiscent of colonial repression of old: mass arrests and detentions, torture of suspected insurgents, and the alienation of locals through heavy-handed responses failing to distinguish between fighters and ordinary people. These battles did not spare the shrine cities.

In 2004, fighting devastated the city of Najaf, which is built around the shrine of Imam Ali. Dissident Iraqi politician Muqtada al-Sadr, the son of a famous cleric murdered by Saddam's regime, had taken refuge around the shrine with an army of hundreds of followers. Sadr had originally been opposed to armed resistance to the US; like many Shia Muslims who felt they had been severely repressed by Saddam's rule, he took a wait-and-see approach to the occupation. But after US authorities shut down a newspaper affiliated with him and arrested one of his aides, beginning in April 2004, Sadr's forces launched an uprising that successfully captured numerous cities before a US-led assault took them back.<sup>30</sup> In August, after Sadr's forces in Najaf carried out a series of small-scale attacks, the coalition launched a direct urban assault.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> For detailed analysis of the uprising from the perspective of the US military, see: Wright, Donald P., and Timothy R. Reese. *The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005: On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign*. Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008: pg. 39-41, 323-37. For a broader analysis of the rise and fall of Sadr's Mehdi Army, see: Krohley, Nicholas. *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Forces tore through Wadi al-Salaam, the largest cemetery on Earth, home to the graves of Shia Muslims from around the world as well as numerous small shrines.

From there, US-led forces subjected the areas around the golden-domed shrine itself to a fullfrontal attack, and after days of urban warfare, dropped two large bombs on hotels next to the shrine where insurgents were said to be fighting from. Unable to dislodge Sadr's forces, and concerned about growing anger in the region as scenes of American soldiers shooting at some of the most sacred Muslim sites were beamed around the world, a compromise was eventually reached in which Sadr's forces were disarmed and allowed safe passage out of Najaf. When the battle dust cleared, the shrine was left heavily damaged. Bullet holes littered its gold-plated facade and numerous rocket blasts had damaged its protective walls. US soldiers continued to maintain checkpoints in the area's vicinity, prepared to fight again if needed: a military occupation with no end in sight.



Figure 21

A photo taken by Colonel Glen Butler of the U.S. Marine Corps from a helicopter, showing another helicopter launching rockets into Wadi al-Salaam cemetery. The golden dome of the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf can be seen in the background. (Source: Wikimedia Commons). It was not only Iraqis who witnessed the fighting. That summer, Iranian general Qassem Soleimani was in Najaf as well. The head of Iran's Quds Force, an arm of the Revolutionary Guards tasked with military interventions outside of Iran's borders, Soleimani was likely engaged in reconnaissance in Najaf at the time (Iran is thought to have begun directly aiding Iraqi Shia insurgents only after this event). Soleimani would eventually be assassinated on President Trump's orders in January 2020 in a move that nearly dragged Iran and the US into a full-scale war. But at the time, he was a largely unknown figure. But he would come to a play a key role in the history of the region and the shrine cities in particular. In a speech released after his assassination, purported to be from 2005, Soleimani credited the devastation of Najaf as the reason he began to endeavor to establish the *Setād-e Bāzsāzy-e `Atabāt-e `Āliyāt*, the Headquarters for the Reconstruction of the Exalted Thresholds (henceforth: Setad), the Iranian government-linked organization responsible for the transformation of Iraq's shrines under Iranian tutelage in the last 20 years:

When the first [battle] of Najaf happened, I was there. There were no pilgrims in Najaf. At the most crowded time of day, only around 30 people were at the shrine. It was as if the tomb had emerged from beneath the dust. ... That deserted and dust-covered landscape was not suited for such an [exalted] place. That's when we realized we needed to establish Setad. <sup>31</sup>

The battles of 2004 would shape how the US military approached urban warfare for years to come. The images of the battles – showing US soldiers firing at the shrine and tunneling into cemeteries – produced global revulsion, anathema to winning the "hearts and minds" that authorities felt central to defeating Iraq's insurgencies. If the US was going to succeed, military officials believed, it would have to draw on its seemingly unlimited resources to defeat the

enemy in more creative ways with less cost to US forces and their reputation. The US military thus became an urban planner in Iraq.

The US-led coalition began to increasingly rely on concrete as a tool of war. Durable, forbidding, and great for building blast-proof walls, concrete T-walls – each about 12-feet high, weighing 14,000 pounds, and costing around \$600 – would play a central role in remaking Iraq's urban areas. They were similar to those famously deployed by the Israeli military to construct the wall that snakes through the Palestinian West Bank.<sup>32</sup> The T-walls used in Iraq were initially imported from the US at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, pocketed by construction companies working with the military. T-Walls were deployed to protect checkpoints, official buildings and military bases, contributing to a pedestrian-hostile urban landscape in Iraqis cities that trapped passerby between cars and concrete walls. Simultaneously, US authorities plotted out Iraq's self-governance, producing a political system organized not around equal citizenship but sectarian identity.<sup>33</sup> Similar to colonial-era governance such as the French constitution for Lebanon, Iraq's political system – first instituted in 2005 – mandated that Iraqis vote according to sectarian identity. While US administrators imagined they were organizing society based on how Iraqis already thought, by making political participation dependent on sect, they were institutionalizing and crystallizing it to an unprecedented degree.

By 2007, as Iraq's insurgencies devolved into a wider and bloodier civil war between different armed groups, the US military began building concrete walls across urban areas to separate neighborhoods where different groups operated.<sup>34</sup> Seen by US authorities as a tool of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Rubaii, Kali. "Concrete Soldiers': T-Walls and Coercive Landscaping in Iraq." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2022, pp. 357–362.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Haddad, Fanar. Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity. New York: Columbia UP, 2011: pp. 150-1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> For an overview of concrete barriers as part of US military strategy in Iraq, see: Sharp, Deen. "Concretising Conflict." *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2022, pp. 6–12.

stability, these walls divided Baghdad's urban fabric over dozens of miles. Breaking apart neighborhoods and creating a complex geography of military checkpoints and roadblocks that limited mobility and produced massive traffic jams, these walls made interrogation, detention, and threats by soldiers with little command of Arabic a part of daily life for Iraqis. Baghdad had never before been divided along religious lines. However, the civil war in these years often operated on sectarian lines (Sunni, Shia, Christian), and battles between groups were accompanied by forced displacement of people that found themselves in the "wrong" zone. This process was always gradual and haphazard, however, and was produced by militia rule, not concrete geographic boundaries. By building walls that defined these vague battle lines as fullydefined borders, the US military strategy ironically made these lines a much more palpable and permanent part of the urban landscape than ever before. The walls' construction sparked protests in Baghdad, as critics argued that the walling off neighborhoods created a dangerous precedent that set in stone the fracturing of Iraqi society. They also feared that members of sects left in areas outside walled zones would be targeted by armed militias, who would finish off ethnic cleansing of communities that were still quite mixed.<sup>35</sup> In a 2008 march, protestors decried plans to "turn the city into a big prison," opposing a wall that would surround the neighborhood of Adhamiya, located immediately beside the shrine neighborhood of Kadhemiyah.<sup>36</sup> One demonstrator compared it to Israel's wall in the West Bank. The walls, however, continued going up, with US military authorities likening the enclaves to "gated communities." <sup>37</sup> As a result, "Iraq became an archipelago of T-walled enclaves, which now often appear more and more as if

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Izady, Michael M. "Urban Unplanning: How Violence, Walls, and Segregation Destroyed the Urban Fabric of Baghdad." *Journal of Planning History*, vol. 19, no. 1, 19 May 2019, pp. 52–68: pp. 60-1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Rubin, Alissa J. "Outcry over Wall Shows Depth of Iraqi Resentment." *The New York Times*, 23 Apr. 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/04/23/world/middleeast/23cnd-Iraq.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Yates, Dean. "Baghdad Wall Sparks Confusion, Divisions in Iraq." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 25 Apr. 2007, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-wall-idUKL2317282720070425.

they offer protection from the world they have produced," a physical manifestation of a military logic that saw threat and danger lurking around every corner.<sup>38</sup>

Soon, concrete barriers were being erected across Iraq as a tool of offensive warfare as well. The most striking example of this strategy came in 2008, when the US led an assault on a sprawling slum neighborhood of Baghdad called Sadr City, home to 2 million people. As US forces fought insurgents on the area's edges, they constructed a large cement barrier around part of the neighborhood using approximately 3,000 concrete T-walls.<sup>39</sup> In a tactic reminiscent of a medieval siege, the military walled off the area to prevent supplies and reinforcements from reaching the insurgents, trapping residents in the battle zone. Over the course of a few years, a massive physical architecture of walls emerged that was supposedly temporary but was in reality quite permanent and costly to dismantle.

The difficulty with security barriers the world over is that once they go up, it's very hard to convince people to bring them down. Walls act as a materialization of potential threats, of the existence of potential intruders, of the need to be afraid. They are a physical manifestation of social divides that in turn reinforce and produce those divides as natural and tied to geographic and urban space. Although from a military perspective they may be useful, they are anathema to building relations of social trust, crucial to post-conflict reconciliation. In Iraq, whatever role they played in lessening militia and gang violence between neighborhoods, they also tore apart and destroyed relations between neighbors. These walls and the strategies they were a part of,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Rubaii, Kali. "Concrete Soldiers': T-Walls and Coercive Landscaping in Iraq." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2022, pp. 357–362: pp 360.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Spencer, John. "The Most Effective Weapon on the Modern Battlefield Is Concrete." *Modern War Institute*, 12 Feb. 2018, <u>https://mwi.usma.edu/effective-weapon-modern-battlefield-concrete/</u>.

however, would be inherited by the Iraqi military, which was trained and funded by the US, as well as by the Iranian Setaad.

## Renovating the Holy Thresholds

It was in the context of decades-long neglect and violent urban warfare that Setad came to assume a major role in the transformation of Iraq's shrine cities. Tasked with restoring and protecting the shrines, Setad collected hundreds of millions of dollars from ordinary Iranians in addition to its state-provided budget to carry out renovation projects in the shrine cities. Their banners and advertisements asking for donations became a ubiquitous site at shrines in Iran, where Iranians were urged to take part in rebuilding the holy shrine cities. These projects involved a wide variety of actors, including Iranian architects and urban planners, construction companies and affiliates, and security details. Architecture, urban planning, and heritage conservation departments at Iranian universities were recruited for the projects, with offices set up at Iran University of Science and Technology and Beheshti University in Tehran. These experts deployed their skills to help restore shrines neglected during Saddam's regime. They worked in tandem with the *walis* of the Iraqi shrines, the local administrators, who often welcomed the influx of funds and expertise that cooperation with Setad brought.<sup>40</sup>

Initial projects focused on renovating architectural details inside the shrines, such as goldwork and tiles damaged in recent fighting. It also included restoring parts of the shrines that had been destroyed under Saddam's regime, for example tiles containing poems in Persian and Azeri Turkish (the second most-spoken language in Iran) that were removed from Najaf's shrine, part of the deposed regime's efforts to eliminate all signs of Iranian history in Iraq. In the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> "Ra`is-e Setād-e Bāzsāzy-e `Atabāt-e `Āliyāt-e Keshvar: Fa`āliyāt-e Ma Qānuni Asst [The President of the Headquarters for Reconstruction of the Exalted Thresholds of the Country: Our Activities Are Legal]." Hawzah Net, 2008, hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/6023/6717/79908. [...]

following years, the projects became increasingly ambitious, involving the purchasing of hundreds of homes and shops around the shrines and their demolition to expand the shrines and the courtyards around them, where pilgrims often spend many hours day and night. Imam Ali's shrine in Najaf was refurbished, retiled, repainted, and its footprint expanded to around 22 times its previous size. Imam Hussein's shrine in nearby Karbala, meanwhile, by 2020 had reached 12 times.<sup>41</sup> These figures were boasted about in Setad publicity materials, which fetishized the idea that building bigger and bigger was an indication of believers' love for the Imams.

Part of these expansions, ironically, built on previous efforts by the Saddam's regime. In the 1990s, after crushing an uprising centered on the shrines, the Iraqi government bulldozed large swathes of the old cities of Najaf and Karbala – and drove a road through the heart of Wadi al-Salaam cemetery – in what appears to have been an effort to ensure that military forces could more easily enter and control protests in the shrine's vicinity. But Setad went further, buying up large parts of the densely-populated older parts of the shrine cities and carrying out demolitions. Although most residents were compensated, when I spoke to residents in the shrine cities I heard numerous stories of locals who were pressured to sell properties against their will.<sup>42</sup>

These projects – and the increased access to the shrines they facilitated for pilgrims – spurred a major economic boon in the shrine cities drawing in millions of religious tourists on a year-round basis. Every year at Arbaeen, the height of the pilgrimage season, 25 million pilgrims converge on Karbala's shrine. The existence of much larger squares and plazas around the shrines, as well as military checkpoints throughout the city, improved ease of movement and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> "Pelarāk: Sākhtār-e Setād-e Bāzsāzy-e `Atabāt-e `Āliyāt Do Bakhshi Shod [Pelarāk: The Structure of the Headquarters for the Reconstruction of the Exalted Thresholds Has Been Split In Two]." Mashregh News, 26 July 2019, www.mashreghnews.ir/news/978385/يلارك-ساذ-يازسازي-عتبات-عاليات-دو-بخشي-شد/978385/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> These forced sales were also carried out by other actors, such as Saraya al-Salam in Samarra. See: Mamouri, Ali. "Conflict Erupts over Properties Surrounding Samarra Shrine." *Al-Monitor*, 20 Jan. 2019, <u>https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/01/samarra-askarian-shrine-saladin-iraq.html</u>.

lessened the risk of fatal overcrowding, though incidents still occur. Many Iraqis of Persian descent whose families were deported to Iran under Saddam returned to work in the shrine cities' bazaars, especially in Karbala and Najaf, due to the thriving economies and their multilingualism in Persian and Arabic. There has also been a dramatic rise in investment in hotels spurred by Shia Muslims from the Persian Gulf countries, which has led to the rapid construction of multistory towers amid the small lanes of the old cities.

At the same time, there is a growing feeling that Iraqis have been left out of the boom or at least marginalized from the profits, a criticism often expressed as concerns that Iran has essentially taken over the shrine cities as its own. Iraqis repeatedly expressed to me their feeling of resentment at Iran's outsize presence, which could translate into disparaging remarks or aggressive behavior toward individual Iranian pilgrims. This is reflected most clearly in the organization of Setad itself. Despite working inside Iraq, Setad is a thoroughly Iranian organization. In an interview given in 2018 amid mounting criticism in Iran of the funds spent on shrine expansion projects, Setad officials responded to criticisms about investing Iranian money outside the country by highlighting how Setad worked almost exclusively with Iranian companies, noting that in the multi-billion dollar project to expand the Najaf shrine's central plaza, "around 85% [of the costs] returned back to [Iran]. The activities of our metallurgy factories, steel, rebar, cement, and stone quarries working on this issue increased." They noted that factories and quarries were often located in the poorer areas of Iran and "created work and circulation of money. ... So it's all a blessing."43 Construction companies generally hired to work on the projects, including Khatam-ol-Anbia, are linked to the Revolutionary Guards, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> "Cherāhā-ye Bāzsāzy-e `Atabāt, Forsathā va Tahdidhā [Reasons for Renovating the Shrines, Opportunities and Challenges]," International Quran News Agency, 18 Dey 1397 [8 Jan. 2019]. <u>https://iqna.ir/fa/news/3777098/جرایی-80%82%81</u>.

military force in Iran that has developed a major stake in the economy since the 1990s. In responding to domestic critics, Setad highlighted how overlooked Iraqis really were in the projects.

Anger over Iran's role came to head in 2018-19, when major protests roiled Najaf and Karbala over the lack of reliable infrastructure. In contrast to the shrines, where a 24-hour supply of electricity and water exists, casting a bright shadow of light over the city, in many residential areas few services exist. The protests targeted not only symbols of US power and Iraqi political parties, but also Iranian consulates. In some rallies, protestors held signs in Persian, suggesting that they felt they needed to speak in Persian to be listened to because Iran was where the real power lay and was thus the government that needed to be appealed to (not Iraq's own government, whose dysfunction was blamed by some protestors in equal parts on Iranian and US meddling). While in 2003, Iran had hoped to position itself as a helpful neighbor in contrast to the occupying United States, two decades later these distinctions were not necessarily clear to Iraqis, perhaps because both states had treated Iraq as a place to pursue their own interests and stake claims against the other, in which Iran considers Iraq its own backyard.



Figure 22

An image circulated widely online shows an Iraqi protestor holds a bilingual Arabic-Persian sign listing demands for work, water, electricity, and censorship-free internet, beginning with the explanation: "To the government of Iran, apologies! [I mean] of 'Iraq'."

The protests underscore that the sense of transnational Shia Muslim solidarity built among Iranians during the pilgrimage can also give them a false sense of familiarity with the landscape; a belief that they are welcomed as brothers and sisters in faith, while papering over the political and economic issues that exist. These issues are not reducible to religious solidarity but involve stakes tied to Iraq's national future as a functioning state for all of its citizens, irrespective of sect. Pilgrimage may allow Iranians to feel closer to Iraqis, but this intimacy based on shared identity can also be misleading and can normalize an increasingly unequal power dynamic between Iran and Iraq.

The shrine cities today are increasingly reshaped by Iranian companies, under Iranian government guidance, with payments made to Iranian companies, in the interest of ensuring Iranian pilgrimage access. This is reflected in its decision-making, which is largely top-down. Mehdi Soleimaniyeh, an Iranian sociologist who has studied the shrines, in an interview with a Setad official criticized the organization as being a "catastrophe" for the shrine cities for its "non-participatory nature" and its lack of consultation on projects with Iraqis. This was also the case in shrine projects in Iran as well, but the fact that it was occurring in Iraq meant it had the added dimension of perceived Iranian over-reach. He criticized how the organization focused on building the largest and biggest plans possible to the extent that it was insatiable in its thirst for renovation.<sup>44</sup> The project of "reconstruction" was by its very nature unending, "reducing the greatest of sacred objects to the greatness of their construction," and as a result building gigantic "pseudo-modern" projects divorced from context and overpowering visitors. A complaint by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> "Manteq-e Towse'h-e Bāzsāzy dar 'Atabāt: Sud-e Eqtesādi yā Raf'-e Niāz-e Za'er [The Logic of Expansion and Renovation of the Threshholds; Economic Profit or Addressing Pilgrims' Needs]." International Quran News Agency. 20 Bahman 1398 [9 Feb. 2019]. <u>https://iqna.ir/fa/news/3783100/\_\_\_\_\_\_\_</u> منطق-توسعه-و-باز سازی-در -عتبات-سو د-اقتصادی-یا-رانر

pilgrims that I heard repeatedly was that the shrines are now so large that people constantly get lost; the feeling of serenity at the shrine's heart is accompanied by bewilderment about how to get in or out. This "non-human scale," Soleimaniyeh argued, was a direct result of the architecture, which, even as it eased pilgrim movement, could end up alienating them along the way. The tensions that these projects produced were blamed by some locals for increasing anti-Iranian sentiment, a resentment of Iranian pilgrims lingering beneath the surface due to the perception that their government was involved in a slow, long-term take-over.

The permanent security barriers around shrines, meanwhile, were accompanied by new moral regulations that extended the "holy precinct" to the security cordons around it. At military checkpoints to enter Najaf's Old City, for example, in 2018 I saw large banners telling visitors what not to wear. For men, ripped skinny jeans and outlandish haircuts are banned; for women, skin-tight clothes and heads bare of a scarf. These moral regulations, which once would have been informally maintained in the shrine itself, now extend to the old city's edges, nearly two kilometers away, at checkpoints manned by armed soldiers. The idea that the whole city is a sacred space, and not just the shrine, became a part of conservative discourse about what should and could happen there, and what Shia Muslim identity and its holy places should look like.

Throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the shrine cities were home to political and social dynamism, precisely because they attracted pilgrims from all over the region, many of whom came to study in religious seminaries and were exposed to new ideas, cultures, and languages during the experience. The shrine cities of Iraq played a key role in Iran's Constitutional Revolution in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when clerics issued statements of support for the revolt against the Qajar shahs and in support of constitutional monarchy in Iran.<sup>45</sup> These could also

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Nakash, Yitzhak. *The Shi'is of Iraq*. Princeton University Press, 1994: pp. 49-55.

affect social issues; Ayatollah Khomeini, while exiled in Najaf, relied on his wife to drive, despite having left Iran in part out of protest at the Shah's liberalizing reforms on women's status. These positions, in turn, emerged out of dialogue and debate with fellow students and clerics from across the Arab world and South Asia, including many Indians and local Iraqis involved in political movements in their own countries.

Today, however, entire cities are being marked as sacred zones. Drawing on the shrine's holiness to turn these old cities into militarized zones in which religious rules are enforced as law undermines their dynamism and substitutes debates about the role of religion in society with a socially conservative, police-enforced, and nostalgic vision of what a shrine city is. It is run by a patriarchal order oppressive to its youths, for whom the city is not just a holy place but a home, and who came to form the backbone of the 2018-19 Iraq protests that drew on socioeconomic grievances to demand an end to Iraq's sectarian political system, put in place by the US and supported by Iraq's main parties as well as outside actors like Iran. This vision of the entire city as a sacred zone has led to backlash against cultural events perceived as violating the most conservative norms of Shia Islam. This was visible during the 2019 Asia Cup in Karbala, when religious and political leaders in both Iraq and Iran condemned organizers as having violated the "sanctity" of Karbala for beginning the event with a performance by singer Belqis Ahmad.<sup>46</sup> This response should be seen in light of the fact that women's public singing is banned by law in Iran – even though in Iraq it is legal. Iran's extension of control and support of the militarization of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> "Al-Waqf al-Shi`i Ydin b-Quwwah wa Ystankar al-Raqs al-Mājen allethi Takhalal Hefl Iftitāh 'Batulat Gharb Āsiā' wa Yasafuhu bal-Hojum al-Laikhlāqi `ala Hurmat Medinat al-Imām al-Hussein [The Shia Endowment Strongly Condemns the Shameless Dance That Occurred at the Opening Ceremony of the 'West Asia Cup' and Describes It as an Immoral Attack on the Sanctity of the City of Imam Hussein]." Nahrein Net News Network, 1 Aug. 2019, https://nahrainnet.net/?p=50281.

these spaces and enforcement of a particular vision of public morality only aggravates the perception that Iran is itself becoming a force of occupation like the United States before it. Rescuing Samarra from 'Strangers'

Setad's renovation projects have gone hand-in-hand with the construction of elaborate security and military apparatuses around the shrines that today encompass much of the urban fabric. T-wall barriers block off alleyways, forcing locals to use checkpoints to leave their neighborhoods. This has sped the flight of residents from the old city and created virtual dead zones in what were once vibrant areas. They also create the impression of forever war, of a geography of danger. These security apparatuses were often originally installed by US forces, and then adopted by the Iraqi military follow the US departure. Iranian intelligence services also play a role in coordinating security, coordinated through the Iranian consulates in Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad. Setad, although not responsible for the security arrangements, is part of the broader collection of military, security, and charitable enterprises linked to Iran and the Revolutionary Guards consulted and included in planning around the shrine cities. The introduction and continued presence of security infrastructure in and around the shrines has gradually had the effect of turning them into military precincts.

This is most striking in Samarra, north of Baghdad. Unlike the other shrine cities, whose residents are mostly Shia Muslim, Samarra is an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim city host to a Shia Muslim shrine. Prior to 2003, it was not uncommon for Sunni Muslims to visit Shia shrines and vice-versa; religious difference and diversity was a largely non-politicized part of Iraqi social life, and sectarian identification did not function the way it did post-2003. The keys of the shrine of Samarra were entrusted to a Sunni family from the city, and for years the shrine was an

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important part of local identity, which saw the town and its inhabitants as the shrine's protector.<sup>47</sup>

This status quo was shattered in 2006, when al-Qaeda militants entered the shrine at night and planted explosives in its golden dome, triggering an explosion that wrecked the holy site. In the days to come, a vicious cycle of reprisals between Shia and Sunni militant groups across the country led to a wave of bloodshed that initiated the height of the Iraqi civil war. A year later, another bombing hit the shrine's minarets. The attacks dramatically encapsulated a sense of threat to Shia Muslim identity and faith and was an emotive trigger for sectarianization and violence in Iraq. For Iranian pilgrims, the attacks added to the sense of horror and fear that had been fed by years of bombings targeting pilgrims to Iraq. The attacks came to be seen as justification for Iran's military presence in Iraq and its new role arming and training Shia insurgents, who became increasingly seen by religious Iranians as struggling in a fight for their lives. This impression was furthered by Iranian state broadcasts, which heavily emphasized the sectarian component of the war as one of Sunni persecution of Shias and downplayed reporting on atrocities committed by Shia militias against Sunnis. Throughout much of the civil war, hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims continued to visit Samarra when the security situation permitted – and tour guides emphasized the great danger and risk they took in doing so, which seemed to prove their faith. In 2007, Setad entered Samarra and in coordination with UNESCO began the painstaking work of rebuilding the shrine.

Amid the violence, the US military built a passage with concrete barriers on either side through the heart of Samarra. This passage connected a main road into town with the shrine,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Jiyad, Sajad. "Samarra: Shi'i Heritage and Culture." In *The Shi'a of Samarra: The Heritage and Politics of a Community in Iraq*. I.B. Tauris, 2012.

creating a path for pilgrims. But it did so by eliminating the tourist bazaar that previously lined the road, the main source of income for thousands of people in Samarra. The effect of walling it off – and forcibly removing residents of nearby buildings adjacent to the wall – was to restart pilgrimage while simultaneously removing the shrine from its urban context. After occupying forces left, the walls remained, and today they continue to define Samarra's urban fabric. The walls amounted to a transfer of the infrastructural practices and imaginaries of US counterterror urbanism, cultivating a shared and "tacit 'common sense'" of how to understand Iraqi society.<sup>48</sup>

When I visited in 2018, the entrance of the shrine was through a walled corridor protected by masked guards.<sup>49</sup> Behind concrete blast walls towering over the path that pilgrims take are the deserted buildings of Samarra's people, precluded from having any relation with the shrine or its visitors. Whereas they once ran the bazaar catering to pilgrims' needs and sold visitors Shia Muslim religious souvenirs, today they are hidden behind a wall. Passing through the pilgrims' path makes you feel like you are in a militarized bunker, in fear of faceless threats held at bay. The securitized architecture is a central part of the experience, one that reinforces a sense of sectarian danger and threat for Shia Muslims, and which appears constantly in tour guides' explanations. The sense of threat is repeatedly stressed in the stories of pilgrims to Samarra, even absent present danger. A group of Iranian boys in their twenties I met in Karbala shared tips with each other on what to do if they were caught by ISIS while visiting Samarra. I heard religious preachers in Iran point to the experience of visiting the shrine as a way for pilgrims to meaningfully understand and feel the persecution faced centuries ago by the Prophet's family.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Chu, Julie. "When Infrastructures Attack: The Workings of Disrepair in China." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 351-367. See also: Larkin, Brian. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2013, pp. 327–343.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> This situation has been perpetuated in large part in recent years by Saraya al-Salam militia, which since defeating ISIS on the outskirts of the city has had a central role in policing the area.

Pointing to the securitized architecture, parallels are drawn between pilgrims and the Imams buried at the shrine, both braving danger amidst *ghorabā*' – 'strangers.'



Figure 23

Pilgrims approach the shrine of Samarra between walls, behind which are the abandoned buildings of the city's marketplace. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Qassem Soleimani, in a speech, described the work of Setad in Samarra as having rescued the shrine from "*ghorbat*," loneliness and impoverishment, as a result of being "in the hands of strangers." It is true that today the shrine has been brilliantly rebuilt, its golden dome brighter than ever before, its glimmering tiles provoking wonder and amazement among pilgrims. But the rescue from "*ghorbat*" has come at a price: Samarra has been cut through its heart. What was once a symbol of religious coexistence in Iraq – a Shia shrine protected by Sunni locals whose economy focused on catering to Shia pilgrims – is today an iconic representation of sectarian divide. Samarra's shrine had been rescued from the hands of strangers in their own city. The shrine is a constant reminder of their exclusion from the urban order, in turn symbolizing their exclusion from the national order. It has reinforced a sense of sectarian

division allowing groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS – that prey on Sunnis' sense of alienation from Iraq's new political order – to make footholds and recruit members, creating a vicious cycle.

Over a decade after the shrine was bombed, it is at peace – a peace defended by blast walls and arms, a peace better described as forever war rather than reconciliation. Through urban planning and architectural means, Samarra's shrine has become a militarized bunker, a space in which security is its own self-propelled rationale, as well as a model for Iranian-led reconstruction of other Shia Muslim holy sites, such as the tomb of Sayyidah Zeinab in Damascus, Syria. And for millions of Iranian pilgrims who pass through this space every year, it is the embodiment of their need for fear, of the constant threat they face as Shia Muslims. Horizons of Forever War

In the years after Iran began taking a security role in Iraq, it expanded its interventions across the region from Iraq to other countries, including Syria and Yemen. Initially, Iran's interventions were kept under wraps and were rarely spoken of directly by officials. In the late 2000s, there had been increasing dissatisfaction in Iran with the perception that the Iranian government was spending large parts of its budget on projects abroad. This only increased as the economy slowed amid the crushing impact of US sanctions imposed in 2012. But after the rise of ISIS in 2014, the calculus changed. In the days after the group suddenly crossed the border from Syria into Iraq and captured Mosul, they nearly reached Samarra as well, throwing into sudden relief the potential for yet another attack on a shrine. A combined force of Iraqi volunteers, Iraqi armed forces, Iranian special forces, and US air cover blocked ISIS' advance at the city's northern edge. But ISIS would grow into a force that struck terror into the hearts of many Iranians, who feared that as Shia Muslims in particular – who the group views as heretics and

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carried out massacres of, alongside Christians, Yazidis, and thousands of Sunni Muslims who opposed its rule or defied its orders – they would be targeted if ISIS were to ever reach them.<sup>50</sup>

These fears came to fruition in 2017, when ISIS affiliates carried out an attack on the Iranian parliament in Tehran and on the complex where Ayatollah Khomeini is buried south of Tehran, killing civilians at both. In the days that followed, a wave of righteous anger surged across Iran as the nation was united in a sense of mourning at the attacks, bringing together progovernment and opposition voices that until recently were at each others' throats. In the wake of the attacks, the government's military interventions in conflicts across the region suddenly became highly visible, publicized by state cultural organs to show the government's defense of its citizens beyond its borders. Called "Defenders of the Shrine," martyrs appeared in posters and pictures all over Iranian cities, celebrating the role of Iranian special forces in fighting those across the region that had sought to destroy Shia holy places. Drawing on a narrative of perpetual persecution that portrayed Shia Muslims across the region – and their holy sites – as perpetual victims, the narrative neatly imagined Iran's special forces, led by the Quds Force under the command of General Qassem Soleimani, as pious defenders of the faith slain fighting for the cause of God. In a speech by Ayatollah Khamenei praising the sacrifices of the "Defenders of the Shrine," given in 2017, he made a statement that would come to be plastered on the walls of cities across Iran: "If we had not fought them in Aleppo, we would have had to fight them here in Kermanshah and Hamedan," cities not far from the Iran-Iraq border.

No matter that the Iranian troops that fought in Aleppo in the mid-2010s had not fought ISIS, but Syrian rebel groups engaged in a revolt against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, a close

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> These fears were also evoked by non-Muslim Iranians, particularly Assyrian Christians, who protested in Tehran in solidarity with communities across the border: "Iran's Assyrians Condemn Killing of Iraqi Christians." *Tasnim News Agency*, 7 Aug. 2014, https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/media/2014/08/07/454129/photos-iran-s-assyrians-condemn-killing-of-iraqi-christians.

ally of Iran. Nor did it matter that there were few Shia Muslim shrines in Aleppo, where many Iranian soldiers lost their lives.<sup>51</sup> The "Defenders of the Shrine," who now came to retroactively encompass Iranian forces who had died in Iraq since 2003 as well as those killed in Syria, were heroes of both faith and nation. And for once, there was less public dissent regarding their heroic role, after years in which state authorities had downplayed their role to avoid public criticism. In the face of the fear provoked by ISIS' attack, many Iranians silenced the kind of criticism that had rung out a decade before that Iran's government was spending too much money abroad that should be used at home.

The fact that millions of Iranians had direct experience of sites of conflict across the border – and had perceived the shrines there as places of heightened fear and danger – aided in constructing this imaginary of sectarian fear that Iranians found themselves in after the 2017 attack.<sup>52</sup> The feeling of being a persecuted minority came alive in the first-hand experiences and second-hand stories of bombings at shrine – and later through the security measures that followed, which instilled a permanent fear of potential bombing. This fear was in turn repeated in the state's publicity organs, including television and movie shows produced with government money like *Vaqt-e Shām* (Damascus Time) and *Khāneh-ye Amn* (Safe House). As part of the advertising for Damascus Time, promoters staged a fake ISIS attack at a Tehran mall, reinforcing the possibility of attack less than a year after an actual attack had struck the city.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> For information on Shia shrines in Syria, see: Mulder, Stephennie. *The Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi'is and the Architecture of Coexistence*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> This can also be applied to Syria as well, which prior to 2011, received around 1 million Shia Muslim pilgrims from Iran to visit sites near Damascus. See: Pinto, Paulo G. "The Shattered Nation: The Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict" In Hashemi, Nader & Postel, Danny, eds. *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., London, 2017.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> "Vorud-e Bāzigarān-e Naqsh-e Dā`esh beh Pardis Kurosh-e Tehrān; Hātami-Kiā `Ozr-Khāhi Kard [The Entrance of Actors Playing ISIS to Pardis Kurosh in Tehran; Hatami-Kia Apologizes]." BBC News, 8 May 2018, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-44038926.



Actors dressed as ISIS members confront diners at a mall in Tehran. Source: Alef 54

In the wake of the attack, shrines across Iran began to change as well. Checkpoints were erected at major sites, and armed police – an extremely rare site in Iran, where guns are strictly forbidden and police rarely are equipped with them – came to be present at major sites and gatherings. In Mashhad, home to Iran's largest shrine, a separate police force called *Gasht-e Sāmen* was created specifically tasked with ensuring security – and preventing moral crimes around the shrine as well, with increased penalties related to the "sanctity" not only of the shrine but also the neighborhoods around it, now legally-established.<sup>55</sup> Years after Iranian shrine cities served as a model for how to reshape Iraqi shrine cities, the architecture of forever war that had come to define shrines in Iraq was now coming home to be magnified in Iran.

The initial violence of the ISIS attack in 2017 set into motion a logic of securitization that, just as in Iraq, was difficult to reverse. The construction companies contracted to build the new barriers, the police and soldiers paid for extra shifts, the increased budgets for "security"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> https://www.alef.ir/news/3970218047.html?show=text

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup>"Sāzmāndahi-ye Niruhā-ye Setād-e Pishgiri Barāye Gashtzani dar Atrāf-e Haram-e Mottahar-e Razavi [Organization of Forces of the Prevention Center for Patrolling the Outskirts of the Razavi Holy Shrine]." *ISNA News Agency*. 29 Sept. 2012, <u>https://www.isna.ir/news/91070804703/</u> <u>اطراف-حرم-مطهر</u>.

allotted to the religious organization tasked with administering shrines – a new economy emerged focused on protecting shrines inside Iran, just as it had followed Iran's intervention into Iraq. For Iranians who had visited the shrines in Iraq, the militarization of shrines at home was not unfamiliar.

In this chapter, I have examined how sectarianism is produced and reinforced by the built environment, specifically how the urban planning and architecture of shrines in Iraq, administered in part by Iranian authorities, contributes to a sense of permanent threat. Inherited from US occupation forces, like the war on terror itself, these concrete barriers and armed checkpoints have become a natural part of the landscape of Shia Muslim religious sites in Iraq. Today, a majority of Iraq's population is under the age of 24, meaning they have little or no memory of life before the US invasion and the construction of the walls that today continue to divide Baghdad. A divided Iraq is the only Iraq they've ever known.

While Iraq may now be counted as one of a number of societies remaining in a state of seemingly permanent division even after the resolution of conflict, the presence of a mass pilgrimage industry introduces another component into the story. While for locals this militarized geography sectarianizes the national horizon, for foreign pilgrims it produces an affect of fear tied to transnational Shia Muslim identity mediated through the shrines. They understand shrines as zones of danger not only in the past as described in the yearly retelling of the Battle of Karbala, but as sites of ongoing terror they bear witness to during pilgrimage. Security installations recall the constant potential for the threat pilgrims face. Pilgrimage is a moment of heightened emotional awareness and feeling. The shrines are called "thresholds" between Heaven and Earth for their transformative power. In these moments, the concrete barriers produce a heightened sense of vulnerability, encouraging pilgrims to imbue their travel with a

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sense of defying death. That sense of defiance, in turn, becomes central to how transnational Shia Muslim identity is constructed, producing support for Iran's militarized projects across the region and its militarization of the domestic sphere. These affects have effects.

In 2022, an attack occurred at the Shah Cheragh shrine in Shiraz, Iran, leaving more than a dozen dead.<sup>56</sup> But it felt so much like a self-fulfilling prophecy that many Iranians immediately blamed the government.<sup>57</sup> Coming at a time of renewed mass protests across Iran in which the government was deploying forces of repression nationwide, many argued that this was exactly what the government wanted – an excuse to position itself as the protector against chaos. It was as if Supreme Leader Khamenei was sending a warning to the nation: if you keep failing to obey the rules, the gates of hell will open; "here" will become just like "there."



Figure 25

Graphics released by state-affiliated *Owj Media* during 2022 protests, showing national monuments being destroyed in war, suggesting that the protest movement would lead to conflict and destruction. They were released in mid-October, two weeks before the attack in Shiraz. The slogan reads: "Everything is an excuse. Iran is the target." <sup>58</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> "Fifteen Killed in Attack on Shia Mausoleum in Southern Iran." *BBC News*, BBC, 27 Oct. 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63405073.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> "Iranians Blame Regime for Attack on Shia Shrine Calling It 'Self-Inflicted'." *Iran International*, 27 Oct. 2022, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202210277537.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Owj.Art, 16 Oct. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/CjxKLIIIHY7/.

For years, activists had decried authorities weaponization of religious sentiment to divide society into polarized camps (*doh qotbi sāzy*); the attack was interpreted by many as a false flag operation precisely because the logic seemed too neat, as if it were a warning from the government to the religious public to support the government's heavy-handed repression. "Stand with us against the protests," the warning seemed to say, offering a pact that would bind supporters into complicity with the government's crimes for fear of the unknown assailants that awaited them otherwise. No matter that there was little clear evidence suggesting the government had carried out the attack (or allowed it to happen, as some versions of the theory said). These conspiracy theories "seduced and repulsed" because they were both "precise and hallucinatory, delusional and internally much too consistent," mimicking reality – as well as the conspiracy theories peddled on state TV about Western machinations.<sup>59</sup> But conspiracy theories often hold a mirror on society; in these rumors, emerged the deferred nightmares of a war that authorities had for years located just beyond the horizon. Their threats made them appear culprits. The shrine became a locus of dreams and nightmares, projections and fears – and social hatred and disintegration. The fear of forever war that had painted the horizon blood red was now coming home to Iran. It is to the effects of militarization on Iran's internal politics and its religious society that we turn to in the next chapter.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Stewart, Kathleen. "Conspiracy Theory's Worlds" in Marcus, George E. *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

# Chapter 4: Fighting for the Oppressed: The Politics of Basiji Masculinity

"My heart is twisted in pain!" Mahmud Karimi's voice boomed through loudspeakers outside the Imamzadeh Ali Akbar shrine in Chizar in north Tehran, where a crowd of thousands had gathered to mark a religious holiday on a warm summer evening in 2016. Karimi paused, his every movement being broadcast to viewers in the square outside the shrine on a large TV screen. "Men should be men and women should be women," he boomed. "But men should be like women in some ways: like crying like a mother!" Sobs burst from the crowd, many weeping with hands lifted toward the sky. The screen showed Karimi sitting on the floor under the eerie glow of red light, surrounded by hundreds of young men, their cries echoing over the crowds.

The camera panned across the sobbing men inside. Karimi began to repeat the mantra, "Hossein, Hossein, Hossein," rocking back and forth. Those around him reacted by beating their chests, slowly at first, but then quicker in dramatic unison. Karimi cried out: "Oh Hussein! Oh beloved! All of the hearts of our nation beat in mourning!" As the chest-beating crescendoed, it merged into a bass line. Karimi began singing poetic verses tuned to the rhythm of hands slapping across chests. His deep voice bellowed: "*Ey Ahl-e Haram*" – "Oh lovers of the shrine!" – "*Mir o `Alamdār Nayāmad*!" – "The *seyyed* and the flag-bearer did not arrive!" The cheatbeating grew frenetic, young men leaping up and slapping their heads and faces to the beat. Perspiration covering his face, Karimi frenetically encouraged the crowd to shed tears, reminding them that crying for martyred saints is a religiously meritorious act ("*savāb dāreh*"). As the crowd continued the chants, reciting lines by heart, Karimi emotionally recounted the massacre of members of the Prophet Muhammad's family at Karbala, urging the crowd to be ready to go and fight in place of those who failed to show up to defend them. He called upon the crowd to protect the shrines that today mark the tombs of the Prophet's family, before ending his sermon

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by cursing the "enemies of Islam:" the US, Israel, and ISIS. Finally, he praised Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the "Defenders of the Shrine" who went and did exactly that, stressing that the young men whose visages peered down upon the crowd from posters on the shrine's walls bore the "jihadi" spirit that young Iranians should cultivate.

A few miles away, further up Tehran's sloping northern hills, a billboard welcomes visitors to "Paradise Hub" (پارادایس هاب), a pine tree-filled complex crowned by a co-working space that prides itself on being Iran's largest high-tech incubator. When I visited in 2020, I was shown around by the Hub's director. As we walked through the space, dozens of men sat around chatting and typing on laptops as they worked in its two buildings, one dedicated to software like smartphone applications and the other hardware like drones.<sup>1</sup> They worked for different tech start-ups that used the space and built relationships with others engaged in similar work. Bright colors punctuated the space and large windows opened onto a large garden. Painted across the main wall was an inspirational quote in English: "If you can dream it, you can do it!" Between a funky multicolor mural and a cafeteria serving healthy snacks was a large portrait of Iranian Revolutionary Guards general Qassem Soleimani, who had been assassinated on US President Trump's orders a few months before.

While the general's portrait may seem out of place at a tech incubator, Paradise Hub was funded by the Executive of Imam Khomeini's Order, an organization with a budget of tens of billions of dollars under the direct control of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, like both the Revolutionary Guards and the Islamic Endowments' Organization that controls most of Iran's shrines. Paradise Hub – which describes itself as *sherkat-e ārmāni*, "a [revolutionary] values-based company" – is in a formerly-private residence that was confiscated after the 1979

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The incubator is men-only; women were banned soon after it opened after pictures circulated on social media showing mixed-gender hangouts in which strict government rules on women's clothing were not being followed.

Revolution from individuals affiliated with the *ancien régime*. In speech after speech, Ayatollah Khamenei has framed entrepreneurship as the key to defeating US sanctions, a crucial part of " $k\bar{a}r$ -e jahādi" – jihadi work – that young Iranian men need to engage in if the nation is to survive enemies' plots. Creating domestic apps to circumvent US limits of Iranian access to technology, building companies that could increase domestic employment (" $k\bar{a}r \ \bar{a}farini$ "), and developing drones to be deployed on the battlefield around the world – most notably, a few years later, by Russia in the Ukraine – are all important jihadi work, part of the building of a "Resistance Economy" to survive US economic pressure.<sup>2</sup>

The Chizar shrine and Paradise Hub are connected not only by state decisions and budgets but also by their roles as spaces for producing a "new Islamic man," a central project of Iranian authorities since the revolution which brought the Islamic Republic to power. As shrines became spaces to re-imagine and articulate the nation's sacred geography, history, and political system as well Iranians' place in the regional landscape, they also became part of a complex of bureaucratically-connected institutions seeking to mold a new kind of Iranian subjectivity. Men, as the state's main enforcers in institutions like the Revolutionary Guards, Basiji paramilitary, and government ministries, were a central part of this project. In this chapter, I explore the state's promotion of an ideal revolutionary masculinity, as well as how the state cultivated this masculinity in contrast to the 'unruly' masculinities it sought to violently discipline.

State-promoted conceptualization of ideal masculinity has shifted over time since 1979. But the figure of the Basiji has remained central ever since the 1980s Iran-Iraq War, when hundreds of thousands of Basiji volunteers was crucial to turning the war's tide in Iran's favor. After the war's end and the economic liberalization of the 1990s, the Basiji war hero became a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Shahram Khosravi first noted the emergence of the use of the word "jihadi" in this way. See: Khosravi, Shahram. *Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, pp. 10.

nostalgic type associated with the zeal of the early revolutionary period, whose memory was widely promoted through Iranian public institutions including schools, media, and museums. However, in this chapter, I argue that since the early 2010s, a new type of Basiji masculinity has been promoted by state institutions centrally connected to the regional context of the "Defense of the Shrines" and the effects of the US-led War on Terror and economic sanctions against Iran.

Although the shrine rituals and tech incubator I mentioned at the start of this chapter may at first appear opposing types, I argue that they form two sides of a re-articulation of Basiji masculinity framed around a gendered understanding of men's protection of the Iranian nation and Islamic faith on one hand and promoting neoliberal entrepreneurialism on the other. This state-promoted model of masculinity contrasts with another gendered figure – the rioter – that state media has focused on as a threat amidst recurring rounds of political protests in recent years. While the first is central to the state project of reforming masculinities and turning Iranian men into "modern" subjects, the latter is deployed to disable working-class opposition. I argue that the construction of masculinity is key to the resilience of state power in Iran. It is crucial for us to understand how this articulation of masculinity shapes Iranian men's social roles and how it provides narratives to supporters of the political system to understand and explain their actions.

I first explore the landscape of traditional urban masculinity in pre-Revolutionary Iran through a historical lens. I then examine the emergence of the Basiji as a masculine ideal during the 1980s war before looking at how authorities have used state-promoted religious shrine rituals as sites to craft an ideal Basiji masculinity. I argue that in contrast to common perceptions in Iran of these rituals as chaotic, the Basiji masculinity promoted through such rituals emphasizes a "revolutionary" outlook requiring a martial and disciplined body and mind which is shaped and produced through the rituals themselves. I examine two examples of this shaping at the Chizar

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shrine: the banning of behaviors seen by authorities as excessive (*gholov*) and the promotion of certain rituals and creation of new ones. I then analyze the re-articulation of the Basiji ideal in recent years, emphasizing how it emerges in moments of domestic conflict in response to two different but related factors: the context of the War on Terror and US economic warfare on Iran. Through this analysis, I highlight the link between gender performance and political context, as well as how it is linked to the ways in which religious meaning is constructed and re-imagined, specifically through the shrines. I conclude by looking at the Islamic Republic's 'others' – the working class men who have become the locus of classed and gendered anxieties promoted by state media and which have even pushed Iranian authorities to redefine basic revolutionary terminology so as to exclude them.

#### Reforming Men

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, efforts to modernize and transform masculinities have had a central place in Iranian state policy. As scholars of Middle Eastern masculinities have noted, these efforts have often gone unmarked; recent works, however, have noted how gender and sexuality – and men and masculinity in particular – were central to nationalist concerns.<sup>3</sup> Changing the nation required changing men; it also required producing an ideology that they could be convinced of and that they could enact and perform. In Iran, as in many other states in the Global South, early 20<sup>th</sup> century concerns around masculinity were framed in terms of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See: Afary, Janet. Sexual Politics in Modern Iran, Cambridge University Press, 2009; Moallem, Minoo. Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran. University of California Press, 2005; Najmabadi, Afsaneh. Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran. Duke University Press, 2013; Najmabadi, Afsaneh. Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity. University of California Press, 2003; Balslev, Sivan. Iranian Masculinities: Gender and Sexuality in Late Qajar and Early Pahlavi Iran. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

need to reform and "modernize" Iranian men: their gender presentation and their sexuality.<sup>4</sup> In the final decades of the Qajar dynasty, reformists articulated the project to defend Iran – and the need to overthrow absolutist monarchy and enact a constitutional state – in terms of Iranians men's need to save the "motherland" from violence at the hands of foreign powers.<sup>5</sup>

Gendered discourse about the nation propelled political projects to reform and modernize Iranian men. Around the turn of the century, nationalist reformers took aim at men's lack of "modern" behaviors and widespread homosexual practices as an object of scorn linked to their perceived effeminacy and weakness, a process linked to their encounters with Europeans.<sup>6</sup> This became part a broader process of trying to 'catch up' with the West by attempting to address society's moral failings, which involved identifying and 'fixing' aspects of Iranian men's behaviors that seemed problematic from the lens of "colonial modernity" in order to "fashion" a "modern self." <sup>7</sup> Doing so was seen as central to the project of constructing a modern, independent nation, and became taken up by political authorities. When Reza Pahlavi took power in a coup in 1925, he introduced mandatory national conscription, instilling modern military discipline in young men, including through the widespread use of corporal punishment that became a formative experience for generations of Iranian men – and for many, one of the first experience of the state's role in their lives. Beginning in the late 1920s, all ethnic or regional clothing were banned and Iranian men were forced to wear European-style hats and coats on pain

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For analysis of the elimination of an ideal of masculinity and beauty from Iranian society because it was deemed too feminine for modernity, see: Shay, Anthony. "A Rainbow of Iranian Masculinities: Raqqas, a Type of Iranian Male Image." *Iran-Namag.* 2017.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Concern for the "motherland" was articulated in terms of saving Iranian women from enslavement at the hands of nomadic tribes on the Eastern frontier See: Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan: Gender and National Memory in Iranian History*, Syracuse, NY, 1998.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See: Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> I take this term from Jacob, who describes a parallel process as it unfolded in Egypt. Jacob, Wilson Chacko. *Working out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870-1940.* The American University in Cairo Press, 2011.

on imprisonment, forfeiture of wages, and police harassment.<sup>8</sup> The institution of new models of masculinity by the state was from its inception linked to violence against men.

The form of masculinity promoted by the Pahlavi state was "urban, secular, and elitist," and the discourse around the sartorial reforms was that they would open the way for a transition from traditional, superstitious outlook to one that was modern and scientific.<sup>9</sup> Police were instructed to enforce these rules ruthlessly and publicly, ripping off turbans and humiliating men on the streets, in the process establishing a clear new hierarchy in which state authority and violence trumped individual honor and respect. It was only following the enforcement of codes on men that similar laws were introduced on women, such as the banning of the veil in 1936.<sup>10</sup> Martial discipline did not, however, only punish men; it also offered them a stake in power, giving them the responsibility of protecting newly-unveiled women and creating a new heterosexual gender dynamic to replace pre-existing homosocial social norms. It also recruited them as enforcers; the new codes required thousands of policemen to carry out, and as hundreds of thousands of men were forced into military service, they were given a stake in the new order, both financially and ideologically.

The transformation of men's lifestyle and clothing choices into political battlefields set the tone for the critiques of the Pahlavi system that would emerge in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the lead up to the 1979 Revolution, prominent intellectuals lambasted Iranian society as having been "Westoxified" by Pahlavi policies, with sartorial practices reflecting the pollution

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See: Chehabi, H. E., "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah", *Iranian Studies*. vol. 26, no. 3–4, Summer–Fall 1993, pp. 209–29; DeSouza, Wendy. *Unveiling Men: Modern Masculinities in Twentieth-Century Iran*. Syracuse University Press, 2019.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Moallem, Minoo. Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran. University of California Press, 2005, pp. 71-2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> While the restrictions on women would be remembered, memorialized, and eventually overturned by revolutionaries in 1979, the codes implemented on men were, in contrast, largely ignored, forgotten, or even continued in the post-1979 state. Bans on ethnic clothing in public institutions, for example, continue into the present, as does mandatory conscription for men.

of their minds by Western conceptions of modernity.<sup>11</sup> The need to imagine, build, and create an authentically Iranian, Muslim, and non-colonized form of modernity was linked with the need to reform Iranian masculinity. During protests, female supporters of Islamist and some leftist factions donned headscarves in protest against not only the Pahlavi regime but also capitalism and the West writ large. Men did so as well by discarding ties, which until this day in Iran continue to be associated with the Pahlavi regime. After the victory of the revolution in 1979, some of these were gradually enforced as law by the Islamic Republic, including the imposition of the mandatory veil for women and restrictions on men's clothing such as ties, shorts, or jeans, as well as hairstyles. The new state staked its authority on the power to enforce a new vision of gender norms on society and in the process to reform Iranians yet again – this time substituting what they considered Western modernity with an 'authentically' Iranian and Muslim modernity. Popular Models of Urban Masculinity

Apart from state-promoted ideals of masculinity, many other models proliferated in urban Iran, connected to particular spaces. Idealized working class masculinities were associated with *zurkhāneh*, the "house of strength" where a traditional form of bodybuilding was performed, and *hey'at*, grassroots religious associations dedicated to performing rituals in the Muslim mourning month of Muharram. The *zurkhāneh* is dedicated to a culture of masculinity historically known *fotovvat* or *javānmardi*, translated as "chivalry" and which draws on Sufi cultural influences to stress men's role as protectors of their family, neighborhood, and faith.<sup>12</sup> At the *zurkhāneh*, groups of men exercise with heavy meels to the accompaniment of the *daf* drum, an instrument rooted in Sufi mystical ritual. They take place under portraits of the early Muslim leader Imam

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Al-e Ahmad, Jalal. *Gharbzādegy*. Khorram, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> For more on zurkhaneh and homosociality, see: Chehabi, H.E. "Gender Anxieties in the Iranian Zurkhanah." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 51, No. 3, Aug 2019, pp. 395-421.

Ali, who is revered as a model of ideal manhood for his generosity, bravery mixed with caution, forbearance, honor, and sense of justice, as well as physical prowess and skill in battle.

Members of the zurkhaneh explicitly model themselves on Imam Ali. Men who became powerful wrestlers were known as *pahlevān* (champion), becoming neighborhood heroes, a subject of pride for the *zurkhāneh* and the local community. Such figures could also fall under two other categories, depending on how others saw them. The first was *lat* or *luti*, referring to neighborhood toughs or ruffians with a somewhat ambiguous moral role, and the second was arāzel owbāsh, which referenced violent hooligans without respect for prevailing social codes. These three categories -pahlevan, lat / luti, and arazel owbash - were a spectrum of a single traditional masculinity; they shared codes of honor, references to ideal type, and reverence of Imam Ali. The difference is others' perceptions of them. This masculinity provided expression for and constrained men's behavior according to a code of ethics, and it was connected not just to strength but also *gheirat*, male honor expressed through "protection" over women.<sup>13</sup> This form of traditional urban masculinity, which by the mid-20th century in Tehran was associated with working-class men, was widely depicted as a heroic type modeled on Imam Ali as an ideal pahlevān.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, they were subject to historical shifts, as honorable neighborhood heroes became over the course of the 20th century to be considered nuisances by newly-created institutions of state power and public security.<sup>15</sup> The honorable *luti*, for example, in the 20<sup>th</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Other scholars have explored how men may embody models of masculinity while also feeling constrained by them in practice. See: Chiovenda, Andrea. *Crafting Masculine Selves: Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan.* Oxford University Press, 2019; Ghannam, Farha. *Live and Die Like a Man: Gender Dynamics in Urban Egypt.* Stanford University Press, 2013.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> This chivalrous masculinity was in originally associated with noblemen; it was only over time, as upper class moors changed, that it became seen as specifically working-class. This type was a major figure of pre-Revolutionary "Film Farsi" cinema; see Gow, Christopher. "Real Men: Representations of Masculinity in Iranian Cinema." *Asian Cinema*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2016, pp. 165–176; Naficy, Hamid. "Iranian Cinema." In Leaman, Oliver (ed.), *Companion Encyclopaedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, Routledge, 2001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Jacob charts a similar process in Egypt, where the honorable fotowwa became increasingly seen as part of the criminal underworld, often depicted in 20<sup>th</sup> century popular media as linked to "baltagiyya" gangsters. See: Jacob,

century became increasingly depicted through "new discourses of nationalist hegemonic masculinity" that "ascribed the *lutis* with a set of gendered, pejorative signifiers," making them "recognizable' as a deviant, chaotic, violent, homosexual, and distinctly non-normative measure of manliness in Iran." <sup>16</sup> It is possible that the term *arāzel owbāsh* emerged during this transition to ascribe a more clearly-negative label to contrast with *lāt / luti*. What is key to remember is that these were loose labels, and changed depending on who was talking; men who the state saw as troublesome *arāzel owbāsh* for evading law enforcement might be seen as ambivalent *lāt* by neighborhood business owners forced to pay protection fees or even *pahlevān* by locals who saw the police as an oppressive force.

The stories of two enormously-influential wrestlers elucidate these categories. Shaaban Jaafari was born in 1921 Tehran and was active in his local *zurkhāneh*. He was known for his massive physique and was an accomplished wrestler; he was also notoriously short-tempered and was rumored to be a thug-for-hire, giving him a reputation as a *lāt*. A *lāt* is similar to the gangster in the sense that he follows a code of honor but can also be a ruffian or tied to organized crime, networks he may draw on to protect loved ones and neighbors but also to attack enemies. Nicknamed *Sha`aban Bimokh*, Shaaban the Brainless, he famously embodied this masculine type during the 1953 CIA-backed coup against the democratically-elected Mohammed Mossadegh, who sought to nationalize Iran's oil reserves. Jaafari was said to have organized gangs that helped the coup and ensured the Shah remained in power at the expense of democratic forces. This became the lasting symbol of his life, one that left his reputation in infamy, to the point that

Wilson Chacko. *Working out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870-1940.* The American University in Cairo Press, 2011: pg. 240-7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Bell, Robert Joseph. "Luti Masculinity in Iranian Modernity, 1785-1941: Marginalization and the Anxieties of Proper Masculine Comportment." *The City University of New York*, 2015.

even his gravestone in Los Angeles, where he died in 2006, is regularly defaced. His detractors would consider Jaafari less than a *lāt*, but instead part of the *arāzel owbāsh*.

In stark contrast is Gholamreza Takhti. Born in 1930, Takhti was a champion-wrestler seen as using his strength in honorable ways. Numerous myths linked his behaviors to those of Imam Ali, for example stories that circulated that he would go in disguise (so he would not be recognized) to give food to children in impoverished neighborhoods at night. Tales of his honorable feats at wrestling competitions continue to circulate. For example, in one story, he discovered that a player he was supposed to compete against was injured in one leg. Instead of taking advantage of the weakness, he avoided hitting that leg in the competition. These stories of personal chivalry were bolstered by his political activism, as he was known as a supporter of Mohamed Mossadegh (who became a popular national hero in Iran) and an opponent of the Shah. When in 1968 he died of apparent suicide, his funeral was attended by hundreds of thousands. His status among the masses as a *pahlevān*, and not a *lāt* (as he may have been viewed by authorities), made him an enduring national hero, whose visage still finds its way on graffiti around Iran today. He remains a powerful symbol for contemporary Iranian wrestlers.



Figure 26

A stencil of Takhti on a street in central Tehran, 2021. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Alongside the *zurkhāneh*, grassroots religious associations called *hey'at* were also dedicated to promoting an ideal of masculinity in urban Iran.<sup>17</sup> Their activities are focused on organizing rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, Imam Ali's son, during the month of Muharram, which begins with 10 days of parades, nightly poetic recitations of the story of the Battle of Karbala, and chest-beating rituals leading up to Ashura day. These rituals are large, public street gatherings featuring the carrying of large, metallic emblems called `*alam* weighing hundreds of pounds.<sup>18</sup> They are boisterous, involving competition between neighborhoods, publicly performed on occasions when city streets come to resemble a massive stage.<sup>19</sup> During parades, participants often carry small whips or metallic chains they use to beat themselves in unison with the drum beat of the band. The public displays of physical power and presence create an atmosphere charged with a sense of camaraderie and competitiveness. Although emerging out a shared cultural idiom of masculinity, the *hey'at* rituals overwhelmingly focus on the figure of Imam Hussein, who is portrayed as *mazlūm* (oppressed) because he stood up for his beliefs, even when he knew he would be killed for them, and is a model of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Both *zurkhāneh* and *hey'at* have their roots in Sufi Islam, which once predominated in urban Iran. The origins of *he'yat* lie in the 1500s, when Iran's Safavid rulers converted the nation to Shi'a Islam. Previously, Sufism – a mystical form of Islam organized through lodges and focused on poetry and meditational ritual – had been extremely influential across the country, but after the conversion, many former heads of Sufi lodges were expelled and the Safavid leaders turned over control of the Sufi lodges to local communities. They were encouraged by state authorities to utilize these associations to hold commemorations for Ashura and associated holidays linked to the Prophet's family and the 12 Shia imams. In some ways, this was not a radical shift; Sufism stresses veneration of the Prophet's family, which the Ashura story focuses on, and venerates the figures of Imam Ali and Imam Hussein as idealized male figures.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> For more on the history of the emergence of alam-carrying, see: Rahmani, Jabbar. Hey'athā-ye 'Azādāry dar Jāme'h-ye Irān [*Religious Mourning Associations in Iranian Society*]. Tehran: *Nashr-e Armā*, 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> The competitive display of *alam* and conflicts over parade routes can lead to clashes between rival *hey'at*. Masoudi Nejad points out how Ashura clashes between *he'yat* in Dezful in the 1950s had their roots in a rivalry between two Sufi orders established in the 1300s. This rivalry persisted even after the brotherhoods became Shia *hey'at*, though the content of the division changed. For example, in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Dezful, the division came to be connected to political fighting between a workers' movement and landlords in the city, which came to head amid the heightened sense emotion and disorder during Ashura parades. See: Masoudi Nejad, Reza. "Urban Violence, the Muharram Processions and the Transformation of Iranian Urban Society: The Case of Dezful." In Freitag, Ulrike, et al (ed.) *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*. Berghahn Books, 2015: pp. 91–110.

endurance.<sup>20</sup> In the story of Karbala, Hussein is martyred alongside his family, with women and children around him killed and enslaved by the forces of the corrupt caliph Yazid.

Beside their religious function, *hey'at* are social places. They allow for a dissolution of social hierarchy during rituals; they also offer a venue for more wealthy or powerful members to highlight their charity and largesse by paying for the food or tea distributed post-ritual. Traditionally, *hey'at* were an all-male affair; although women helped extensively, they were largely confined to the background. Even the cooking of food was handled by men. The ritual space of the *hey'at* allowed for performance of a compassionate masculinity defined by faith and community. The model of masculinity promoted around Imam Hussein is linked to his piety and the performance of mourning for him by *hey'at* members; tears shed for Hussein at the *ruwzeh* rituals are considered to have religious merit. Shedding tears is linked to having a pure heart. This includes unrestrained and almost ecstatic sobbing as well as chest-beating that can last hours. The mourning rituals of Muharram, preparation for which occupies a large part of the year, produce and are produced by a sense of brotherhood among men organized around love for the martyred Imam Hussein.

 $<sup>^{20}</sup>$  In popular culture, the contrast can be highlighted through two expressions: *Ya Ali!* ("Oh Ali!") said commonly in a situation requiring strength like standing up or opening a heavy door, versus *Ya Hossein!* ("Oh Hussein!"), invoked when drinking water, in reference to the fact that he was deprived of water in the days before his death (and emphasizing his victimhood).



Figure 27

Left: Men hold `*alam* aloft during Muharram processions in Tehran in 2018. Right: Members of a *zurkhāneh* pose together in an undated photo, likely mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Photo: Alex Shams)

## From Hey'ati to Basiji

In the late 1960s and 70s, *hey'at* became a site of political protest against the Shah's regime. Many were inspired by oppositional clerical leaders like Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Mottahari and intellectuals like Ali Shariati, who argued that mourning ceremonies should be linked to the political issues of the day. Shariati called for Shi'ism to be turned from a religion of mourning, what he called "Black Shi'ism" and which he associated with imperial governments organizing ceremonial crying, into a revolutionary struggle, a "Red Shi'ism" in which the memory of past injustices fueled activism for a better world. He reframed key Shia slogans such as "Ashura is every day, Karbala is everywhere" to mean not that Muslims should forever mourn the death of Imam Hussein but that they should see his model of resistance to oppression as a lesson for all times and places. Young men challenged the lack of political themes in *hey'at* rituals and forced their inclusion through slogans and poetry. This reached a climax during winter 1978, when *hey'at* became a central part of popular mobilization during

Muharram.<sup>21</sup> While until then, protestors had been individuals or organized through the student groups, often affiliated with universities, during Muharram, they were accompanied by larger groups of people leading out from the *hey'at* of the working-class neighborhoods of Tehran. Protests and revolutionary slogans took the place of the usual mourning processions and poetic chants. During the chaos that followed the Shah's downfall in 1979, these so-called *enqelābi* ("revolutionary") *hey'at* formed the backbone of the *komiteh*, neighborhood self-defense organizations, and eventually the volunteer paramilitary organization Basij, which was tied together into a central organization after the Revolution's victory under the command of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Traditionally the *hey'at* is an independent, neighborhood grassroots association; the Basij, in contrast, emerged locally but was integrated into a national bureaucracy that received orders from above. The formation of the Basij was an attempt to create order out of revolutionary chaos and transform neighborhood committees into fighters for permanent revolt. While *hey'at* were based at their own buildings, the Basij based themselves at local mosques and shrines. Almost immediately after their creation, the Basij became deployed to put down what were deemed "counter-revolutionary" insurrections across the country, by a mixture of mostly Communist and local ethnonationalist (Turkmen, Kurdish, etc.) factions that opposed Khomeini's new order.<sup>22</sup> The Basij became the backbone of the mobilization of volunteers to fight at the warfront when Saddam Hussein invaded in 1980, and tens of thousands of their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> For a history of this period, see: Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam. Resāneh Shi`eh: Jam`ehshenāsi-ye A'yinhā-ye Sugvāri va Hey'athā-ye Mazhabi dar Irān bā Ta'kid bar Dowrān pas az Piruzi Enqelāb-e Eslāmi [Shia Media: The Sociology of Mourning Rituals and Religious Hey'at in Iran with a Focus on the Period after the Triumph of the Islamic Revolution]. Sherkat-e Chāp va Nashr Bayn ol-Mellal [International Publication Company]; Tehran, Iran; 1387 [2008]. In English, see: Ostovar, Afshon. Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Golkar, Saeid. *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015.

members fell as "martyrs" in the war, in the process aiding the beleaguered Iranian army and likely turning the war in Iran's favor. In the sense of being largely voluntary and holding religious rituals, the Basij was a continuation of the hey'at. In other ways, however it was not. This included its paramilitary character (including arms training) as well as its inclusion of women's units, empowering them to be active in its national activities alongside, but separated from, men.<sup>23</sup> Their roles were explicitly modeled on those of Fatima and Zainab, two women from the Prophet's family that took active roles in the lead-up to and aftermath of the Battle of Karbala. Just as they played a key role in keeping Islam alive, the argument went, so did Iranian women today need to play their role in protecting the Islamic Revolution. The transformation of women's roles became important to defining emergent views of masculinity in Iran, in which women were participants but simultaneously bound by codes of piety and dress that configured them as vulnerable and needing protection.<sup>24</sup> Whereas in the traditional urban masculinity, a man's honor was tied to his sense of protection over women related to him (by blood or neighborhood), in the Basiji masculinity, men's gheirat (honor) was extended to all women of the nation.

The Basiji (member of the Basij) came to define a new masculine ideal in the 1980s that was tied to devotion for Imam Hussein and a deep investment in his model of self-sacrifice on behalf of the Islamic community. After Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, hundreds of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> In keeping with the Revolution's modernist character, women were recruited to defend and spread the Revolution along with men, including arms and medical training, a literacy corps extending across the country, and organization of material support for the war effort. Whereas the *hey'at* was a traditional institution premised on the invisibilization of women, the *Basij* empowered women to be alongside men. This difference is also key to understanding the gender ideology promoted by the Islamic Republic, which overturned patriarchal restrictions on women's participation in order to promote their access to study, work, and even arms training. The caveat, however, was that women needed to follow a moral code that also involved physical body covering as a condition of their presence in the public sphere.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> For a detailed analysis of these dynamics, see: Moallem, Minoo. *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*. University of California Press, 2005.

thousands of men and boys volunteered to fight in a war framed as a battle to defend the Revolution, Iran, and Islam more broadly. Basiji masculinity downplayed boisterous competitiveness and stressed humility, sacrifice, and austerity, informed by devotion to religious and political ideals. It was deeply informed by the homosocial nature of life on the front, where a brotherhood of men was organized in devotion to Imam Hussein, considered the central model for soldiers. It emphasized fighting against oneself and one's desires in order to save the nation.<sup>25</sup> Mourning ceremonies featuring weeping and chest-beating became a form of male camaraderie, and *maddāh* (religious chanters) constantly led these ceremonies for soldiers, transporting this religious ritual from its traditional home in *hey'at* to the battlefield.

This masculinity model was also encouraged through the creation of mythology through media depictions of extraordinary Basijis presented as ideal types. Majid Faridfar was one of them. A former child actor during the time of the Shah, in the late 1970s, he renounced cinema and left behind his family to pursue military training in Lebanon to train to overthrow the Shah's regime. He later returned and joined the revolutionary committees. He was famously skinny because he ostensibly gave anything he had to aid the poor, preferring to stay hungry as penance for his years of acting in (what he now considered) frivolous and immoral movies. Faridfar was killed soon after he went to the frontline with Iraq. His story was widely promoted and retold in official media. This cultural image of an ideal man was modeled in part on Ayatollah Khomeini, who was seen by followers as a kind of mystical ascetic who lived an extremely humble life, as well as Imam Hussein himself.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Moallem, Minoo. "Staging Masculinity in Iran–Iraq War Movies." *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema*, Edited by Magnan-Park, Aaron Han Joon et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 489-506.



Faridfar as a child actor and in a portrait widely circulated after his death.

The Basiji model of masculinity was promoted by a variety of government cultural institutions, including the Islamic Ministry of Culture, the Education Ministry, state media outlets, and all other public organizations that housed Basiji offices, through books, pamphlets, and documentaries. These stories filled textbooks and their faces and names decorated wall murals and street names across the country. Their life stories were recounted as models to follow for young men who joined the Basij. It was promoted through the "Culture of the Front," a state-funded cultural effort focused on documenting and celebrating the sacrifices of the Basiji volunteers. It initially began with filmic documentation led by Morteza Avini, whose films on the war were widely-watched in Iran and engendered widespread popular identification with the cause.<sup>26</sup> This "culture" would come to include a body of literature, films, and public ceremonies dedicated to the memorializing the war, stressing Basijis' humility, sacrifice, and revolutionary zeal united in their love for Imam Hussein. The lives cut short by the war – as well as the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> The so-called "Sacred Defense cinema." For more on this cultural effort and its producers, see: Bajoghli, Narges. *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Stanford University Press, 2019.

hundreds of thousands of veterans who came back disabled – were narrativized as humble, willing participants, in the process obscuring questions about why the war lasted as long as it did. The Basiji model of masculinity became a way that men were convinced to volunteer and to explain the sacrifices they made and suffering they endured, likening them to religious martyrs. The "Culture of the Front" became the dominant way that the hundreds of thousands of Iranian men and boys who died at the front were publicly memorialized, their austere, unsmiling blackand-white portraits adorning public spaces across the country and marking their absence.

The 1990s ushered a new chapter in the history of the Basij, who by then were thought to have around 10 million members. With the war over and the state increasingly moving toward economic and political liberalization, the Basij redirected itself domestically. Under the instruction of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who took power after Khomeini's death in 1989, state budgets were directed to support the Basij's gradual conversion from a paramilitary organization into a government-backed *hey'at*. They became tasked with translating governmental practices and ideas of revolution at the neighborhood level.<sup>27</sup> Historically, the *hey'at*'s activity were funded by voluntary contributions of members. But in the Basiji *hey'at*, activities were funded by the government budget as well, tilting the balance away from members and toward the state bureaucracy, replacing a bottom-up organization with a top-down one.<sup>28</sup> Their bases at mosques became permanent; when new mosques were built or shrines renovated, Basiji offices were integrated into buildings, and in schools, universities, and public offices as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Moradi, Ahmad. "The Basij of Neighbourhood: Techniques of Government and Local Sociality in Bandar Abbas." *Urban Neighbourhood Formations*, 2020, pp. 239.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> This being said, local Basijis still had to mediate between their neighbors and state institutions, sometimes moderating their stances as a result of pushback or discussion. See: Moradi, Ahmad. "The Basij of Neighbourhood: Techniques of Government and Local Sociality in Bandar Abbas." Urban Neighbourhood Formations, 2020, pp. 237–256.

well, giving them "a prominent role in regulating collective life at the neighbourhood level." <sup>29</sup> Shrines became the grandiose centers of Basiji rituals, crowning their activities with the authority of the sacred.

The physical divide mirrored a growing social divide in which Basijis became institutionally separated from traditional hey'at. As the country demobilized, high-ranking veterans had social prestige and through their networks, many went on to hold top government positions. Joining the Basij became seen as a path to success, reinforced by special programs like quotas for children of Basij to enter universities. The Basij's morality policing also created a divide with traditional hey'at; while hey'at maintained religious norms, members did not necessarily abstain from drinking, doing drugs, or engaging in sexual liaisons. It was not unheard of for hey'at members to pass around a flask of araq, Iranian vodka, or to smoke opium. For the Basij, these acts were taboo. The Basij prided themselves on following the state's reformist view of Islam, which saw religion as a set of legal codes to be rationally considered and accepted, in contrast to what they saw as the mindless repetition of religious ritual common in average hey'at.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, hey'at tended to maintain the traditional emphasis on body-building and feats of strength in Ashura parades, while the more interiorized Islam promoted by the Basij focused on mourning ceremonies and downplayed rituals with origins difficult to explain in terms of religious logic, such as the ceremonial parades.

Although not in opposition, these groups promoted different conceptualizations of masculinity – one focused on popular ritual and volunteerism, the other revolutionary norms of Islamic piety and devotion to state ideology. They competed, in turn, with the *pahlevān* –  $l\bar{a}t$  /

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Ibid 253.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> For more on the Iranian state's "rationalization" of Islam as public policy, see: Doostdar, Alireza. The Iranian *Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

*luti – arāzel owbāsh* masculinity spectrum which continued to exist in urban working-class society and was increasingly unmoored from the *zurkhāneh* and associated with gym, wrestling, and bodybuilding culture. In the next section, I examine religious rituals as a site through which Basiji masculinity is constructed. I then examine its evolution in response to the "War on Terror" context, US economic sanctions on Iran, and the neoliberalization of Iran's economy.

### Constructing Masculinity through Rituals

Local shrines became central to the promotion of Basiji masculinity, providing a site for the performance of religious rituals and the shaping of public embodiment of devotion. Basiji masculinity was tied to a sense of order; unlike *hey'ati*, which was used colloquially to mean anarchic and disorganized, Basijis prided themselves on martial discipline. Religious rituals hosted at shrines were funded by the government and promoted on state media. They are led by *maddah*, religious chanters. *Maddah* must be skilled orators, performing *noheh* poetry with the goal of helping the crowd access their deepest emotions and leaving them overwhelmed and in tears. The sense of tempo is key, as the *maddah* must time his words carefully to evoke the right emotions at the right time – and to transition slowly from the crying part of the ritual to chestbeating (*sinehzani*), the beat of which provides a bass line for the poetic verses he recites. In contrast to the first part, focused on an interior emotional state, during the chest-beating many in the crowd stand, take off their shirts, and begin moving in circles or other formations as they loudly chant along with the orator and enter ecstatic collective motion.

Since the 1990s, the Iranian government has bureaucratized the previously grassroots religious chanting profession and began hiring *maddāh* using state funds, assigning them to different Basij offices. This not only centralized the profession under state authority; it has also allowed the state to become arbiters of taste and culture, subsidizing *maddāh* with certain styles

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and political leanings while avoiding others or depriving them of platforms. By being recruited by the state, religious chanters would come to sacralize the position of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who came to power in 1989 and lacked the charisma, religious authority, and popular appeal of his predecessor, revolutionary leader Khomeini. His favorite maddāh performed for him personally on state TV, producing a synergy between the chanters and the leader. In turn, the chanters more systematically invoked political themes in sermons and recitations. This was indicative of a wider phenomenon in post-Revolutionary Iran, whereby the government adopted grassroots religious customs, traditions, and rituals and tied them to the state, as we have seen so far through the shrine modernization project. State-backed *maddāh* became a fixture of TV broadcasts during the Ashura season, their performances televised and advertised, encouraging people to attend officially-sponsored maddah (as opposed to local hey'at, where the same events would have been occurring simultaneously). Their tapes and CDs were sold in Basiji-run bookstores and gift shops. The techniques developed during the war to encourage young men to fight were now employed "to transport young women and men into what some see as lyrical, semi-mystical experiences."<sup>31</sup>

Mahmud Karimi, whose voice opened this chapter, was among those to rise to fame through this cultural project. Born in Tehran in 1968, both his father and his brother lost their lives in the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>32</sup> His career as a successful *maddāh* parallels the profession's centralization under state control. Karimi is famous for developing a style of *maddāhi* seen as controversially innovative, drawing from techno and pop music and using synthesizers to mimic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Walker, Sarah. "'Under the Bruised Sky': Music and Mourning in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in Davidson, Jane W. (ed.) *Music and Mourning*, Routledge, pp. 69–82. <sup>32</sup> "Zendegināmeh-ye Hāj Mahmud Karimi." Sibtayn.ir, 28 Mehr 1388 [20 Oct. 2009], <u>http://www.sibtayn.com/fa/index.php?option=com\_content&view=article&id=10613:</u> <u>juine\_content\_content\_view\_article\_content\_content\_view\_article\_content\_c</u>

the rhythm of chest-beating. Based at Imamzadeh Ali Akbar shrine, he became closely identified with the shrine's identity, drawing a loyal following of young men and women from across Tehran's wealthier northern half, propelled by advertising for the shrine's rituals on state TV. Even a 2014 incident in which he shot at a couple following a minor car accident on a Tehran freeway did not undermine his popularity, though his privileged position on state TV was subsequently diminished.<sup>33</sup>

The shrine is surrounded by a cemetery dedicated to martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War. In recent years, new martyrs have been buried there: young men who died fighting as part of the "Defenders of the Shrine" movement, this time in Iraq and Syria against ISIS and militant groups opposed to Iran's regional allies. Karimi has become a face of the movement, encouraging young men to volunteer to fight. He is a muscular, larger-than-life personality whose voice has become a defining feature of *maddāhi*, broadcast across Iran and listened to among Shia Muslims in nearby countries like Iraq, Lebanon, India, and Pakistan. His role as the spiritual head of the Basiji association of *Razmandegān-e Shemirānāt*, the "Fighters of Shemiranat," has given him an unparalleled national platform. His popularity among young "revolutionary" men, especially the relatively well-off, educated, and devout young men who attend rituals at the shrine of Chizar, has made him a towering figure and model of contemporary Basiji masculinity.

The evolution and reshaping of religious rituals at the shrine of Chizar index wider attempts at reshaping religious practice and men's bodies. The promotion of certain maddah over others is not merely about style of performance; it involves promoting specific conceptualizations of ideal masculinity. Since 1979, the Iranian state has promoted a version of Islamic practice and identity which it argues is modernized and rationalized, based on scientific

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> "Charges dropped against Iranian religious singer who shot at couple," *Al-Monitor*, 29 Jan. 2014. <u>https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/01/singer-shooting-charges-dropped.html#ixzz7JrZEEPb7</u>.

reasoning and disciplined comportment befitting a contemporary Muslim.<sup>34</sup> This involves not only instruction on proper Islamic practice and rules in schools across the country, but also restrictions on certain behaviors. In this section, I examine two examples of these policies at the Chizar shrine: the banning of behaviors seen by state religious authorities and the promotion of certain rituals and creation of new ones. Through these examples, I focus on how these policies promote and enforce particular vision of ideal Basiji masculinity, mediated through the sacredness of the shrine.

Rituals offer the possibility of shaping how participants view and relate to their bodies, through restrictions turning a spiritual moment defined by losing control into one instead of practicing control. As Azam Torab notes, "ritual activity is ... the very means whereby people negotiate, redefine or construct new interpretations, and offer competing gender perspectives," a space in which participants not only enact existing meanings in the rituals, but, because those meanings are open-ended, through the rituals "give rise to new understandings, enabling actors to negotiate the self, the social and the cultural." <sup>35</sup> Through changes in these performances, these meanings and possibilities can be shaped by participants as well as authorities. Traditionally during the *sinehzani* portion of the Ashura rituals, men take off their shirts to mark the transition from mournful poetry to boisterous chanting in which they form circles while beating their chests.<sup>36</sup> Just as crying is crucial to the emotional release, movement is key to the *sinehzani*, creating an extended ecstatic feeling that leaves participants sweating heavily, physically exhausted, and ready to eat the freshly-prepared food distributed at the ritual's conclusion.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> For more on the "rationalization" of Islam in Iran in bureaucracy since the Revolution, see Adelkhah, Fariba. *Being Modern in Iran*. Columbia University Press, 1999.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Torab, Azam. Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Islam. Brill, 2007: pg. 22-24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> I describe the dominant form among urban Tehran men, who are the core participants in the rituals I am describing. However, it is enacted differently in various regions and cities of the country.

Beginning in the early 2010s, new regulations were introduced at Chizar that reflected a military-like discipline. They were forbidden from removing their shirts during the ritual, creating new norms of male comportment in religious spaces that emphasized a more disciplined relationship to self and de-emphasized the ecstatic component. Part of this reflected the increasing mediatization of the shrine as a space; first, through the ubiquitous smart phones that participants brought with them, but secondly and more crucially, through the professional videotaping that occurred at every ritual, broadcast on the shrine's social media pages and, at major rituals, on TV screens outside the shrine and even on state TV. The staging of the images glamorized the rituals, turning the interiors of the shrine into something resembling a nightclub, with a heavy bass line to match. In doing so, it drew on aesthetic interventions that drew out the aura of state power and sacredness as delegated to the Basij through the shrines. These changes drew caustic remarks from critics, who accused authorities of letting Basijis mimic western nightlife aesthetics (while, as secular-minded critics would point out, simultaneously banning actual nightclubs and bars). They also entailed closer surveillance of participants' behaviors to ensure that they were representing Islam properly, since no longer was the ritual only for themselves – there was a national and transnational audience involved. This surveillance also involved self-surveillance and discipline.

Participants were urged to cry while consciously thinking about the tragedy of Karbala, not crying for the sake of crying or, for example, crying while reflecting on tragedies in one's own life. This emphasis on engaging in ritual with rational purpose became connected to disciplining not only one's thoughts but one's movements. Instead of assembling in circles, participants at Chizar's rituals were directed to form large lines facing each other. The ritual becomes a venue with which to instill martial discipline in participants, ordered from above.

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Basiji masculinity promoted through such rituals emphasizes a "revolutionary" outlook which requires a disciplined body and mind. Rationality is an explicit part of this.<sup>37</sup> In one sermon while discussing the lessons of past martyrs for Basijis of the present, a speaker at a Chizar ritual argued that those who have the ability to discern between right and wrong have more `*aql* (rationality) than those who don't. "This means that those who love *velāyat*) are smarter and more rationally-minded than those who don't. Martyrs have more rationality than others … because someone who chooses God is wiser while the one who leaves God lacks wisdom. The one who is afraid of God is more rational; let us be rational!" <sup>38</sup>

The second example is what some scholars of religion inside Iran have begun to decry as *manāseksāzy*, the invention of new rituals.<sup>39</sup> In recent years an increasing number of seemingly novel mourning holidays have been promoted by state cultural organs. One afternoon as I sat in a collective taxi on my way to a shrine, the man beside me began complaining about how hard it was to figure out when offices were open and schools were closed. Reflecting on the week we were in, which was in the Islamic month of Safar, marked by a number of major holidays, he exclaimed: "Sunday is a holiday, and then Tuesday again, so they consider Monday *beyn-ol-ta`tileyn* and take it off as well," he said, using a mixed Arabic-Persian neologism meaning "between the holidays," referring to a day off given because the day before and after are off. "And last week everything was closed Saturday because of Arbaeen. I'm not against holidays, but there's just so few work days!" he added, with a laugh.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Lara Deeb describes similar process among Shia Muslims in Lebanon under the term "authentication," which she links to their understanding of "public piety." See: Deeb, Lara. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton University Press, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Here, the term *velāyat* could either refer to the religious leadership of the Shia imams or Iran's system of governance, *Velāyat-e Faqih* – or, most likely, to both at the same time, with the latter understood as a continuation of the former in the present.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Sociologist Mohsen Hessam Mazaheri has frequently decried the growth in new rituals associated with state power. For more in depth discussion of Shia ritual in Iran, see: Fischer, Michael M.J. *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

The birth and death anniversaries of each of the 12<sup>th</sup> imams were increasingly marked as official holidays, and some holy figures' birthdays were turned into national holidays as well, such as the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter Zainab's birthday, which became National Nurses' Day, or Imam Ali's birthday, marked as Fathers' and Men's Day. Each of these in turn became occasions for official speeches and state-sponsored poster campaigns extolling the virtues of various holy figures and urging Iranians to model themselves after them. In many rituals held at shrines where I attended, extra focus was given to Zainab in particular. While in the official narrative that made her a symbol of nursing she was depicted as having cared for others at the Battle of Karbala, thus resembling a strong, defiant, and caring woman, in the stories I heard frequently repeated at shrines, she was discussed as having been left undefended at Karbala, thus leading to her capture and enslavement after the massacre of her relatives. In this narrative, her helpless is emphasized – in turn, allowing the narrator to focus on the failure to protect her in the past and the audience's need to have *gheirat* in the present. *Gheirat* means honor but is used specifically for men's role protecting women, and it was frequently invoked in sermons at speeches to describe the values held by the Defenders of the Shrine who protected Zainab's shrine in Syria.

In the 2010s, an increasing number of new, unofficial holidays focused on martyrdom were promoted at shrine rituals and on state TV that also furthered this vision. Some of these include holidays that were previously considered somewhat extreme for their sectarian nature, and which, in the early years after the Revolution, were publicly ignored by state authorities (even as some groups, such as the *Hojatiyeh* associations, marked them in private). This includes *Fatemiyeh*, marking the death of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter. Fatima, who was married to Imam Ali, died during a period of political struggle in the Islamic community that came to

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embody the Shia-Sunni divide. The caliph Omar is said by Shias to have usurped Imam Ali's rightful claim to authority over the Islamic community; in one particularly heated encounter, Omar is said to have forced his way into Imam Ali's home when only Fatima was present. Soon after, she suffered a miscarriage, and then passed away herself. In *Fatemiyeh* commemorations, Fatima's death is framed as a "martyrdom" and commemorated as a holiday of mourning, promoted with state funding at mosques and shrines.

It is particularly important in the context of heightened sectarianism across the region, as it potentially sharpens antagonism between Shia and Sunni Muslims by labelling Caliph Omar, revered by Sunnis as a close companion of the Prophet, as a murderer. It also positions those taking part in the rituals as blameworthy for failing to have defended the Prophet's daughter at a crucial moment, a point reinforced in the sermons and poetry recited at the holiday, which stress the failure to protect the vulnerable women of the Prophet's family as a source of tragedy. In doing so, it mobilizes a uniquely gendered sense of responsibility, in which masculine notions of protecting female family members (*gheirat*) are called upon and reinforced. Direct connections are made between the failure of believers to protect the Prophet's family in the past and the danger looming over the shrines dedicated to them in the present – with a transference of that protective masculinity from the deceased to their tombs in nearby countries in the present. This reformulation of ritual practice, I argue, is inseparable from the evolution of Basiji masculinity amidst the contemporary political context.

### Shrine Defenders, Jihadi Managers

Over the last decade, the Basiji model of masculinity has found renewed meaning in the unfolding of wars that have engulfed the Middle East. In 2001, George W. Bush ordered US troops to invade Afghanistan, Iran's eastern neighbor; less than two years later, he invaded Iraq,

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to Iran's west. Iran was encircled by an enemy military presence. Bush's inclusion of Iran in the "Axis of Evil" left little doubt that he intended to attack Iran next. He never managed to; but the invasions triggered conflict across the region that continues into the present. Two features of that violence are of special import to Iran. The first is that shrines dedicated to the Prophet's family revered by Shia Muslims have come under attack by Sunni extremist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, provoking sectarian conflict where none existed prior. Repeated bombings and massacres, first in US-occupied Iraq and later in conflict-torn Syria, led Iran to undertake military interventions in both labelled officially as "the Defense of the Shrines." Over time, they came to have larger geopolitical aims beyond the shrines.<sup>40</sup> While many fighters were salaried members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, many were non-professional Basiji volunteers.<sup>41</sup> As thousands died, a new narrative of wartime masculinity was crafted and promoted in Iran.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> In Iraq, these interventions began immediately following the bombings, before any clear political authority beside the US occupation had come into effect. The goal of protecting the shrines dovetailed with Iran's interest in supporting allied parties in Iraq, but was not as directly connected as it would become. Over time, however, these goals more clearly became connected to expanding Iran's military and security apparatus across Iraq. In Syria, these goals emerged over 2011-12 as ensuring that the regime of Bashar al-Assad remained in power in the face of a popular revolution and ensuing civil war.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Iranian volunteers were the most visible face of this intervention among the Iranian public. Numerically, however, they were far outnumbered by Afghan refugees from Iran who signed up to fight. The reasons behind their recruitment were varied and beyond the scope of this paper. For further information on them see: Moradi, Ahmad. "(Dis)abling Sacrifice: Veterans' Classification in Iran." *Sociologus*, Vol. 71, Issue 2, 2022, pp. 129 – 152; Reumert, Anna. "Fighting Other People's Wars: Afghan Soldiers on the Syrian Battlefield." *Ajam Media Collective*, 14 June 2016, ajammc.com/2016/06/14/afghan-soldiers-in-syria/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> It is extremely difficult to find reliable numbers for those who died as Defenders of the Shrine. Some Iranians officials have given estimates above 2,000. But given that a wide variety of different paramilitary groups have fought in the conflict organized through Iran, including Iranians, Afghans, Pakistanis, and other nationalities, it is unclear what the total figures are. See: Hashemi, Adel. "Shrine Defenders: A New Beginning" in *The Making of Martyrdom in Modern Twelver Shi'ism: From Protesters and Revolutionaries to Shrine Defenders*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022: pg. 113-128.



Figure 29

"Defenders of the Shrine" martyrs, depicted on posters in Tehran in 2017. The poster on the left reads: "The value of a man is in the measure of his perseverance, and his virtue is in the measure of his zeal/honor." "Zeal" is the word "*gheirat*," which also means a man's protectiveness over female relations. In this case, it can be read as alluding to Sayyidah Zeinab, the female saint buried at the shrine, whose dome is pictured behind them. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Secondly, since 2011 the United States has imposed increasingly punishing sanctions on Iran intended to strangle its economy. US sanctions have caused the national currency to collapse in value repeatedly, undermining people's savings and making salaries worthless. They have also banned Iranians from the international financial system, making transactions like importing medicine, buying plane tickets, or anything that uses a credit card nearly impossible for Iranian companies and organizations. Intended to undermine Iran's government, US sanctions have tanked the economy as a whole, making average people poorer and reliant on the government, which continues acquiring resources from selling oil abroad. This process accelerated further in 2017, when US President Trump imposed a "maximum pressure" policy designed as economic warfare. These developments re-energized the Basij's role in society; rather than focusing on being relevant by commemorating past wars, the paramilitary group became focused on defending the nation in the present. The state-promoted model of Basiji masculinity has become increasingly militarized and focused on a neoliberalized and nationalistic economic discourse. Whereas in the 1980s, the image of the Basiji was focused on self-sacrifice – both as volunteers to defend the nation and to help build a new society including through social efforts like literacy programs – the new Basiji masculinity stresses a willingness to take risks by venturing to far off battlefields as well through investment to boost Iran's ailing economy. The thousands of young men who have signed up to fight for the Defenders of the Shrine have taken on mythic roles as protectors of faith and nation against "takfiri terrorists" in a remarkable appropriation of US War on Terror rhetoric against vaguely defined enemies. In contrast to the Iran-Iraq War, described as an "imposed war" that Iranians were forced to fight defensively, this war is about preventing future risk to Iran – a domestication of the doctrine of "pre-emptive" warfare Bush used to justify the 2003 Iraq War.

In a line from a speech painted on murals across the country, Supreme Leader Khamenei explained: "If they had not gone to fight in Aleppo, we would have been forced to fight here." In contrast to the humility of Iran-Iraq War martyrs, they are memorialized as men "who had everything" but were driven by faith to fight against hidden enemies. At the funerals of returning fighters, they are lauded for ensuring that "Zeinab did not fall into the hands of the enemy and become captive yet again," referencing both the Prophet's granddaughter, taken captive at Karbala, and her shrine in Damascus, a central mobilization symbol after being bombed repeatedly. The discourse of the need for men to engage in wars of gendered protection has become central to the construction of the Shrine Defenders.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> This can be contrasted with the lack of public visibility or discourse around the Afghan refugees who have fought in the wars, whose motivations have often been linked to acquiring citizenship for their families through their sacrifice.

A wave of cultural production has emerged extolling their virtues. Books delve into fighters' biographies, television shows and movies lionize their achievements, and documentaries highlight their sense of duty. Booklets are sold depicting fighters with large muscles, smiling coquettishly into the camera in photographs lifted from fighters' personal Instagram pages. They stand proudly on Syrian battlefields with large guns in poses reminiscent of Hollywood movies, wearing sunglasses shimmering in the sun. This stands in direct contrast to Iran-Iraq War imagery, which depicted soldiers as skinny, simply dressed, and devout, seated on dirt floors and looking away from the camera. Even Afghan fighters, many of whom were refugees in Iran who volunteered to fight in Syria at least in part inspired by the promise of receiving Iranian citizenship, don flashy sunglasses on the portraits etched in their tombstones.

At a funeral for an Afghan fighter that I attended in 2019, alongside several hundred others, held at Shah Abdol-Azim shrine south of Tehran, the cleric giving the sermon extolled the martyrs' sacrifice "in the path of Islam." He continued, his voice full of anger: "America must answer for their blood! For the sake of all this blood spilled in a Muslim country! Yell 'Death to America' for the sake of the martyrs," he continued, urging the crowd to share in his anger. "All of Ali's soldiers call for the destruction of Israel!" he continued, as the crowd roared. He noted that the fighter's brother had also died as a "martyr" in Afghanistan, without mentioning how, and as he started crying, provoking tears in the audience, he added: "Thanks to all the *velāyat-madār* people of Iran and Afghanistan. Their sacrifice shows the connection between the leaders of Iran and the oppressed people of Afghanistan!" As he emphasized the religious merit of the fighter's *Beyn ol-Haramein* literally means "between the shrines" and refers to a plaza connecting two holy sites, such as the tomb of Imam Hossein and Al-Abbas

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shrine in Karbala. The term has since been applied to various other new such plazas, such as around Shah Cheragh in Shiraz, which have been created through the shrine modernization project. The cleric referred to two Shia shrines in Damascus about 10 kilometers apart – suggesting that the fighters were not only defending shrines, but also fighting to expand them.

Funerals of the Defenders of the Shrine, which occurred regularly during my fieldwork throughout 2018 and 2019, often for fighters who had died years before but whose bodies had only recently been returned or identified, were a constant reminder to both Iranian and transnational Shia publics of the need for eternal vigilance against enemies. After the ceremony at the shrine, the crowd was taken on buses to the martyrs' section of Behesht-e Zahra cemetery outside south Tehran. We stood at the edge of the crowd around the grave, where female family members wailed as the fighter's body was lowered into the grave, beating their faces and tearing at their veils, their tears mixing with the dirt. An Iranian conscript soldier on guard nearby came up to ask a man nearby me at the edge of the crowd who the funeral was for. He answered the soldier that it was for a fighter killed by ISIS in Syria. The soldier looked shocked; "ISIS is still there?", the other man responded: "Yes! And if it weren't for the Shrine Defenders, they would have come to Iran!" He spoke, probably unaware that he was repeating Khamenei's words verbatim: "It was preventive that they went and fought there. If they didn't go there, we'd be fighting them here."

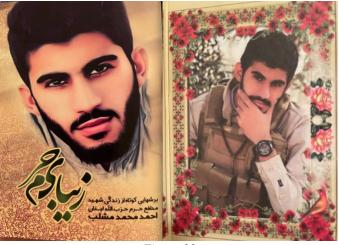


Figure 30

A booklet dedicated to the life of a martyred Shrine Defender from Lebanon, entitled, "The Beauty of the Shrine," sold at Basiji-affiliated bookstores in Iran. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Few narratives about the Shrine Defenders focused on hardship or the pain of those left behind. The tears of their relatives at funerals rarely made it into the slick documentaries about them, which featured polished interviews with family members who beamed with pride. No doubt, these different emotions sat uneasily upon many families. Their pain was personal, but their experience was shared and public. In Iran, it involved both Iranians and Afghans, and across the region, it included Lebanese, Syrians, Pakistanis, Indians, and others.<sup>44</sup> In the official Shrine Defenders narrative, this was a transnational Muslim fraternity of men of honor and pride.

The glamorization of Shrine Defenders even attracted prominent men who adopted the label without ever having been one. One such "pretender" was Mohsen Safaee, a burly Instagram star who became nationally famous. Safaee's Instagram posts featured him posing with large guns, taking aim at invisible ISIS fighters in the distance. Safaee became famous among young religious men not only for his war feats but for his muscular physique and his expletive-laden

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Brigades for South Asians were also organized in Iran; in Qom, I saw posters for the funeral of two Pakistanis who had died fighting in Syria.

Insta-live rants where he berated those who "dissed" him or Iran's government. At one point, he even invited a Los Angeles-based Iranian gay porn star to a live debate on his Instagram, which turned into a screaming match between the two (and garnered thousands of viewers in the process). As Safaee grew increasingly flamboyant in his public persona, rumors swirled that he had not actually fought in Syria. Eventually, his profile disappeared, and the truth emerged. Safaee was the son of a Revolutionary Guards commander of considerable power. Safaee had used this connection to travel to Syria as a religious tourist, which during the war had been banned for ordinary Iranians but allowed for those with Revolutionary Guards' connections. While visiting, he took posed pictures. The cultural cache and bravado of being a Shrine Defender was too hard for him to resist, a sign of how linked the publicized form of hypermilitarized masculinity was to notions of male strength and physical bulk, a far cry from the image of starving mystics that Basijis once cultivated. Although this depiction persisted in some narratives, it was complemented – if not overshadowed – by the widespread adoption of Shrine Defender "cool." These men were risk takers; they put their lives on the line to prevent future harm to Iran by putting their own bodies in front of the bullets.

Joining the war offered these men an opportunity to feel a measure of control at a time when Iran's economy was being buffeted by outside forces, by unpredictable US sanctions that caused economic effects beyond average Iranians' control. Alongside sanctions, Israeli attacks in Iran became more frequent in the 2010s; scientists were assassinated on Tehran's streets, and numerous explosions targeted military sites that were traced back to Israeli intelligence services. By being invited to take risks to defend the nation against ISIS, which in Iranian media was described as directly backed by the United States and Israel, these youths were invited to take control over their lives and nation. Alongside the need for pre-emptive warfare abroad, Iranian authorities increasingly stressed the need for the construction of a "Resistance Economy" that could defeat US sanctions. Ayatollah Khamenei and other officials highlighted the crucial role of young people in engaging in "jihadi" work. In this context, jihadi meant taking the kinds of risks that soldiers take on the battlefield in the domestic economy; investing in risky projects and supporting risky ventures in the hope that they could succeed and save Iran's economy, just as risky battlefield operations in the Iran-Iraq War that had cost thousands of lives had, in the end, helped the poorly-armed Iranian armed forces push back the stronger, invading Iraqi armies. This took place in the context of US sanctions that cut Iran's economy off from global investment and forced domestic companies to rely on domestic investors. In preceding decades, the Revolutionary Guards had transformed themselves from a paramilitary group fighting alongside the army to the largest economic force in the country. Beginning from their role in the country's post-war reconstruction, the Revolutionary Guards and its military commanders came to have a commanding stake in the economy.

The emergence of the commander-turned-manager into a central figure in the Iranian business world was the context in which "jihadi" came to refer to a style of economic management. This overlapped with the sell-off of large chunks of the state-owned economy in the mid-2000s under President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. An engineer by training, Ahmadinejad ran as a "populist champion of the poor" who promised to redistribute economic wealth.<sup>45</sup> But after initially freezing the privatization programs that had characterized Iranian authorities' economic policies since the 1990s, he later relaunched these neoliberal reforms, and as many as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Habibi, Nader. "How Ahmadinejad Changed Iran's Economy." *The Journal of Developing Areas*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2015, pp. 305–312.

2,000 public enterprises were targeted for privatization.<sup>46</sup> Portions of the sale were reserved for working-class and poor Iranians, to be distributed as cash handouts, but "ultimately most shares of privatized firms were purchased either by semi-governmental enterprises or by investors who had close ties to security forces or government officials," in the process dramatically contributing to the rise of the Revolutionary Guards as one of the nation's most important economic actors. Simultaneously, US sanctions weakened private enterprises and empowered the Revolutionary Guards, who controlled Iran's borders and thus stood to benefit from the rise of smuggling linked to the foreign crackdown on Iranian access to markets abroad. State subsidies were progressively cut, replaced with cash subsidies to the poor that, due to high inflation, quickly lost value. The welfare state was slowly but progressively dismantled while protections for workers were cut, introducing greater precarity for the working class. Well-connected members of the middle and upper class, meanwhile, were able to acquire unprecedented amounts of wealth, fueling widening social inequality, while new forms of conspicuous consumption and leisure fueled a "fantasy investment" in securing "the good life" – and the belief that it could be possible.<sup>47</sup>

Neoliberalism was not just an economic policy; alongside it, a culture of self-help flourished, encouraging ordinary people to have a can-do attitude and make their business dreams happen. But US sanctions dramatically increased the barriers to Iranians' personal economic success; in 2012, immediately after Obama imposed sanctions, the value of the Iranian rial fell by 2/3 in just one week. Five years later, when Trump re-imposed sanctions (after a brief easing following the Iran Nuclear Deal), the rial suffered a similar collapse in a similar time frame. Each time, the price of basic goods rapidly doubled or tripled, while salaries remained

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Wedeen, Lisa. *Authoritarian Apprehensions*: pp. 24; Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2012.

stagnant. In light of the structural instability that Iran's economy faced, the discourse of taking risks and relying on yourself offered a way to displace responsibility from the state on to the people. The neoliberal self-help model and the jihadi manager discourse may at first glance seem contradictory, since one stresses individual gain and the other self-sacrifice. But they were bridged in official discourse by stressing the ideological nature of Iran's economic growth – becoming a jihadi manager was not just about getting rich, it was linked to supporting a "Resistance Economy" against the United States. In contrast to the thousands of educated Iranian young people who migrate to work in the West every year, the argument framed remaining in Iran and contributing to the economy as a political act of sacrifice.

This can be seen through the phrases that Ayatollah Khamenei picks every year at Persian New Year, the first day of Spring, as slogans to motivate people over the year ahead; they become plastered on billboards, sprinkled into speeches by politicians, and dropped into news broadcasts. While in the 1990s and 2000s these yearly slogans often focused on religious and national messages like "unity" and "Hussein's Revolution" or celebrating specific figures like the Prophet Muhammad or Imam Ali, since the imposition of US sanctions in 2011, slogans have been uniformly economic, starting with the Year of "Economic Jihad," followed later by the Year of "Economy and Culture, with National Participation and Jihadi Management." By 2016, when Trump was elected, this morphed into the Year of "Resistance Economy," followed by the Year of "Support for Iranian Products," Year of "Expanding Production," Year of "Accelerating Production," and so on. Gone were the poetic and mystical themes of the past like "Morning of Light," "Strengthening Spirituality, or "Social Justice;" in their place were instructions to Iranians to convert themselves into a nation of jihadi economic managers.

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The transition from defender of the revolution to jihadi economic manager was not always an easy one for members of the Basij. The Resistance Economy discourse tended to address Iranians as an undistinguished mass; but the kind of tech entrepreneurs the state hoped to cultivate represented a middle- to upper-class ideal, especially given the expensive private testing many students rely on to pass standardized testing exams and the broad lack of economic mobility Iranians are faced with. The quotas for Basiji students helped ensure many ideologically-committed students found a way into Iranian universities. But once there, many Basiji students found themselves a minority on campus. And once they secured employment, Basijis often found themselves in the unenviable position of mediating between workers and employers. Ahmad Moradi, in his study of Basijis in Bandar Abbas, note that by giving them a stake in economic enterprises, many Basijis have been turned into managers - and thus enemies of workers.<sup>48</sup> The privatization of numerous state-owned entities aggravated this issue, especially as many ended up in the hands of Revolutionary Guards-linked figures. As companies linked to the Revolutionary Guards receive preferential treatment in getting contracts, they increasingly squeeze out smaller businesses, becoming a dominant economic force contributing to the concentration of wealth in people and companies close to the political elite. The Basij in these workplaces thus became complicit in a system criticized by workers, making clear the tensions of their claiming a revolutionary mantle of promoting social justice while promoting a state increasingly creating a model of militaristic crony capitalism.

This points to the broader cultural problem of the drive to turn Basijis into economic managers. From a young age, Basijis are encouraged to volunteer in underserved rural areas, in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Moradi, Ahmad. "The Basij of Neighbourhood: Techniques of Government and Local Sociality in Bandar Abbas." *Urban Neighbourhood Formations*, 2020, pp. 237–256.

particular constructing infrastructural services, especially through the Construction Jihad.<sup>49</sup> When these activities first began, in the 1980s, they were an implicit critique against the Shah's regime, which was accused by revolutionaries of having neglected rural areas. Reaching out to these areas was part of the revolutionary mission of uplifting the mostazafin, the oppressed. However, decades later, Basijis' continued service in rural areas highlighted the discrepancies between the promises of the Islamic Republic and its achievements; even as the state had massively bridged disparities between urban and rural areas and improved access to infrastructure and service, major gaps remained. Basijis explained their volunteer trips as part of their "revolutionary duty to help the poor, which politicians often shrug off," and in the process regularly critiqued (aspects of) the state. Ironically, "insofar as jihadi projects of the Basij are designed to render the *nizam* [the (political) system] desirable in the eyes of the public, in most cases, they orient Basijis towards highlighting the failure of the state to deliver its promises." <sup>50</sup> Given that justice was central to their collective organizing ethos, this put Basijis in a delicate position as promoters and enforcers of a state that increasingly shirked its commitment to social justice - and drew on the Basijis to crack down on those who demanded it.

At places like Paradise Hub, organized around the ideal of the Revolutionary Guards but which, unlike neighborhood or workplace Basij, existed as a bubble from the world around it, this irony was often palpable. As the director gave me a tour on a summer afternoon in 2020, we walked along the edges of the property. It extended far beyond the hub building, with tall, aged pine trees a reminder of the fact that before the revolution, it had been a home surrounded by a vast garden. The director said he had heard the complex was previously the house of one of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Moradi, Ahmad. "The contentious life of Basij revolutionary politics in poor neighbourhoods." *Oxford Middle East Review*, 2021, pp. 82-88.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Ibid 85

Shah's teachers, but he wasn't sure; all he knew is that it was confiscated after the Revolution. The complex had had different usages since then; not far from the hub building was an out-ofuse multi-floor fish restaurant closed a few years back, the seating area wrapped around an atrium with a large pool where fish had once swam for well-heeled patrons to pick out to grill. It was now full of broken glass. Belonging to the Revolutionary Guards, the property until a few years ago had been focused on service industry money-makers like restaurants and cafes.

As we passed the edge of the complex, I noticed that a collection of informal mud-brick shacks had been built along an exterior wall. When I asked the director what they were, he mentioned that these were home to a couple dozen squatters who had moved in a long time ago. "They're trying to kick them out now," he explained, with the vague "they" used in Persian to refer to the state or state-related entities, in this case probably the authorities from the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order organization that managed the property. "They stole the building [from the previous owners] and now they're complaining about some poor people taking over a corner of the property," he said, laughing.

It's one thing to notice irony; it is another to act on it. Even as the jihadi managers at Paradise Hub criticized the state, they were complicit in its actions. This complicity would become far more explicit two years after my visit, when Russia invaded the Ukraine. Among Russia's newest weapons were Iranian-made drones, testament to the success of Iranian technological projects developed at incubators like Paradise Hub. And as growing numbers of Iranian Revolutionary Guards commanders ended up in Russia, instructing counterparts how to use these drones, the combination of martial discipline and tech entrepreneurism that defined Defenders of the Shrine masculinity reached a zenith. It seemed only a matter of time before a Shia shrine needing defending would be discovered on Ukraine's battlefields.

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### Defenders of the Shrine, Defenders of the Nation

همهی دار و ندار را بردن، یه کویر مونده فقط و لب تشنه ... همه را لخت کردن و میگن: این پوشش چرا اسلامی نی؟

They took [away] all our possessions, only a desert is left, and thirsty lips ... They stripped everyone naked [i.e. they robbed everyone], And [yet] they say: why aren't you wearing Islamically-appropriate clothing?

-Rapper Hichkas, *Dastāshu Mosht Kardeh* ("Hands Curled into Fists"). The "thirsty lips" alludes to Imam Hussein, who is frequently described with this term before he was killed at Karbala.

The privileged youths who risked it all to fight on faraway battlefields and build start-ups to strengthen the Resistance Economy – and the state's narratives about them – were always aspirational for the vast majority of Iranians. The Basij as a whole remained an organization overwhelmingly staffed by poor and working-class youth, many looking for a way to get ahead and make connections in lieu of other paths for social mobility. The image of an ideal *Basij* masculinity was a way to attract young men to join the organization as promoters and enforcers of the state's ideology. When state-backed start-up founders were interviewed on TV about the risks they took and sacrifices they made to build successful companies, or Shrine Defenders spoke of the metaphysical convictions that drove them to fight against ISIS to interviewers whose eyes shone with admiration and respect, they created an image of what every Iranian man could be – even if the reality was that these "ideal men" were children of privilege, a fact mentioned in their biographies but simultaneously de-emphasized to universalize their stories. They were spotlighted in state media to give the nation heroes: attractive young men who channelled their commitment to Islam and to the nation into a "jihadi," risk-taking mentality on behalf of the Supreme Leader.

In certain ways, this was not so different from the old Basiji heroes like Majid Faridfar, the child actor who gave up everything to fight for the 1979 Revolution. But back then, the Basiji were seen as defenders of the downtrodden – the *mostazafin*. Originally referring to the

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disempowered in the Quran, the leftist atmosphere of the time inspired Ayatollah Khomeini to rework this term to reference the global oppressed masses, at whose vanguard he saw the revolutionary masses of Iranian society challenging the Shah's dictatorship.<sup>51</sup> But by the 2010s, the Basij were increasingly trained to see the nation's working-class, the downtrodden of society, as the enemy. But in contrast to the *Basiji* ideal which emphasized commitment to state authorities, other models of masculinity existed, many of which continued to challenge it. Chief among these was an ideal that continued to be central to working class masculinity – the heroic wrestlers, who could be seen as either *pahlevān* or *lāt / luti* and *arāzel owbāsh*.

In the late 2010s, as protests began to shake Iran's political system amid the worst economic crisis since the founding of the state, authorities began to draw on long-standing class prejudices to mobilize the Basij to repress dissent using the threatening figure of the  $ar\bar{a}zel$   $owb\bar{a}sh$  – and to manufacture consent among the middle class to support them. Coming only a decade after the 2009 protests, when the Basij had been wielded against secular middle class protestors calling for freedom and political liberty, the transformation of the Basij into a force protecting the middle class by repressing the poor – including in the worst bloodbath on Iran's streets in modern history – was a shocking transformation. In the final section, I argue that it was inseparable from the gendered anxieties the state played upon as it articulated an emergent landscape of the politics of masculinity.

In the mid-2010s, funerals for young men who died on the battlefields of Syria became an increasingly regular and public event at Imamzadeh Ali Akbar, and across the country. Surrounding the saint's tomb is a large graveyard, home to hundreds of martyrs from the Iran-Iraq War; amongst them are buried Iranian pilgrims who died in explosions while visiting shrines

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Moallem, Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister, pp 99-100.

in southern Iraq, as well as a nuclear scientist assassinated on a street not far away. The funerals of Shrine Defenders transform into religious rituals; the thousands gathered, dressed in black, mourn not only the fallen but also the lineage of fallen that the new martyr joins, materialized in the physical setting of the event itself. In 2019, I attended a memorial marking the one year anniversary of the death of a Basij member named Mohamad Hossein Haddadian, in the presence of dozens of top security officials who came to honor his sacrifice.



Figure 31

Outside the shrine where the memorial for Haddadian was held. Numerous police and security officials in attendance can be seen. (Photo: Alex Shams)

"We have 500 martyrs buried around this shrine," a speaker cried out as he looked out over the crowd, many wiping tears from their eyes. "Oh martyr!" he yelled, "You showed all those that look at the story of Ali Akbar at Karbala and don't believe that even in this day and age, you can become Ali Akbar as well!" Ali Akbar was Imam Hussein's teenage son, killed at Karbala alongside him. The speaker played on the fact that the shrine's saint shared his name to suggest a proximity that didn't exist, while in the process converting the shrine's saint, in the eyes of the audience, into a Karbala martyr.<sup>52</sup> The speaker underscored the link: "They are not crying for you, oh martyr! It is like they are crying for Imam Hussein when they cry for you!" Haddadian had served a volunteer tour of duty in Syria. The speaker triggered further weeping in the crowd by invoking the name of the Prophet's granddaughter, whose shrine near Damascus is the *raison d'être* for Iran's military intervention: "*Yā Zeinab*!" he yelled, provoking hundreds to loudly sob, throwing their arms up in grief.<sup>53</sup>

But Haddadian did not die fighting on a far-away battlefield. He returned safely to Iran, continuing as an active member of the Basij at Chizar. He died years later, only a few blocks away from the shrine. Basiji members had accompanied the police to break up a gathering of a dissident Sufi group that challenged state hegemony over religious interpretation. In the clashes that ensued, Haddadian was killed as the Sufis defended themselves. Haddadian was officially named "*Shahid Amniat o Velāyat*," Martyr of Security and *Velāyat*, referencing Iran's system of religio-political governance (*Velāyat-e Faqih*). The official pronouncement of "martyrdom" has legal, bureaucratic consequences, entitling his family to benefits. Haddadian was part of a new classification of the "martyr" category applied to Basijis and police who died fighting protestors.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> This was a frequent rhetorical device used in speeches at the shrine. Once, as I was exiting, I heard one attendee ask another: "Is this really Ali Akbar's shrine?" To which the other replied, "No, you idiot!" (*Na baba!*). Ali Akbar's shrine is in Karbala, where he was killed; for someone well-versed in the Islamic narrative, this would have been a preposterous question. But since clerics at the shrine so often played up this connection, it was hardly surprising that some attendees became confused.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> For a history of the development of the Sayyidah Zeinab shrine, see: Zaidi, Noor. "Making Spaces Sacred: The Sayyeda Zaynab and Bibi Pak Daman Shrines and the Construction of Modern Shi'a Identity." *University of Pennsylvania*, Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations, 2015.

No longer did the privileged men of north Tehran have to go all the way to Syria to die, though their training there could come in handy; they could become martyrs attacking fellow Iranians.

The speaker condemned the "deviant" Sufi groups who had killed Haddadian, lambasting them as  $Dar\bar{a}vish-e D\bar{a} eshi$  – ISIS-like Dervishes, making a comparison to ISIS fought against by Shrine Defenders in Iraq and Syria.<sup>54</sup> He lauded Haddadian for having become, through his martyrdom, "vāseteh" to Imam Zaman – an "intermediary" to the 12<sup>th</sup> imam, akin to a saint. But I must ask, he continued: "Where are our authorities (*ma 'sulin*)? Why is this blood being shed? But my belief is that this blood must be shed... All of these events [i.e. the Basiji battle with the Sufis] show us that the Basijis are here and present (*bachehhā-ye Hezbollah hastand*). *Labeyk ya Khāmenehi*!" For him, and for the hundreds, including many security officials, gathered at the event, Haddadian's help enforcing government repression against the Sufi order was testament to the fact that Iranians were ready to defend the Islamic Republic – even from each other.

In these clashes, the Basijis' efforts were supported by tech companies that had emerged on the local market. This became clear in 2019, when Iran was shaken by the most widespread protests the country had seen since the 1979 Revolution. In response to the announcement of a sudden reduction in gas subsidies, potentially leading to an increase of triple in price, protests broke out in cities, suburbs, towns, and villages across the country. In response, the government cut the internet. As rallies continued for a second day, and then a third – with many protestors attacking gas pumps, police stations, and banks at night, burning down hundreds – the government kept the internet off, paralyzing the economy. But the fourth day, Iranians woke up to find that domestically-produced apps and news websites were back online. The "domestic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Given that ISIS was a resolutely anti-Sufi organization that bombed their holy sites and persecuted Sufi devotees, the comparison was a ludicrous one. But it was repeated by numerous speakers at the event and in state-affiliated media in reference to the Gonabadi order after the clashes in Pasdaran in which Haddadian was killed.

internet" was working. Billboards appeared across Tehran advertising apps hitherto largely unknown, such as Balad, an Iranian alternative to the Waze navigation app. Drivers for Snapp, the Iranian version of Uber, switched to the new app *en masse*, as access to foreign apps was blocked. For 10 days, the foreign internet remained off while the domestic internet was on; it became clear that this was a dress rehearsal for a plan revealed two years later, to build a fully domestic internet protected by an electronic wall modeled on China's great electronic fire wall. The domestic technology start-ups had intervened to save the day, becoming complicit in the state's project to repress the protests and eradicate dissent without bringing the economy crashing to a halt.

Meanwhile, Basijis were deployed across the country to crush protests; in response, their centers, including mosques, were attacked by protestors across the country. Repression intensified; by some measures, 1,500 protestors were killed over the course of a week, the bloodiest slaughter in the streets in Iran's modern history. Out of the repression emerged dozens of new Basiji martyrs. They were widely celebrated in the media, their funerals publicized on state TV. <sup>55</sup> The framing of Basijis as protectors relied on the characterization of protestors as their opposite – as *eghteshāshgar* (rioters), and specifically in the resurrection of the working class *arāzel owbāsh* as a threatening figure bent on destroying the nation.

Since Iran is officially a democracy in which the right to protest is constitutionally guaranteed, the official narrative following the protests was that Basijis and police died trying to protect protestors from having rallies hijacked by "rioters," responsible for the deaths of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> These "martyrs" received extensive coverage in the days immediately following the protests. See: "Shohadā-ye Eghteshāshāt-e Akhir Bishtar Beshnāsim [Let's get to know the martyrs of the recent unrest better]." Defa Press, 27 Nov. 2019. <u>https://defapress.ir/fa/news/371222</u>/ المناسيم-تصاوير ; "Vedā '-ye Kamnazir-e Mardom-e Tehrān bā Paykar-e Shohadā-ye Modāfe '-ye Amniat [The Unique Farewell of the People of Tehran with the Body of the Martyrs of Defenders of Security]." Tasnim News, 28 Aban 1398 [19 Nov. 2019]. <u>https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/08/28/2143280/28/2143280</u>- وفيلم/28/2143280

"ordinary people." In the wake of the protests, security forces paid visits to victims' families urging them to publicly say their loved ones were killed by rioters. Doing so would allow the state to label their loved ones "martyrs," entitling them to state benefits.<sup>56</sup> Those who refused would have loved ones deemed "rioters" – casting suspicion on them for public mourning, which would constitute complicity in violence against the state and could lead to arrest. The state sought to define the political trauma by dividing the population in three: Basiji martyrs of security, ordinary people killed in riots, and rioters. At the heart were competing notions of masculinity.<sup>57</sup> In contrast to aspirational, respectable men who joined the Basij, took part in its religious rituals, and defended the state's religio-political program, "rioters" were working-class men who refused, taking part in anarchic protests and burning down symbols of authority.<sup>58</sup>

The identification of the "rioters" as *arāzel owbāsh* drew on a longer history of the state demonizing working-class masculinities. As discussed previously, alongside the *hey'at* and Basij have long existed the bodybuilders of the *zurkhāneh*. Working-class wrestlers have played a key role in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Iranian popular imagination, serving as neighborhood toughs that protect their turf and can embody ideal image of a strong, chivalrous man. But it was the tensions in this form of working class masculinity that the state used to demonize the protestors,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> See: Bahraini, Raha. "'Shahidsāzy' Rasmi az Koshtehshodegān-e E`terāzāt-e Ābān 98: Siāsati barāye Takrim-e Enfe'āl" [Official 'Martyr-Making' from the Slain of the Ābān 98 Protests: A Policy to Sacralize Passivity], BBC Persian, 10 Khordad 1399 [30 May 2020]. <u>https://www.bbc.com/persian/blog-viewpoints-52832253;</u> "Movāfeghat-e Rahbar-e Irān bā 'Shahid' Khāndan-e Ba`zi Koshtehshodegān-e `Eterezāthā-ye Ābān" [Approval of Iran's Leader with Labeling Some of the Slain of Ābān Protests as 'Martyrs'] BBC Persian, 13 Azar 1398 [4 Dec. 2019]. <u>https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-50659530</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> While existing work on martyrdom in the Muslim world often stresses Islamic textual references to this category, as the above makes clear, martyrdom is a political concept that emerges as part of a project to denote certain people martyrs and deny others access to this category.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Although thousands of women participated in the protests and dozens were killed in the repression, they were largely ignored in state media coverage or grouped into the category of "ordinary people," automatically discounted as having been part of violence. This is despite the fact that women did, in fact, take part in violence; I heard several accounts of young women involved in the organized lobbing of molotov cocktails aimed at police in West Tehran.

exploiting the collapsibility of three key categories - pahlevān, lāt / luti, and arāzel owbāsh - and in doing so stress the Basijis' role in protecting the nation from destruction at their hands.

In contemporary Iran, wrestlers continue to stand as symbols of idealized working class masculinity as *pahlevān*, while also having the potential to become *lāt* or *arāzel owbāsh* depending on the beholder. In the protests, several prominent wrestlers have been arrested among the thousands detained. They have added to the nearly ~200,000 incarcerated individuals, the vast majority of whom are working-class men on drug charges. As working-class men find avenues for mobility closed by economic conditions and paths to prison expanding amidst widened police presence, wrestlers targeted by the state have emerged as popular heroes.

Recent waves of protests initially took place during the daytime, but as the police violently repressed the rallies, they began taking place under the cover of night, focused on the poorer suburbs ringing the edges of Iranian cities. These dormitory suburbs were home to hundreds of thousands of working-class and poor young Iranians, many of whom commuted into major cities for work and were severely affected by rising inflation. By night, hundreds of gas stations, police headquarters, and banks were burned across the country, attacks on symbols of state power and presence in neighborhoods that felt otherwise abandoned. On state TV, these attacks were presented widely as evidence of the violence of the protestors, who were deemed "rioters" and linked to the image of *arāzel owbāsh*, who in the two decades before had been discussed on state TV as an anti-social urban menace to society, engaged in drug usage and gangsterism. Several public executions were even held in the late 2000s specifically of men deemed *arāzel owbāsh*, part of a campaign to label them responsible for the rise in pretty crime.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Shahram Khosravi has explored this campaign of demonization of *arāzel owbāsh* as a social type. See: Khosravi, Shahram. *Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

During the protests, daily announcements by politicians urged people to express their grievances in peaceful protest, seemingly ignoring the widespread violence that the original protests had been met with. The new narrative stressed the fact that these were not ordinary protests; they were riots, possibly instigated from abroad, led by criminal men from Iran's underworld. Tens of thousands were arrested for participating. Navid Afkari, a young man arrested during similar protests the year before, around this time emerged as a symbol of resistance against the state. A champion wrestler from a working-class background, Afkari was accused of having killed a security guard at a state institution during protests and was sentenced to death. His execution was to be carried out in 2020, less than a year after the 2019 protests.

In TV broadcasts, authorities positioned Afkari as a cold-blooded murderer who had carried out his crime amidst the riots, painting him as an *arāzel owbāsh* hooligan. They stressed that violent instigators were at fault for the deaths that occurred at protests, highlighting the innocence of the police and *Basiji* who merely sought to "protect people's right to express their opinions." The sentence handed out to Afkari was seen by many as a warning sign for working-class men across the country. Afkari himself thought as much; in a final recording before his death, he claimed authorities were "looking for a neck to hang their rope on." In the process, Afkari became a hero to millions. His name became not only a popular hashtag but a resistance slogan appearing on graffiti across the country. But Afkari was not a "martyr;" instead, graffiti labelled him "*Pahlevān* Navid," Navid the Champion. The term "martyr," co-opted by the state, no longer serves its function when referring to anti-state protestors. Instead, the old image of a wrestling hero took its place.



Figure 32

The poster reads: "Goodbye, hero," alongside a picture of Navid Afkari. This image was circulated online.

In order to justify relying on the Basij to repress working-class protestors, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei even redefined one of the key terms of Iranian political discourse since 1979. The revolution had been waged, according to its supporters, on behalf of the "*mostazafin*," the downtrodden. This Quranic term for the weak had been re-appropriated to have a class connotation in revolutionary Iran, meaning those who had been excluded from the prosperity of the Shah's pre-1979 elite society. The official name of the Basij paramilitary group itself is "Forces of Resistance of the Downtrodden," utilizing the word "*mostazafīn*."

However, amidst this new wave of strongly class-based protests, Ayatollah Khamenei sought to clarify the phrase's "real" meaning. In a public meeting with Basij groups just weeks after the 2019 protests, Khamenei said that in the past some had mistakenly thought "downtrodden" meant the poor or "vulnerable." He argued that this was incorrect; according to the Quran, he said, it referred to the politically downtrodden, those who would "inherit the Earth" in the future by fighting for an Islamic "caliphate on Earth" and the "triumph of Islam." <sup>60</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> "*Ma`anā-ye Haqiqi-ye 'Mostazafin' az Manzar-e Qorān Chist?*" [What is the true meaning of 'Mostazafin' according to the Quran?]. *Khamenei.ir*, Nov. 2019, <u>https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=44276</u>

It was those who opposed global imperialism, he argued, that were the downtrodden of the Earth. Khamenei's speeches previously configured the protests as part of a conspiracy by imperialist states to undermine Iran. This new framing highlighted Iran's role as an anti-imperialist state at the vanguard of defending global Islam. Addressing the crowd of Basij, who were being celebrated for taking part in the recent repression, framing "downtrodden" to mean those who fight on behalf of Iran's political system was a striking innovation, one that could position the Islamic Republic's supporters as righteous victims even as they supported a bloodbath by security forces.

But the images of victims that flooded Iranian social media in the days, weeks, months, and years following the crushing of the 2019 protests belied Khamenei's claims that the security forces were the downtrodden. One of the most iconic images was that of a young boy who had been shot and killed, his body laying in a pool of his own blood. The blurry image – its low quality revealing the cheapness of the smart phone that captured it – revealed that at time of his slaying, the victim was wearing a shirt that read *Yā Hossein*, "Oh Hussein!" The shirt appeared to be of the kind passed out by religious *hey 'at*, a sign of the young victim's participation in neighborhood religious rituals. Identified as Muhammad Mohsenpour, he was a 17-year-old boy from a working class family from Khorramshahr. The city is famous across Iran because its liberation in 1982 signalled the turning of the tide of the war against the Iraqi invasion – in large part due to the support of volunteer Basiji soldiers. On his gravestone, his family described him as *Pesar-e Irān*; a "son of Iran." Soon after, authorities replaced the grave with one describing him as a "martyr," attempting to re-narrativize him as a victim of "rioters." <sup>61</sup> But the picture of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> "Bonyād-e Shahid Sang-e Qabr-e Yeki az Koshtehshodegān-e `Eterāzāt-e Ābān 98 rā bedun-e Ejazeh-ye Khānevādehsh Taghir Dād [The Martyrs' Bonyad Changed the Grave Stone of One of the Slain of the Ābān 98 Protests Without His Family's Permission]." Iran International, 8 Feb. 2022, www.iranintl.com/202202083523.

his killing, and its spread on social media, came to stand in for the perceived betrayal of the Basijis of the downtrodden they were sworn to protect.



Figure 33

A stencil on a Tehran street depicting Muhammad Mohsenpour, reading: "We didn't give our lives to be complicit [in the killings by] praising the murderous regime." (Source: Khiaban Tribune)

# Chapter 5: Contesting Hussein's Revolution: Power and Resistance in Shia Muslim Ritual

امشب شب عشق است ای دل، ای جان به عبادت برخیز ای عاشق یز دان منشین، ای اهل عدالت بر خیز از دین شما بیز ارم، دینی که فقط بهتان است اسلام سر اپا تزویر ، اسلام ابوسفیان است داغ همه یار انم، با آنکه به جان سنگین است جان دادن سرخم بهتر ، از زندگی ننگین است

Tonight is a night of love, oh my heart, oh my spirit, for worship, awaken! Oh lover of the divine, do not tarry, oh lovers of justice, awaken! I loathe your creed, a creed that has become full of lies An Islam that is from head-to-toe deception, the Islam of hypocrites The grief of losing my friends is heavy on my soul But giving up one's life is better than a life of shame

— Noheh poem written for Besat Hey'at for Ashura 2022. Iranian censors rejected the poem and banned the hey'at from public performance.

When I first began telling friends in Iran that I was traveling to the Arbaeen pilgrimage in Iraq, many voiced surprise: "Why would you go all the way there to see a show the [Iranian] government is putting on?" I learned that many Iranians critical of their government saw Arbaeen as an invention of the Islamic Republic. For them, it was yet another religious occasion co-opted by the state to attract people to its brand of politicized religion. They resented what they imagined were billions of Iranian rials flowing into Iraq to put on a spectacle of Iranian state power. In the weeks before my trip, it was not hard to see why they thought so. Between Ashura and the Arbaeen holiday 40 days later, Iranian TV and radio hosted a blitz of advertisements encouraging Iranians to head across the border to Najaf for the five-day walking pilgrimage to Karbala, joining the more than 20 million pilgrims who take part yearly.<sup>1</sup> "Hamāseh bozorg dar rāh asst!" screamed a billboard in central Tehran depicting two pilgrims walking, a man in black

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Ashura marks the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the Islamic month of Muharram and is linked to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the Battle of Karbala in the 8<sup>th</sup> century; Arbaeen marks the 40<sup>th</sup> day after his death, a traditional mourning anniversary in Middle Eastern faith traditions.

with a green keffiyeh around his neck beside a woman in black chador: "The great epic is on the way!"<sup>2</sup>

Official Iranian media stresses that the entire pilgrimage is free, since local Iraqis provide food, drink, and lodging as a display of devotion to Imam Hussein, the martyred saint that is the pilgrimage's *raison d'être*. The ads give the impression of a pilgrimage dominated by Iranians in which Iraqis play the role of hosts in the background. Images of massive crowds walking on the Najaf-Karbala road are illustrated with captions from politicians' speeches: "The epic of Arbaeen shows the power of Islam to the Arrogants [i.e. the imperialist powers]" or "Arbaeen is a 20 million-person display of Husseini strength and support for *Velāyat-e Faqih*." <sup>3</sup> According to this official narrative, the large pilgrim numbers reveal not only devotion to Imam Hussein but to Iran's Islamic Revolution and its leaders, said to carry the "Husseini" message of global revolution against injustice into the present. Some even describe pilgrims as Iran's "soldiers" in the never-ending conflict with the US, UK, and Israel, accompanied by images of crowds along a dusty, and otherwise deserted, road.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The phrase is a play on words, as the Persian phrase "*dar rāh asst*" literally means "is on the road" but is colloquially used to mean, "is on the way." Here the phrase can be read in two ways: an exciting event is taking place on the Arbaeen road that pilgrims walk as well as that an exciting event is about to take place. <sup>3</sup> *Velāyat-e Faqīh* means "Guardianship of the Jurist" and refers to the religio-political ideology that underpins the Islamic Republic of Iran's form of government, in which the unelected Supreme Leader is considered the ultimate authority in both political and religious realms, above the elected president. For these titles, see:

<sup>&</sup>lt;u>https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4447624/۲</u>حماسه-%DB%B0حماسه-<u>DB%B0-میلیونی-اربعین-مانور -قدرت-حسینی-و -ولایت-مداری-است https://www.isna.ir/news/1401061108785/می-دهد/DB%B2</u>



Figure 34

Pilgrims walk along the Arbaeen route in southern Iraq. (Photo: Alex Shams)

The reality on the ground, however, could not be more different. For miles and miles, hundreds of thousands of young Iraqis line the road passing out snacks and refreshments from simple structures called *mowkeb*. In the mornings they invite pilgrims to eat bread, eggs, and tea; in the afternoon, they bring out large cauldrons of meat or bean-based stews followed by thick, sweet Iraqi coffee; and in the evenings desserts like dates covered in tahini and coconut flakes or sweet vermicelli covered in condensed milk (*sha`ariyah*) and platters of fruit. "*Yā zuwār! Shārku min al tabaro`āt! Mowāfagin inshāllah! Mansurin!*" they yell, smiling to an unceasing crowd of millions slowly drifting forward. "Oh pilgrims! Take your share of these offerings! You will be successful, God willing, you will be victorious!" At some *mowkeb*, people even offer massages.

Iraq's Shia-majority regions empty out weeks before as millions move to the *mowkeb* to prepare and millions more take to the road toward Imam Hussein's shrine in Karbala.<sup>4</sup> The joy

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Iraqis, who are about 80% of the total pilgrims taking part, walk from wherever they are toward Karbala. Iranians, for the most part, arrive to Najaf and from there walk along the highway to Karbala.

and excitement is palpable, as people give and take freely, making friends easily over shared meals as capitalism seems to melt away for two weeks. "On the entire road, you can't pay for anything," I was told many times before going, and this was exactly how it was. The procession resembled less an army than a festival.



Figure 35

Left: Boys offer lunch. Right: Members of a mowkeb give massages to pilgrims. (Photo: Alex Shams)

In contrast to the picture of somber religiosity depicted in Iranian state media, the mood along the road is carnivalesque, as millions walk, eat, drink, and engage in voluntary acts of care for each other. Although Arbaeen is technically a mourning ritual, the days of walking are defined by a mood of exuberance. And while Iranian authorities describe it as a display of their own power, their own presence is extremely marginal – a drop in the ocean compared to the grassroots organization spearheaded by thousands of Iraqi *hey'at* religious associations, who spend the year collecting money and then leave their neighborhoods during Arbaeen to provide for pilgrims fulltime. Iranian state depictions of Arbaeen reveal how they wish the holiday was – a celebration of their own power – rather than what it really is: a grassroots event by and for Iraqis in which visitors from around the world are welcomed guests. Far from a spectacle of their dominance, as friends in Iran assumed, Arbaeen is a challenge to the state's narrative that it

dominates Shia Muslim communities worldwide. Arbaeen is, indeed, "another world," as many said; but it is one beyond the Iranian government's control, where a vision of Muslim community is articulated that contrasts sharply with the top-down model of Iran's leadership and ideology.

In the chapters until now, I have analyzed how the Iranian state has expanded its control over Shia Muslim shrines across Iran as well as in neighboring Iraq, examining the economic, political, and social implications of this process. In this chapter, I examine how spaces of dissidence and alterity continue to flourish in Shia Muslim religious rituals despite Iranian authorities' attempts to monopolize their interpretation and develop religious hegemony over global Shia Muslim communities. I look at two examples of temporary spaces linked to religious rituals – the Arbaeen pilgrimage in Iraq and Ashura chanting at independent *hey'at* in the Iranian city of Yazd – to examine how resistance persists within the Shia Muslim religious tradition.

I argue that these spaces challenge state authority by continuing to draw inspiration from the story of Imam Hussein resisting injustice, which has become central to Iranian state narrative, but in doing so highlight alternative conceptions of a transnational Shia sphere that is grassroots, independently organized, and often (but not always) fiercely critical of the Iranian state. Through these rituals, they create heterogenous spaces and build horizontal connections that defy state authorities' visions of a perfectly-ordered society, as expressed in state management of shrines in the chapters until now. I make this argument by focusing not on Shia Muslim "liberation theology," as most scholars of Iranian religion have done previously, but by examining material and social practices of the rituals themselves – not as the enactment of textual imagination but as lived practices that materially create revolutionary possibilities. The connections created through the rituals become key to building communities of defiance that challenge state hegemony and dominance by creating shared visions of alternative orders, even if briefly.

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I begin by providing a brief sketch of Shia Muslim rituals associated with the Ashura holiday and how Iranian intellectuals, clerics, and activists have drawn on them to theorize the possibilities of revolution. I examine how the discourse of "Hussein's revolution" was reinterpreted as a plan of action by grassroots *hey'at* religious associations in Iran during the 1978-9 Iranian Revolution, before analyzing how this discourse and these associations were subsequently co-opted by the Iranian state. I then examine how independent *hey'at* in Iran have resisted this process, focusing on the public performance of protest Ashura *noheh* poetry in the Iranian city of Yazd. I then cross the border to Iraq to analyze the Arbaeen walking pilgrimage. I first provide a brief history of the ritual and its association with political activism in Iraq. I then examine the experiences of Iranian pilgrims and Iraqi hosts on the Arbaeen journey to highlight how this 'carnivalesque' ritual produces horizontal connections between participants and temporarily creates a more democratic religious public sphere – and how its existence serves as a perpetual challenge to any single actor's hegemony over Shia Islam.

## **Ritual as Transformative Process**

The Shia Muslim religious rituals of Muharram commemorate the events surrounding the 7<sup>th</sup> century Battle of Karbala. These rituals are directed, conducted and participated in by ordinary people, making them a form of popular culture and thus a battlefield in which tensions and contradictions can emerge between different visions of how to understand the sacred past as well as how to interpret its meaning in the present.<sup>5</sup> Muharram rituals have historically functioned both as public spaces bringing together large masses of people as well as spaces directed by states to produce and re-produce their own power.<sup>6</sup> Ritual is not merely an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'." *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley, Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 347–361.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For a history of these rituals, see Moazzen, Maryam. "Rituals of Commemoration, Rituals of Self-Invention: Safavid Religious Colleges and the Collective Memory of the Shi'a." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2016, pp. 555–

"instrument of social control" but can operate as a context in which power relations are contested "by acceptance, resistance, negotiated appropriation, and redemptive reinterpretation of the hegemonic order." <sup>7</sup> The metaphors that define rituals are open to reinterpretation by participants, allowing them to give rise to "new understandings" and "enabling actors to negotiate the self, the social and the cultural." <sup>8</sup> Religious rituals can open the possibility of resistance even as they can also reinscribe the status quo, operating as spaces of rebellion or carnivalesque rupture wherein new realities emerge and life beyond disappear amidst "free and familiar contact between people," especially because they are defined by a "irrepressible, unsilenceable energy," that mock the solemn tone of official culture.<sup>9</sup> All these valences are possible at all times.

Shia mourning rituals thus create a space in which the state not only promotes a specific vision of faith, society, politics and how they relate to each other, but also in which participants can critique dominant power structures. In contexts like post-1979 Iran, where political resistance is highly policed, they are an outlet of alternative thought and action, as popular rituals compete with official rituals for visibility and existence.<sup>10</sup> Because the "Karbala Paradigm" has been central to how the Iranian state and its supporters construct its legitimacy, challenges within the context of these rituals and narratives strike at the heart of its legitimacy, wielding more

<sup>575;</sup> Rahimi, Babak. Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590-1641

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See Torab, 24; Bell 1992: 195–196.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Torab, 24.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1984, pp. 7-8, 65-6, 92; Lachmann, Renate. "Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture." Translated by Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis. *Cultural Critique*. No. 11, Winter, 1988-1989, pp. 115-152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For more on the interplay of politics and rituals in contemporary Iran, see: Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam. Sāken-e Khiābān-e Tehrān: Masā'el va Chāleshhā-ye Dindāri dar Jomhuri Eslāmi [Resident of Iran Street: The Problems and Challenges of Religiosity in the Islamic Republic]. Nashr-e Armā, 2019.

power and importance than critiques expressed through non-religious idioms.<sup>11</sup> This is especially true among the large swathe of Iranian society that identifies as religious, the central social class that the state claims to represent and whose beliefs, practices, and rituals are the focus of this dissertation.<sup>12</sup> While the post-1979 Iranian state claims to act on behalf of all Iranians, in practice it has focused on its legitimacy among religious Iranians (while simultaneously aiming to turn all Iranians into religious Iranians and supporters of its political ideology).

Iranian sociologist Mohsen Hessam Mazaheri has noted that prior to 1979, because Shia Muslim religious society in Iran viewed themselves as being under threat from the Shah's policies, they developed strategies for survival that isolated them from society and pushed them to focus inward.<sup>13</sup> After the Revolution, even as they emerged victorious in defining the state that emerged and the national symbols that would to represent it, they continued to feel a sense of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Scot-Aghaie, Kamran. "The Karbala Narrative: Shi'i Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s." *Journal of Islamic Studies*. Vol. 12, No. 2, 2001, pp. 151-176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> It is a notoriously difficult exercise to identity levels of religiosity in any society, much less to compare across societies, given how piety is interpreted in different ways by different people. It could refer alternatively to personal belief or to attendance in religious rituals, for example, and can vary dramatically from person to person. In this dissertation, I use the term "religious" to reflect how the concept functions in Iranian society. It describes a social class (mazhabi) that, broadly speaking, is Shia Muslim, participates in hey'ati culture and observes certain social norms such as de-emphasizing gender mixing, veiling for women, and avoiding public consumption of liquor. Being "religious" is a self-identification but also one based on its legibility by other members of this social group, who can be of any socio-economic, ethnic, or geographic background. The consolidation of "religious Iranian society" as a category with shared social norms across Iran is a product of the 1979 Revolution and in particular the 1980s Reconstruction Jihad, which connected urban and rural regions to an unprecedented extent and, through electrification, facilitated the emergence of a shared popular culture linked through Iranian state TV and radio broadcasts. This led to the spread of certain social norms previously associated with particular regions and classes such as the black chador for women - among self-identified religious people as well as the broader intelligibility of a single "religious" identity across national space. It is important to note that being religious does not imply a specific political belief; while most of the people that support the state's ideology can be identified as religious, many religious Iranians oppose the state or specific policies on a variety of grounds, including disagreement over its cooptation of religion or disagreement with the gender norms it promotes such as womens' expanded access to education, work, and the public sphere more broadly. Among religious Iranians, thus, one can identify a divide between "revolutionary religious" (mazhabi enqelābi) and "traditional" or "ordinary religious" (mazhabi sonnati, mazhabi ma'muli), among many other divides. For more on this specific divide in the context of gender norms, see: Shams, Alex. "Revolutionary Religiosity and Women's Access to Higher Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran." Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, vol. 12, no. 1, 2016, pp. 126–138.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam. Sāken-e Khiābān-e Tehrān: Masā'el va Chāleshhā-ye Dindāri dar Jomhuri Eslāmi [Resident of Iran Street: The Problems and Challenges of Religiosity in the Islamic Republic]. Nashr-e Armā, 2019.

insecurity, perceiving themselves as being in a continuing battle for survival from forces beyond Iran as well as continued domestic opposition. Faced with the state's broad failure to make nonreligious people more religious (except in outward appearance, by following newly-introduced laws), he argues, authorities resorted to promoting and pushing for public rituals that could give the impression of dominance. Rituals are seen by authorities as a key method to ensure their dominance because of the appearance of "unanimity" they create, pushing society to follow a "public transcript" that visibly reproduces state power and mass obedience.<sup>14</sup> The promotion of certain rituals and specific modes of performance and interpretation has thus been central to state articulation of ideology as well as its cultural project to imagine and produce a modern Islamic society.<sup>15</sup> It is also been key for asserting the dominance of the Islamic Republic's brand of political religiosity, and attracting religious Shia Muslims who distance themselves from *Velāyat-e Faqih* to embrace the state's vision as their own political ideology.

But as we will see, rituals are not always so easily controllable from above. Rituals are a form of "symbolic communication" that are always "linked to status claims and the interests of participants." As such, they are open to "contextual meanings" – they are not based on enacting beliefs, but instead are themselves embedded in the entire world of "collective representation" that we live in.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, "when beliefs are taken to be prior to ritual action, the latter is considered as derivative and secondary, and is ignored or undervalued in its own right as a medium for transmitting meanings, constructing social reality, or, for that matter, creating and bringing to life the cosmological scheme itself."<sup>17</sup> But ritual is both "activity and the fusion of

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Scott, James C. Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. Yale University Press, 1990.
 <sup>15</sup> Scot-Aghaie, Kamran. The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran. University of Washington Press, 2004, pp. xi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Tambiah, Stanley J. *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*. Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 125-30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ibid

thought and activity," and their coming together in the same person.<sup>18</sup> Because participants "appropriate the social schemes of the hegemonic order in terms of an individual redemption," they may as a result end up empowered, as these "are the very definitions of power, personhood, and the ability to act." <sup>19</sup> As a result, "they afford a great diversity of interpretation in exchange for little more than consent to the form of the activities," and "simultaneously involve both consent and resistance, misunderstanding and appropriation."

Rituals are how we interpret the world. And they are also, sometimes, how we change the world. Shia Muslim rituals, interpreted as they are around themes of resistance to injustice, have been a challenge for authorities to fully control. Commemorative rituals have for centuries been central to fostering a sense of Shia identity - as well as for Shia leaders to assert their power. But this assertion of power is always a performance – a desire to project a representation of reality, not reality itself. And as a performance, it is always open to contestation by those involved, a stage on which they can challenge authorities and ideologies that claim power. Even when people cannot openly and directly contest their subordination, they find ways to make spaces where they can voice their discontent, in the process strengthening ties between like-minded people who refuse to be subordinated. It is not always easy to see resistance, particularly in places like Iran where open dissenters are jailed or worse. When "the powerless are obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful," and when "the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery," we must look for forms of resistance in ways unique to cultures and histories.<sup>20</sup> Dissent may not always look like how we imagine it from the outside. Hence it is key for us not only to examine the "public script" of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Bell, Catherine M. Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice. Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Ibid 217-8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Scott, James C. Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. Yale University Press, 1990, pp. xii.

government-backed rituals, but also to examine the "hidden transcripts" that Shia Muslims maintain, away from state-led rituals and mediatized spectacles.<sup>21</sup>

#### Ashura: From Religious Tale to Political Model

Ashura commemorates the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the Islamic month of Muharram. It marks the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD, when the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussein, was killed along with much of his family and followers by the Caliph Yazid. Hussein openly resisted Yazid, who was leader of the Muslim community, because he considered him a corrupt tyrant. The Caliph's forces chased Hussein to the plains of Karbala, where they killed and enslaved his family. This story became central to the Shia Muslim tradition and gave rise to acts of remembrance that define the faith today, such as visiting the tombs of Imam Hussein (in the Iraqi city of Karbala) and of his family (across the region). In the ten days leading up to Ashura, as well as on Arbaeen, the 40<sup>th</sup> day anniversary, Shia Muslim worshipers around the world carry out large processions, chant mourning poetry (*noheh*), and engage in ritual chest-beating as forms of commemoration.<sup>22</sup> These acts are at the heart of the Shia creed and marks it as distinct from Sunni Muslim traditions, which generally do not commemorate the event.

In the last half-century, numerous scholars have portrayed the story of Ashura as not only a religious story about standing up for divine truth, but also a political narrative centered around fighting for justice in the face of oppression.<sup>23</sup> Within this "liberation theology," some have

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> These rituals generally share certain features worldwide but are also extremely diverse in their local iterations and often include non-Shias as well as non-Muslims. For more on ritual observances, see: Cole, Juan R. *Roots of North Indian Shī'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859.* Oxford University Press, 1989; Ruffle, Karen G. *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shiism.* University Of North Carolina Press, 2011; Scot-Aghaie, Kamran. *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran.* University of Washington Press, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> In 1981, Anthropologist Michael Fischer coined the term "Karbala Paradigm," arguing for the central importance of this event as a framework of religious and political action in light of the Iranian Revolution. Scholars like Alshamary have since noted that the Iranian Revolution has overshadowed other contexts as well as alternative ways of imagining the relationship of Shia religion and politics. See: Alshamary, Marsin R. "Prophets and Priests:

argued that Shia Islam is at its heart a "religion of the oppressed" and essentially a "revolutionary" creed.<sup>24</sup> This interpretation has been inspired by events in Iran, especially the Iranian Revolution.<sup>25</sup> These scholars have argued that ritual action and political ideology were articulated in tandem, a reworking of Shia Muslim theology through revolutionary practice. The post-1979 Iranian state has adopted this interpretation as the main historic narrative of its own creation. In this section, I explain how this interpretation came to emerge.

The modern politicization of the holiday in Iran can be dated to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> As part of his broader crackdown on the public role of religion, Iran's authoritarian Reza Shah banned public Muharram commemorations in the 1920s. These commemorations bring large crowds into the street in processions characterized by emotional scenes of mourning and chanting, organized by grassroots *hey'at* religious associations at the neighborhood level. This ban reflected the potential of these rituals to become frenzied public gatherings, as well as the probable fear that dissident clerics – who found themselves broadly targeted by Reza Shah's "modernizing" legal reforms – could use the rituals to whip up anti-government sentiment.<sup>27</sup>

Religious Leaders and Protest in Iraq." Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Political Science, 2020, pp. 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> See Dabashi, Hamid. *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest.* Harvard University Press, 2011 as well as Rahimi's critique of this interpretation in Rahimi, Babak. "'The Spirit of the Spiritless World': The Shi'a Rituals of Muharram and the 1979 Iranian Revolution" in Goldstein, Warren S. (ed). *Religion in Rebellions, Revolutions, and Social Movements.* Routledge, 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Scot-Aghaie, Kamran. "The Karbala Narrative: Shi'i Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s." *Journal of Islamic Studies*. Vol. 12, No. 2, 2001, pp. 151-176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Previously, the "politics" of the hey at associations tended to be associated with their alignment with particular Sufi strands, in particular the Heydari-Nematollahi division. State repression of the hey at *en suite* beginning in the 1920s, introduced a new kind of political dynamic. See: Masoudi Nejad, Reza. "Urban Violence, the Muharram Processions and the Transformation of Iranian Urban Society: The Case of Dezful." In Freitag, Ulrike, et al (ed.) *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*. Berghahn Books, 2015: pp. 91–110.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> This can be seen as part of a broader assertion of centralization of power in the hands of the state that not only targeted religious associations, but also included banning independent civil society, disarming the nomadic groups, and generally repressing any potentially independent source of power in society. See: Cronin, Stephanie. *Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran: Opposition, Protest and Revolt, 1921-1941.* Palgrave, 2010.

The *hey'at* brings together large groups of young men organized around honor and neighborhood loyalty. Disciplining them was important for asserting the unrivaled power of the central state. Police carried this out with violence, including massacres.<sup>28</sup> After the ban was lifted in the 1940s, the rituals publicly reappeared, but they did not immediately take on a political role. Mohammed Reza Shah, who took over from his father after his 1941 overthrow, did not take an overtly combative stance toward Islam's public presence. He instituted a broader rapprochement with religious institutions, emphasizing the need for unity in the face of the perceived Communist threat.

Beginning in the early 1960s, however, Muharram rituals experienced an unprecedented politicization tied to dissident cleric Ruhollah Khomeini's efforts to challenge government policies from his pulpit in the shrine city of Qom. On Ashura 1963, during a speech to a large crowd assembled for Ashura at Feyzieh religious seminary, Khomeini condemned the Pahlavi regime's "White Revolution" and invited his followers to openly oppose government policy. Security forces attacked the gathering, and by year's end Khomeini was forced into exile. With open dissent banned, numerous *hey'at* in Qom transformed their rituals into political gatherings.<sup>29</sup> Muharram rituals are traditionally solemn occasions in which a *maddah* chanter recites *noheh*, poetry that emotionally recalls the Battle of Karbala. It is intended to trigger intense emotional reaction, especially crying, in the listeners, Subsequently, poems are recited as participants rhythmically beat their chests. In 1963, *hey'ats* developed new poems that fit the rhythm of traditional *noheh* but with contemporary political messages. These messages became

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> The violence committed against worshipers took place across the country. One example is a massacre at a procession in Mazanderan attested to by British sources: British Library, 'Report by Mr. Mallett, Counsellor at His Majesty's Legation, on Local Conditions in Khurasan, Mazenderan, Gorgan, and Isfahan', Persia: Internal Affairs 1931–8, Oct. 24 1935, L/PS/12/3404, PZ 8877, IOR.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> For more on this period see: Scot-Aghaie, Kamran. *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran.* University of Washington Press, 2004, pp: 79-81.

embedded in the ritual itself, producing shades of meaning linking mourning for Imam Hussein to mourning for the present state of his followers. Among the slogans in the mourning rituals were:

> قم گشته کربلا، هر روز عاشورا فیضیه قتلگاه، خون جگر علما

*Qom has been transformed into Karbala, Every day is Ashura Feyzieh [has become] a slaughterhouse, blood [flowing] from the livers of the clerics.* <sup>30</sup>

This invocation of politics in the 1963 rituals has been identified as the first appearance of "revolutionary hey'at" (hey'at engelābi) in Iranian society.<sup>31</sup> Their use of religious rituals to protest state violence offered a model for political action in an otherwise tightly-controlled society. Drawing on leftist dialectic theory, numerous intellectuals began to interpret the Ashura story as a cultural narrative that spoke to a revolutionary potential within Shia Islam, and they portrayed mourning rituals as a space that offered political possibilities. Most notable was Ali Shariati, a Paris-trained sociologist of Islam. In his work, he identified two central currents in the history of Shi'ism, one revolutionary and one reactionary.<sup>32</sup> On one side, he argued, was Red Shi'ism, the revolutionary Shi'ism of the masses that viewed Imam Hussein's sacrifice as a struggle against oppression. On the other side stood Black Shi'ism, the religion of traditional clerical elites and political leaders that used faith to control people and prevent them from questioning the social order. Shariati saw Muharram rituals as a central site for the articulation of these variant approaches. He argued that in Black Shi'ism, the mourning rituals were a device for authorities to give people an emotional release to distract them from their problems. In Red Shi'ism, in contrast, the rituals were a way of commemorating revolutionary struggle.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Mazaheri, Resāneh Shi'eh, 175

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Ibid 177

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> This analysis is based on two of his most influential works: his essay *Red Shi'ism vs. Black Shi'ism* as well as his book expanding on these themes further, *Tashayo` `Alavi va Tashayo` Safavi* (Alavi Shiism and Safavid Shiism).



Figure 36

Mourners engage in chest-beating at the Karbalai hey'at in central Tehran, 2018. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Shariati's views provided an intellectual underpinning to the religious currents of Iran's 1970s protest movement. They were key in motivating rebellious clerics to voice opposition to the clerical elite, who had otherwise largely avoided criticism of the Shah's regime. Shariati popularized the slogan, "Every day is Ashura, every land is Karbala," arguing that the battle for justice is everywhere and at all times and that Ashura was a roadmap for resistance.

Revolutionary clerics drew on these arguments to encourage *hey'at* to openly oppose the Shah and his allies.<sup>33</sup> In a speech regarding the 1978 invasion of Lebanon by Israel, a state friendly with the Shah, revolutionary cleric Morteza Mottahari argued that Muslims should choose their position by considering how Imam Hussein would react if faced with the commander who killed him at Karbala, Shemr. Mottahari explained that if Hussein were alive, he might say:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Ibid 192, 196-99.

If you want to hold mourning [ceremonies] for me and hit your chests and whip [your backs], the slogan of today should be Palestine. The Shemr of today is Moshe Dayan. The Shemr of 1000 years ago died. Recognize the Shemr of today! <sup>34</sup>

At a time when leftist political currents dominated the growing anti-Shah movement, this discourse helped radicalize the religious public against the regime as well. As revolutionary clerics integrated themes of social justice into their discourse, they brought together different social classes for whom these religious rituals came to acquire shared, political meanings.<sup>35</sup> During Muharram 1978, nightly mourning rituals in working-class south Tehran became a staging point for rallies downtown, until then dominated by activists with a more middle-class profile.<sup>36</sup> Politicized mourning slogans in the *hey'at* gave way to religiously-inflected slogans in the street, often tinged with sarcastic humor.<sup>37</sup> In the streets, protestors flipped the symbols of monarchy on their head, mocking royal authorities with humorous puns:

پدر رضا، پسر رضا، ۳۵ میلیون نا رضا Reza the Father, Reza the Son, 35 million unsatisfied<sup>38</sup>

کورش برخیز ! که گندش در آمد Kurosh awaken! The shit is pouring out (i.e. shit has hit the fan) <sup>39</sup>

به همت خمینی، پهلوی در به در شد، فر عون قرن بیستم، در مصر مستقر شد By Khomeini's will, Pahlavi was forced to flee, the 20<sup>th</sup> century pharaoh is settled in Egypt

<sup>37</sup> They also often included raucous humor, songs which were often sung on the way to and returning from the demonstrations, rather than during the protests when chants would have been more strictly political. See: Mahdinezhād, Omid. *Sho`ārhā-ye Tanz-e Dowrān-e Enqelāb* [Humorous Slogans of the Revolutionary Period]. *Enteshārāt-e Āstān-e Qods-e Razavi*. 1398 [2019].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Ibid 198.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Kashi, Shima, and Sara Shariati. "Vā 'zān-e Shākhes-e Dowreh-ye Pahlavi-ye Dovum va Masa'leh-ye 'Edālat-e E'jtemāy' [Key Preachers of the Second Pahlavi Era and the Issue of 'Social Justice']." Faslnāmeh-ye Anjoman-e Irāni-ye Motale `āt-e Farhangi va Ertebāt [Quarterly Journal of the Iranian Association for Cultural and Communication Studies], vol. 17, no. 65, 2021, pp. 11–33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Minoo Moallem, describing the influence of the Ashura metaphor during the Revolution, explains: "The Karbala drama was completely displaced from the stage to the streets during the revolution and the Iran-Iraq conflict." *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, pp. 95-7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> This refers to the population of Iran at the time: 35 million. In Persian, "Reza" – one of the names of both of the Pahlavi monarchs – also means satisfied, and thus "na-reza" (unsatisfied) rhymes with the Shahs' names.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> This slogan is a play on a famous statement from the Shah in which he addressed the ancient Persian ruler Cyrus the Great (known as Kurosh in Persian) and said: "Cyrus! Sleep well! We are awake!" This was intended as a way for the Shah to say that he had things under control in Iran and that the legacy of the ancient Persian kings continued under his rule.

## بختیار تریاکی، شوشال دمکراشی Bakhtiar you opium-smoker, shoshial democrashy!<sup>40</sup>

جاويد شاه، كدوم شاه؟ شاه نجف خمينى Long live the Shah, which Shah? The Shah of Najaf: Khomeini!<sup>41</sup>

> ما شیشه شکن نیستیم، بت شکنیم We are idol-breakers, not glass-breakers!<sup>42</sup>

ملت نخواب، ملت نخواب، راهش درازه انقلاب Oh nation, do not sleep! The road of revolution is long. <sup>43</sup>

Thousands of hey'at members who had not been active in protests joined for the first

time. Always a minority among the *hey'at*, it was during the 1978-9 uprising that revolutionary *hey'at* developed a particular style influenced by revolutionary anthems. They were infused with an openness to innovation previously absent in Muharram rituals, which tended to repeat the same poems, rhythms, and beats.<sup>44</sup> Their importance emerged as part of a dynamic process in which the ritual's symbolic meaning became connected to contemporary political action, a process Michel Foucault – who was a journalist in Tehran at the time – deemed "political spirituality." <sup>45</sup> As Babak Rahimi notes, "It is not that the religious rituals of Muharram …

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> This slogan targets the Pahlavi monarchy's last prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar. He was mocked for being an avid fan of opium, consumption of which is a national pastime in Iran. The second half of this slogan mocks him by saying the phrase "Social Democracy" in English with the slur of someone who has smoked a lot of opium. <sup>41</sup> Khomeini lived in exile for more than a decade in the city of Najaf in southern Iraq, home to the shrine of Imam

Ali. This slogan plays on the fact that Imam Ali is frequently called the "Shah of Najaf;" by using the term for Khomeini, it implicitly links the two.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> "Idol-breaker" is a historic reference to the Prophet Muhammad, who is said to have entered the Kaaba in Mecca and destroyed the idols there, converting the site into a monotheistic Islamic shrine. In Iran revolutionary discourse, "breaking the idols" came to signify overturning the symbols of corruption and monarchy. Here, the protestors contrast their role as "idol-breakers" with authorities' claims that they are thieves and ruffians. This is similar to the clash over masculinity highlighted in Chapter 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> All of these slogans are from: Mahdinezhād, Omid. *Sho`ārhā-ye Tanz-e Dowrān-e Enqelāb* [Humorous Slogans of the Revolutionary Period]. *Enteshārāt-e Āstān-e Qods-e Razavi*: Tehran, Iran. 1398 [2019]. The book, published by an editorial linked to the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, focuses on anti-Shah and pro-Khomeini slogans; the wide variety of slogans, including leftist and liberal slogans, that were present in the Revolution are thus not represented.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Ibid 213. For the development of Muharram rituals as a public space in Iran, see Rahimi, Babak. *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*. Brill Academic Publishers, 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> See: Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

became 'politicized' in 1978–1979, but that the very religious processions in 1978 emerged *as* political events, shared spaces of copresence for an alternative politics while facing a violent death." <sup>46</sup>

This interpretation of Shi'ism as a dynamic, revolutionary faith captured the imaginations of Muslims worldwide, especially in Shia Muslim communities. The triumph of the Iranian revolution – and the visibility of religion in it – inspired movements elsewhere targeting conservative Shia Muslim elites as well as authorities oppressive to Shia Muslim communities. It helped charge protest movements in Pakistan, reform currents in India, and uprisings in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Crucially, it was not just the discourse of revolutionary Shi'ism, but the actual spaces of the Muharram rituals that allowed Shia Muslim communities elsewhere to emulate events in Iran. The intensive community organization and massing of resources, people, and emotions in the commemorations created a grassroots infrastructure with constant potential for mobilization. In the decades that followed, mourning rituals emerged as a key way Shia Muslims displayed their presence as a political force. They also became a target for bans and attacks by outside forces, including bombings and massacres across the region, which in turn further energized Shia Muslim communities to see these rituals as central to their public identity.<sup>47</sup>

The blending of ritual and political meaning notably came to a head in Nabatiyeh in southern Lebanon in 1983, when Ashura commemorations became a turning point in the country and region's history. Thousands of Lebanese Shia Muslims had gathered to watch a re-enactment

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Rahimi, Babak. "'The Spirit of the Spiritless World': The Shi'a Rituals of Muharram and the 1979 Iranian Revolution" in Goldstein, Warren S. (ed). *Religion in Rebellions, Revolutions, and Social Movements*. Routledge, 2022, pp. 152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Robert D. Crews, for example, examines the political evolution of Ashura in Afghanistan. He traces how, beginning in the 1960s, Ashura became a political form of religious rite imbued with an increasingly revolutionary ethos that the state in turn attempted to co-opt. He charts how the vibrant public sphere associated with the holiday since 2001 made it a major place in which Shia Muslims imagined their identity in post-invasion Afghanistan. See: in his article: Crews, Robert D. "Mourning Imam Husayn in Karbala and Kabul: The Political Meanings of 'Ashura in Afghanistan." *Afghanistan*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2020, pp. 202–236.

of the battle of Karbala, called a *tāziyah*.<sup>48</sup> The Israeli military, who were at the time occupying southern Lebanon, approached the large square where the event was taking place. As their military jeeps began to enter a crowd of hundreds of actors and thousands of spectators, the soldiers appeared to those gathered to take the role of Shemr, the commander who leads the slaughter of Imam Hussein and his family. As Israeli forces sought to push through, they began to violently clash with mourners. In the ensuing melee, the high emotions of the crowd provoked by the *tāziyah* transformed into shock and anger at witnessing the Israeli soldiers' actions, as ritual abruptly blended into reality. The scene seemed to provide an opportunity to right a historic wrong, allowing the crowd to confront the soldiers who appeared to occupy the place of the evil forces of the Karbala story (who, in the course of the  $t\bar{a}ziyah$ , they would have normally jeered but not attacked). In the ensuing chaos, Israeli forces killed several people. Until that time, Lebanon's Shia Muslim community had assumed a relatively neutral stance toward Israel's occupation, due to historic tensions with the Palestinian armed groups that Israel was fighting. But in its wake, a groundswell of popular support emerged for the Iranian-backed organization Hezbollah committed to expelling the Israeli occupation. The mourning rituals provided both an organizational potential and a discourse that fuelled the group's consequent uprising and their eventual victory over the Israeli occupation nearly two decades later.<sup>49</sup>

Today, the notion of Ashura as both a religious commemoration and a political model of struggle for justice – "Hussein's revolution" – has become central to its framing by Shia Muslims worldwide. It has been adapted to local contexts around the world, becoming part of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> For more on *tāziyah*, see: Chelkowski, Peter J. *Eternal Performance: Ta'ziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*. Seagull Books, 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> For more on this event, see: Kifner, John. "Southern Lebanon: Occupation by Israel Trauma for All Sides." *The New York Times*, 22 July 1984, www.nytimes.com/1984/07/22/world/southern-lebanon-occupation-by-israel-trauma-for-all-sides.html. For more on the history of Hezbollah, see: Norton, Augustus R. *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

rituals and debates across the region and in diaspora. But as I have shown in this section, this is a transformation that began in the 1960s that has re-oriented the rituals' meaning and the range of potential action ritual spaces can embody. It is not just the discourse of Ashura but the gatherings themselves that make the rituals efficacious nodes of political action. The meanings of the rituals have evolved over time in a dynamic process tied to changing political circumstances as well how intellectuals, religious clerics, and state authorities have mobilized them. Rituals create our world and help us understand how to interpret events. The Karbala Paradigm has been central to how Shia Muslims have understood politics in the last half century, and arguably for far longer; at the same time, their application and theorization of the Karbala Paradigm has changed the paradigm's meaning and function.

## The Cry of Freedom

But how does the meaning of a tale focused on revolt of the righteous against corrupt authority change when it moves from protestors' mouths to the official narrative of an authoritarian state? This issue first appeared in the months following the Iranian revolution's victory in 1979. After the Shah fled in February, the hitherto-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini returned and began a process of consolidating power. This involved eliminating competing factions, crushing independent organizing, and a "cultural revolution" against those who refused to endorse a vaguely-defined vision of the new Islamic order.

The nascent state relied heavily on local organizations to guard the revolution, fearing a potential coup. Loosely-organized *komiteh* that originally emerged to hold protests and then to control the streets amid the gradual retreat of police were reorganized into squads committed to repressing dissent against the new order. When in September 1980, Iraq invaded and it became clear that Iran's armed forces, battered by infighting, were not able to defend the country,

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authorities called for volunteers. These recruits grew to number a million strong and became the Basij paramilitary militia. As Iran moved into total mobilization, the "revolutionary hey'at" (*hey'at enqelābi*) became increasingly linked to the Basij. The Iranian state defined the war as one not only to defend the nation but also what it called the "Islamic revolution" and Islam broadly.<sup>50</sup> The sacrifices at the battlefront became likened to those of early Islamic heroes and their deaths were portrayed by the state as sacrifices akin to the martyrs of Ashura. Religious *noheh* that previously only appeared during Muharram were now sung by Basijis year round.

Revolutionary *hey'at* began to receive government budgets and began to actively take part in fostering the "culture of the front." They were connected through the Basij organization, which converted these religious associations into martial ones. After the war's end, the Basij and their *hey'at* remained partially mobilized, members periodically recruited to serve as morality police and, during protests, deployed as irregular forces to aid riot police. Mosques were built and renovated to create offices for the Basij; later, they based themselves in religious shrines as well. With state funding – in contrast to grassroots *hey'at*, which rely on donations by members – these *hey'at* acted as an extension of state control linked to religious and security institutions, while maintaining a discourse of grassroots revolutionary fervor.

The process of extending state control over revolutionary *hey'at* led to shifts in ritual practices, reflecting the revolutionary *hey'ats'* new role as pillars of state ideology. This included 1) the politicization of rituals through the systematic inclusion of political discourse in rituals, such as praising of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and cursing of state enemies like the US, Israel, and the UK. It also included 2) changes in ritual practice reflecting the influence of the Supreme Leader as both head of state and the highest-ranking religious official as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Although Saddam Hussein was nominally Muslim, the Baathist party he controlled was a secular Arab nationalist regime. Iran's new leaders thus framed their struggle as a defense of Islam against atheism and Communism.

mandated by the state doctrine of *Velāyat-e Faqih*.<sup>51</sup> As a result, revolutionary *hey'at* changed their rituals according to state mandates. For example, in 1994, Supreme Leader Khamenei issued a directive condemning the somewhat marginal practice of ritual whipping during Muharram commemorations as Islamically impermissible. After the fatwa, these ritual practices were banned by revolutionary *hey'at*. It thirdly included 3) changes in the art of the ritual, especially the *noheh* poetry. In the 1990s, authorities added *maddah*, religious chanters, to the government payroll and began to broadcast the songs of favored chanters on radio and television. They were recorded and released on cassette tapes, turning what was once a live performance into a year-round religious music industry. *Maddahi* increasingly integrated instruments like synthesizers, techno-style bass that mimicked chest-beating rhythms, and rap-style chanting. These changes at revolutionary *hey'at* brought them more closely under government control and also made them more commercial, all with extensive state funding.

The majority of Iranian *hey'at*, however, eschewed the move toward state affiliation, continuing to rely on members' voluntary donations. Most pursued quiet accommodation with authorities while attempting to maintain traditional practices. Not all *hey'at*, however, took this path. Beginning in the late 1990s, several Iranian politicians began to voice critiques of the state's repressive policies. As they coalesced into the Reformist political movement calling for an expansion of freedom of speech, some *hey'at* began to use the limited freedom afforded religious spaces to manage their own affairs to voice more publicly critical positions.

This was most visible in the central desert city of Yazd, the home region of President Khatami, whose 1997 election led to a democratic opening. He loosened political and social restrictions and presided over the devolution of power away from the central government and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> This doctrine replaced a diverse field of potential clerical "models of emulation" (*marāj'e taqlid*) for believers, none of which were above the other, with a single figure who was head of state and mandated to be believers' guide.

toward city councils.<sup>52</sup> The rise of Khatami – and the Reformist movement he led – electrified supporters and encouraged the growing visibility of several *hey'at* in Yazd's historic city center, like Besat, Fahadan, Biyuk, and Sheikhdad.<sup>53</sup> They became famous for performances of mourning rituals accompanied by poetry critical of state repression. Although largely blocked from appearing in state media, in the late 2000s their performances spread through social media and captured a national audience. Similar to the 1970s revolutionaries, who called for Ashura poetry to respond to the day's urgent themes, these *hey'at* used their poetic chants to call for political freedom.<sup>54</sup> They wrapped these calls in thinly-veiled metaphors drawn from both old Ashura *noheh* and Persian mystical and modern poetry, performed in mass-choreographed performances inside the *hey'ats' tekiyeh*, large structures used for mourning rituals.

These *hey'ats'* emergence as a kind of alternative public space was based in the structure of Ashura rituals in Yazd's old city.<sup>55</sup> Each *hey'at* has its own *tekiyeh*, where members gather for months beforehand to rehearse. The chants are written by local poets and change every year. On Ashura, *hey'at* move through the alleyways to perform their *noheh* in each *tekiyeh*, while audiences gather to watch the performances. In this way, the chants are heard not just by their own *hey'at*s but by thousands of others. The Ashura recitations thus offer a temporary public space relatively free from outside interference.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> For more on this process, see: Tajbakhsh, Kian. *Creating Local Democracy in Iran: State Building and the Politics of Decentralization*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> For a closer analysis of the rise of the Yazd *hey'at* and their poetry, see Chapter 3 of Momeni, Esha. "The Politics of Collective Mourning: Negotiating Power at the Intersection of Shi'ism, Gender, and Popular Culture in Iran." *University of California, Los Angeles*, 2019.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> For more on the history of poetic metaphor in *hey'ati noheh*, see Amjadi, Maryam Ala. "Poetry in Iran's Contemporary Theo-Political Culture." *Routledge International Handbook of Religion in Global Society*, edited by Jayeel Cornelio et al., Routledge, 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Yazd's urban structure played a large role in the cohesiveness of the *hey'at*. The *hey'at* actively opposed government plans for urban renewal, drawing on their local base to fight plans that would have displaced thousands of people. As a result, Yazd is one of the few major Iranian cities not disfigured by such projects.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> For more on Ashura mourning rituals as a kind of proto-public space, see: Rahimi, Babak. *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran.* Brill Academic Publishers, 2011.

The emergence of these *hey'at*'s unique style is linked to the Iranian revolution.<sup>57</sup> According to Massoud Hafezi, one of the chant leaders at Besat *Hey'at*, and Shahab ol-din Mousavi, one of the main poets, the *hey'at*s began integrating political themes into rituals in the late 1970s. They were inspired by Ali Shariati's call to bring themes of injustice into Ashura rituals. This process was interrupted by the Iran-Iraq war, when many members went to the front. However, beginning in the late 1990s, the *hey'at* began performing what they called "*noheh eterāzi*" (protest poetry), and developed a network of like-minded *hey'at* across the country.

The *noheh eterāzi* bridged the gap between Persian poetry and *noheh*. Hafezi notes that whereas previously, these were seen as different worlds, the *hey'at* invited poets to write chants and cite poetic metaphors. This included not only traditional Persian poetry such as Hafez and Saadi but also modernist poetry, including poets involved in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Constitutional Revolution like Farrokh Yazdi and Akhavan Sales and mid-century figures like Ahmad Shamloo.<sup>58</sup> In one *noheh*, drawing on a poem by Yazdi focused on freedom, the *hey'at* sings:

کو زبان خاموشان قوم حق فر اموشان کو کر امت انسان کو صدای آزادی تا به کی ستم بردن نان بندگی خوردن زندگی نمی ارزد بی نوای آزادی هر دلی نوا دارد شور کربلا دارد کل یوم عاشور است ماجرای آزادی

Where is the voice of the voiceless, the people's rights forgotten? Where is the dignity of people, where is the cry of freedom? Until when will this oppression continue, this bread of enslavement? Life is not worth living without the voice of freedom Every heart that has a voice, longs for Karbala Every day is Ashura, the adventure of freedom...

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> This sketch of Besat's history is based on the author's interview with Ahmad Ali Kadivar, an ethnomusicologist, alongside consultation with an interview with members of the *hey'at*: Kadivar, Ahmad Ali, and Golrokh Nafisi. "Bāz dar Shahr Che Ghughāst [What a Commotion in the City]." *Chehel Cherāgh Weekly Magazine*, 25 Dec. 2018, 40cheragh.org/الجاز در شهر جه-غو غاست-بخش-اول/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> For more on the poetry of the Constitutional Revolution, see: Shams, Fatemeh. *A Revolution in Rhyme: Poetic Co*option under the Islamic Republic. Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 128-9.

These *noheh* draw on the narratives that inspired the 1979 Revolution – and which the state draws on year-round to define its legitimacy – to produce a potent criticism of the current repressive situation in Iran. And by drawing on elements of the Persian poetic tradition, they resonate with non-religious and religious Iranians alike. "Many of our non-*hey'ati* and non-religious friends, including leftists and secularists, appreciated this *noheh*," the director explained. From Yazd, social media amplified this counter-public into one that could be accessed across the country – and further abroad, as translations in English, Arabic, and Urdu multiplied. The chants gained more popularity after the government crackdown following the 2009 Green Movement protests. At a time when liberties were dramatically curtailed, their cries for freedom struck a chord – a perfect execution of Shariati's call to make *noheh* relevant by making them revolutionary, in this case against a self-defined revolutionary regime.

I argue that these rituals thus emerge as a kind of "counterpublic" whose ideas and discourses circulate through a segment of Iranian society and even beyond Iran's borders through social media.<sup>59</sup> They create horizontal connections through sonic dissidence, producing the possibility of intimacy between strangers. They allow religious Iranians to recognize themselves in the oppositional religious discourse espoused by the performances, which provide a counter to the nearly-hegemonic politicized religion that has repelled many devout Shia Muslims in Iran and pushed them to reject their faith, publicly or privately, out of anger at the ways it has been deployed as a force of repression in society. For many Iranians, and Shia Muslims elsewhere, the circulation of these rituals through social media offers the possibility of hope of a Shia Islam beyond Iranian state control, and of a particular set of sensibilities and dispositions to be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> For more on public and counterpublics, see: Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Columbia University Press, 2009; Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. Zone, 2005.

cultivated through the recognition of an alternative politico-religious imaginary. The circulation of these performances could be considered a "nonmovement," a collective endeavor that is neither protest nor revolution but which is defined by the "art of presence," meaning "agency in times of constraints" expressed through quiet encroachment against state ideology and domination.<sup>60</sup> Through the yearly performance of the ritual, the meanings of the holiday are repeatedly renegotiated and a space is created in which critique of the state is openly and publicly expressed, even at a time when such critique is banned beyond *tekiyeh* walls.

But with the *hey'ats'* fame came scrutiny. In 2021, Iran witnessed an election in which Reformist candidates were disqualified and the Supreme Leader's hand-picked candidate Ebrahim Raisi came to power with the lowest voter turn-out in Iranian history. Amid a tightening of restrictions on freedom of speech across the country, two of Yazd's most well-known critical *hey'at* – Besat and Fahadan – were targeted in summer 2022. Local authorities reviewed their *noheh* poems and demanded lyrics be changed, but the *hey'at* refused. As a result, they were banned from performing publicly at Ashura. One of the offending *noheh*, performed privately by Fahadan *hey'at* after the public ban, read:

> به نام دین جفا تاکی؟ ستم تا چند؟ ریا تا کی؟ حکایت همچنان باقیست... دوباره ظهر عاشور است دوباره جوی خون جاریست

How long will persecution in the name of religion go on? How long will oppression continue? How long will there be hypocrisy? It is a tale that continues... Once again, it is noon on Ashura. Once again, a stream of blood is flowing...<sup>61</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Bayat, Asef. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. x-xi, 12-15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Only a few weeks after the ban, protests broke out across Iran after the killing of Masha Zhina Amini, a young woman who was detained by morality police and died days later. Sparking the "Woman Life Freedom" movement, the protests brought religious and non-religious specifically to oppose the state's use of religion as a tool of power through enforcement of so-called morality laws, including the mandatory veil. The words of *Hey'at* Besat seemed more relevant than ever.

Far from government-funded rituals, these *hey'at* create small, temporary spaces of freedom and independence that fight to be heard amid widespread political repression. They represent a continued a space of resistance within the religious tradition, one whose persistence represented a threat to state hegemony over interpretation. As the 2022 ban shows, the state is aware of the power of their lyrics. These *hey'at* actively defy the state's attempted monopolization of religious interpretation, continuing a history of poetic resistance in a context where even the most mundane criticisms of state policy can invite backlash. Even as room for independent political organization has become restricted inside Iran, they draw on the Shia Muslim revolutionary tradition to defy a state that claims to be its sole representative. And in building a vocabulary of resistance that draws on both secular and religious poetry, they defy both the Iranian state's characterization of opposition to its rule as anti-religion as well as Western and opposition depictions of Iran as defined by a religious-secular binary.

Members of Yazd's *hey'at* are not the only ones.<sup>62</sup> In an age of increasing transnational Shia Muslim connection – and repression inside Iran's borders – we must take into account places connected to Iran, even if they are not in Iran.<sup>63</sup> For our next example, we travel to Iraq. Arbaeen, 'Another World'

"As we got closer to Karbala," Zaynab explained, her voice tense with emotion, "the streets were filled with so many people that the van couldn't move anymore. They wanted to drop us at the shrine, but the crowds were so large we got out at the edge of town. We began walking the 15 kilometers to the center, surrounded by thousands and thousands of Iraqis. On

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> This includes in Iran, where numerous other critical chanters and preachers circulate. This includes figures like Hamid Alimi, who has also been banned from public performance.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> This framing is indebted to Fariba Adelkhah's book, *The Thousand and One Borders of Iran: Travel and Identity*, which contextualizes Iran in a transnational lens. As of writing, Adelkhah is being detained in Iran. See: Adelkhah, Fariba. *The Thousand and One Borders of Iran: Travel and Identity*. Routledge, 2019.

either side of the road, there were people pouring tea and passing out snacks. It was incredible." Zaynab is a 72-year old Iranian woman who visited Iraq on pilgrimage in spring 2003, soon after the US invasion. As part of a package tour to Iraq's holy sites, her group navigated US military checkpoints and were even detained for several hours.

Unintentionally, they witnessed the first open Arbaeen pilgrimage after decades in which the Iraqi government had banned the ritual. Unfamiliar with the event, Zaynab walked alongside Iraqi pilgrims. She marvelled at their devotion and the innumerable acts of hospitality she witnessed along the way. She was one of the first Iranians to take part in Arbaeen. Historically, the walk to Karbala was an exclusively Iraqi affair, attracting small numbers who walked along paths amid date palm gardens on the shores of the Euphrates. After Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, millions of Iraqis began taking part. For Zaynab, as for the approximately 3-5 million Iranians who today join yearly, Arbaeen is "another world," a temporary urbanism that offers visions of an alternative social order in which horizontal relations of care take precedence. By the early 2010s, growing numbers of Iranians and Shia Muslims from around the world joined them. By 2020, Arbaeen was the biggest yearly pilgrimage on Earth, bringing together upwards of 20 million people. It quickly became one of the largest, temporary transnational Muslim public spaces – one organized almost entirely through grassroots efforts.

The re-emergence of Arbaeen is one of the great untold stories of post-invasion Iraq. Nearly half of the country takes part in the pilgrimage on a yearly basis. Large swathes of southern and central Iraq empty out in the weeks beforehand, as millions travel to the pilgrimage route to prepare food, drink, and lodging. "About two weeks before, me and all my friends from the local *hey'at* travel to our *mowkeb* on the Najaf-Karbala road," Ahmad, an Iraqi originally from Hilla, Iraq, explained to me in Tehran, where he studies. "We prepare five meals a day –

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breakfast, soup or a light snack, lunch, afternoon snack, and dinner – and we hang out waiting for the pilgrims to arrive." Ahmad's *hey'at*, like thousands of others, collects donations during the year to fund their Arbaeen activities, which take place at a small building on a plot of land they purchased years ago (i.e. the *mowkeb*). If in decades past, most pilgrims were welcomed and offered food, drink, and lodging at people's homes, today most interact with *mowkebs*. They line hundreds of miles of the roads leading to Karbala, but only come "alive" around Arbaeen. While the Iraqi state provides security, it is absent from the pilgrimage itself; the *mowkeb* are Arbaeen's central organizers. Each displays the name of the *husseiniyah* (the Iraqi word for *hey'at*) that sponsors it, including the city and neighborhood of origin.



Figure 37

Resting outside a mowkeb, 2018. (Photo: Alex Shams)

The event is all the more incredible in light of the violent turmoil and lack of security that have plagued Iraq since 2003 – including bombings and attacks on the pilgrimage that have killed hundreds. In contrast to the intense centralization that has characterized the Iranian government's control over religious spaces and organizations inside Iran and its extension of authority into Iraq's shrine cities, Arbaeen is primarily grassroots. It offers a temporary image of an ideal community, characterized by equal relations and mutual aid – albeit for a few weeks. And since nearly 15% of all Shia Muslims worldwide participate in the event every year, it is the only truly grassroots Shia transnational space, providing a sharp contrast with the Iranian model of authority we have seen in the chapters until now.

Arbaeen marks the 40<sup>th</sup> day after the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the Battle of Karbala.<sup>64</sup> But rather than a holiday of mourning, the mood at the pilgrimage is carnivalesque, defined by a sense of community, as millions joyfully pass out food and drink and millions more receive it. Along the way, connections are formed crossing social and geographic boundaries. Every act of friendship acquires greater meaning in the pilgrimage, imbued with *thawāb*, religious merit.<sup>65</sup> For millions of Iraqis, it is a joyful time in which they spend days away from their homes and workplaces alongside friends and family. They see friends from their hometowns or other cities along the way, stopping at *mowkeb* where they know they will find familiar faces. Groups of girls and women walk on the path late into the night and take naps in the female-only halves of the *mowkeb*, enjoying relative social freedom and ease in public space. Arbaeen is fun – and it is free. While back in Iran, government media stresses the devotional aspect, as seen from the ground, it is very much a social experience.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> The 40<sup>th</sup> day after a death is an anniversary observed across the Middle East among different religious groups.
<sup>65</sup> On the political possibilities of friendship, see: Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. by George Collins. Verso, 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> This is reflected in the kinds of people who come; among Iraqis there is a wide diversity in religiosity. For a breakdown of differences and similarities among pilgrims from Iran and Iraq, see: Christia, Fotini, Elizabeth Dekeyser, Dean Knox. "To Karbala: Surveying Religious Shi'a from Iran and Iraq," *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. 20 Oct. 2016. https://web.mit.edu/cfotini/www/Shia\_Pilgrims\_Survey.pdf



Figure 38

Preparing kebab to pass out to pilgrims at a mowkeb during Arbaeen. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Across the border in Iran, the weeks leading up to Arbaeen witness a flurry of excitement. The trip has become the largest mass movement across Iran's borders, with between 3 and 5 million people crossing annually in the span of just a few days.<sup>67</sup> While Iraqis walk from wherever they are to Karbala, Iranians take transportation to Najaf and then walk for around five days, aiming to get to Karbala as close as possible to Arbaeen. The crush is so great that many cross the border without being checked.<sup>68</sup> For Iranians, Arbaeen is the country's most important foreign tourist destination. And because it's free, the crowds are socially diverse, including working-class, middle-class, and well-off Iranians alike.<sup>69</sup> Far from government regulation, it offers a different perspective on what a Shia Muslim public space could like.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> From 2019, for example: <u>https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/07/23/2118814/-</u> ناجا-موج-بازگشت-زائر ان-از -مهر ان-به-60در صد-ر سید-3میلیون-زائر -به-کربلا-مشر ف-شدند

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> I regularly heard stories of men who crossed the border despite not having completed their required military service, which normally should inhibit their ability to leave the country.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> For Iranians, the only aspect of the pilgrimage that requires payment is transportation to the border and then from there to Najaf.

While today Iranians are a major presence, Arbaeen's past is purely Iraqi.<sup>70</sup> Records from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century describe Arbaeen as a small-scale and relatively humble affair. Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, the pilgrimage became more popular, but services were still mostly limited to people opening their doors and kitchens to those walking by. This began to change in the 1970s amid Saddam Hussein's rise as Iraq's authoritarian leader.<sup>71</sup> The Baathist authorities feared that walking pilgrimages could create threats to their rule, a perception magnified after the 1977-9 uprisings, when protests broke out during Muharram.<sup>72</sup> They imposed bans and labeled walking pilgrimages as backward and contrary to Islam.<sup>73</sup> The pilgrimages were a threat precisely because they were grassroots and beyond authorities' control. Beginning in the 1980s, authorities conducted large-scale education campaigns warning Iraqis against participating, including by labelling the practice as a heretical "Persian innovation" (*bida'h fārsiyah*), arguing that it was a perversion of the faith inspired by Iran. In doing so they, they linked the crackdown to the insinuation that Iraqi Shia Muslims were a potential fifth column for the Iranian enemy.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> This historical sketch is based on interviews with Iraqis as well as research in the Baath Party Archives at the Hoover Institute. For a more general overview, see: Al-Akili, Ali Khadr and Muhammad Fahd al-Qaisi. "*Mawqef al-Soltah al-Hākimah min Ziyārat al-Arba`in 1968-2003* [The Position of the Ruling Authorities on the Arbaeen Pilgrimage, 1968-2003]," *Karbala Center for Studies and Research*, 2019, pp. 75-98; Alshamary, Marsin R. "Prophets and Priests: Religious Leaders and Protest in Iraq." *Massachusetts Institute of Technology Department of Political Science*, 2020.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> This process can be said to have really begun in April 1969, when around 6% of Iraq's Shia Muslim population was deported on suspicion of being of Persian descent around the time of the Arbaeen. See: Hamdan, Faraj Hattab. "The Development of Iraqi Shi'a Mourning Rituals in Modern Iraq: The 'Ashura Rituals and Visitation of Al-Arb'ain." *Arizona State University*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> For a sketch of the historical development of restrictions on Arbaeen, see: Al-Akili, Ali Khadr and Muhammad Fahd al-Qaisi. "*Mawqef al-Soltah al-Hākimah min Ziyārat al-Arba`in 1968-2003* [The Position of the Ruling Authorities on the Arbaeen Pilgrimage, 1968-2003]," *Karbala Center for Studies and Research*, 2019, pp. 75-98; Hamdan, Faraj Hattab. "The Development of Iraqi Shi'a Mourning Rituals in Modern Iraq: The 'Ashura Rituals and Visitation of Al-Arb'ain." *Arizona State University*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Hoover Institute, Ba'ath Party Archives, Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, "Letter from Baath Party Iraq - *Tanzimāt Baghdād al-Karkh*," Number- 002/2 – 5/1997. To: *Qiyādāt Forou* `*Tanzimāt Baghdād al-Karkh*, 01\_3134\_0002\_0008.jpeg.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, 01 3134 0002 0008.jpeg.

In the 1990s, government crackdowns on Arbaeen continued. Religious festivals were one of the few public spaces free from government control. Authorities allowed people to travel in cars and buses for shrine pilgrimage, but they deemed walking pilgrimages too uncontrollable.<sup>75</sup> Yet Iraqis continued to defy authorities.<sup>76</sup> Thousands avoided major highways and government checkpoints by walking on small paths along the Euphrates, and thousands more opened their doors to them, despite the possibility of imprisonment, torture, and forced conscription if caught. <sup>77</sup> One thing that comes through clearly from the Ba'athist party archives is how much walking pilgrimages in particular confounded authorities. While shrines could be controlled and their pilgrims surveilled, the act of walking – and the unpredictability it entails through the ability of pilgrims to wander and change their routes at will – was uncontrollable. Walking in the presence of others, collectively, was substantially different from shrine tourism, creating a different relationship to fellow pilgrims and to space – and different possibilities as a result. It allowed Iraqis to walk together and to visit each others' houses along the way without being noticed by authorities, drawing on and in the process building horizontal connections of solidarity between people living under a regime that used fear – of the state, and of other citizens - as a central tactic of suppression.<sup>78</sup> Walking was an intensely political act, one that allowed Iraqis' to evade and escape the state's top-down logic of control, while simultaneously building an understanding of the landscape and geography independent of state projects. In the process, it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> This fact is attested to throughout internal Baath Party documents, which speak about car pilgrimages as unproblematic but repeatedly describe walking pilgrimages in the most threatening of terms. Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, Box: 3134, Batch - 3134 0002. 01\_3134\_0002\_0145.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Authorities produced hundreds of pages of documents describing the scourge of walking pilgrimages, going so far as to describe them as "weapons against the Arab nation" used by Iraq's "enemies" including the state of Israel. Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, Box: 3134, Batch - 3134 0002. 01 3134 0002 0089.jpeg - 91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, Box: 3134, Batch - 3134 0002. 01\_3134\_0002\_0175.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Davis, Eric. *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*. University of California Press, 2008; Makiya, Kanan. *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*. University of California Press, 1998.

also allowed for Iraqis to create horizontal connections between each other that defied state attempts to surveil, control, and "know" what Iraqis were doing at all times.

Iraqis carried out walking pilgrimages to other shrines, confounding authorities who had stamped out independent political organizing but couldn't manage to stamp out walking pilgrimages.<sup>79</sup> In 1995, thousands left Baghdad's Shia suburbs to walk to the shrine in Samarra. Locals, who were overwhelmingly Sunni, came out to meet them with food and drink.<sup>80</sup> Shia rituals thus became sites to defy repression by building networks of friendship across Iraqi society. This mirrored events during the 1919-20 Iraqi uprising against British rule, when religious rituals became sites of pan-Iraqi solidarity against colonial domination.<sup>81</sup> The acts of grassroots solidarity across sects scared authorities, revealing that beneath the veneer of a passive society, alternative social and political organization persisted. Horizontal connections terrified them; in one internal memo, authorities specified punishments for taxi drivers who offered discounted or free trips to pilgrims.<sup>82</sup> Authorities were especially concerned about Iraqis mixing with foreign pilgrims. They instructed police to intervene to stop foreign pilgrims from chanting religious slogans like "Yā Hussein!" (Oh Hussein!) during rituals, afraid they could rally Iraqis.<sup>83</sup> By engaging in such intensive policing, the Baathist regime imbued the walking pilgrimages with a heightened political meaning and strengthened their link to collective Shia Muslim

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Authorities devoted huge amounts of time and energy to policing the streets of Shia-majority regions during the Ashura ritual season. In 1995, for example, authorities in Dhi Qar and Basra provinces assigned 25% of the total police force to be present on the street during 1-6 Muharram, 50% during 7-8 Muharram, and 100% during 9-11 of Muharram, indicating the high level of threat they perceived from the street processions led by local *hey'at*. Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, Box: 3134, Batch - 3134 0002. 01\_3134\_0002\_0325.
<sup>80</sup> Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, Box: 3134, Batch - 3134 0002.

 $<sup>01\</sup>_3134\_0002\_0125$ 

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Batatu, Hanna. Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers. Princeton University Press, 1978: pp. 23.
 <sup>82</sup> Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, Box: 3134, Batch - 3134 0002. 01 3134 0002 0121-2. Sent by `Adnān Dawud Salmān to Na'ib Āmin Sir Qiyādat al-`Arāq - 11/19/1995

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Boxfiles Dataset from the Ba'th Regional Command Collection, Box: 3134, Batch - 3134 0002. 01 3134 0002 0145-6

identity. This became clear in 2003, when millions of Iraqis took part in Arbaeen after Saddam Hussein's fall – an unprecedented scale for the pilgrimage. In the years that followed, Arbaeen became a mass event attended by a majority of Iraq's Shia Muslims.

For Shia Iranians, Iraq is a holy land full of major shrines. But for decades, they were unable to travel there due to political tensions. During the 1990s, Iranian pilgrims were allowed to visit Iraq in small numbers but were kept under close surveillance, accompanied by Baathist party minders. It was not until 2003 that Iranians could enter and freely move around Iraq. But it took nearly a decade before mass Iranian interest in Arbaeen developed. Between 1389 [2010-11] and 1395 [2016-17], official Iranian border crossing during the holiday soared from 40,000 to close to 2.2 million – a nearly 50-fold increase.<sup>84</sup> This has since increased to 3-5 million. This was due to a number of events. First was the growing participation of mo`āvedin, Iraqis of Iranian heritage who were expelled to Iran during the Baathist era, as they began redeveloping ties to Iraq after decades in exile.<sup>85</sup> Speaking both Persian and Arabic, *mo`āvedin* were a key grassroots link between Iraq and Iran. Then, Iranian maddah chanters began to publicize and invite their followers to Arbaeen.<sup>86</sup> In the early 2010s, Iranian authorities began encouraging participation through official media and they began constructing their own official mowkeb along the routes, often through local and regional authorities in Iran such as shrine endowments or city councils.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam. "Arba`in Irāni [Iranian Arbaeen]" in Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam (ed.), Piādehravi-ye Arbaeen ["Walking Pilgrimage of Arbaeen"]. Nashr-e Armā, 1397 [2018], pp. 225-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Often referred to as Iraqis of "Persian" heritage because the Persian language predominates among them, their ancestors include Persian as well as Azeri, Kurdish, and other Iranian ethnic groups.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Many maddah began to travel between Iran and Iraq for religious occasions, performing for large audiences in both countries. A notable figure is Bassem al-Karbalaei, an Iraqi maddah who lived in Iran and traveled back and forth between the two.

Back in Iran, authorities founded parallel events for *Jāmāndegān-e Arba`in* – those "left behind" on Arbaeen, walking pilgrimages to local shrines.<sup>87</sup> In contrast to the grassroots organization in Iraq, they were organized and funded from above.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Arbaeen's growth has attracted attention from states and militias. Today, Iran's government sponsors hundreds of *mowkeb* and Iraqi Shia militia actors try to steer it into a symbol of sectarian identity. Arbaeen's evolution as a Shia transnational event could potentially feed into these politics, reflecting the context of its emergence: military occupation, sectarian governance, and civil war. But because it is grassroots and temporary, no actor has managed to dominate Arbaeen – and in contrast to the quest for neat division and perfecting renovation guiding US and Iranian urban policies, it is precisely Arbaeen's messiness that creates a space of momentary possibility in which friendship can disrupt sectarianism's securitized logics.<sup>89</sup>

Recently, non-Shia Iraqis have increasingly taken part. In 2018, convoys of Christian Iraqis participated holding large crosses. They were welcomed not only by fellow pilgrims but also at Imam Hussein's shrine, where their arrival was enthusiastically announced over loudspeakers. For non-Shias, participation is an act of faith – in the possibility of a non-sectarian future through "embodied friendship" in the present.<sup>90</sup> In a society where sectarian difference has been instituted and violently policed for two decades – and in which pilgrims are still targeted by bombings – their presence disrupts dynamics of power that depend on neat sectarian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam. "Arba`in Irāni [Iranian Arbaeen]" in Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam (ed.), Piādehravi-ye Arbaeen ["Walking Pilgrimage of Arbaeen"]. Nashr-e Armā, 1397 [2018], pp. 225-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> They resemble the yearly 22 Bahman events that mark the anniversary of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> One can think of this space of possibility as being part of the "surrounds," a space that creates the possibility of new propositions and produces "the rehearsal of experimental ways of living that circumvent debilitating extraction, surveillance, and capture—for the time being." See: Simone, AbdouMaliq. *The Surrounds: Urban Life within and beyond Capture*. Duke University Press, 2022, pp. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> I draw on Hussein Ali Agrama's analysis of inter-sectarian fasting between Christians and Muslims in Egypt to think about how friendship can disrupt power in quotidian ways. Agrama, Hussein Ali. "Friendship and Time in the Work of Talal Asad." *Religion and Society*, vol. 11, 2020, pp. 16-18.

categorization. Arbaeen may be a Shia pilgrimage, but the infrastructure it creates is a heterogenous space, allowing for complicity and dissent between those who refute sectarian logics, reminiscent of when Samarra's residents welcomed those taking part in illegal pilgrimage under Baathist rule.<sup>91</sup> Fostering an egalitarian spirit characterized by horizontal relations of care, Arbaeen creates possibilities of solidarity that are limited in contemporary Iraq.



Figure 39

A group of Iraqi Christian pilgrims hold a cross aloft as they approach Imam Hussein's shrine during Arbaeen in 2018. (Photo: Alex Shams)

In a country, region, and world of ever-expanding walls, where shrines have become

bunkers and the future has become a space of terror rather than hope, it is precisely these

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> This can also occur for transnational Shia visitors. In Iraq, many South Asian pilgrims visit the town of al-Kifl, which is located smack in the middle of Karbala and Najaf – and is historically Iraq's most important Jewish pilgrimage site, with a synagogue adorned in Hebrew calligraphy sitting at the heart of the mosque. Iraqi custodians do not hide this fact, though it is unclear if tour guides highlight it. See: Shams, Alex. "A Jewish Shrine inside a Mosque: The History of Ezekiel's Tomb in Iraq." *Ajam Media Collective*, 3 Mar. 2019, https://ajammc.com/2019/03/03/ezekiels-tomb-jewish-iraq-muslim/.

temporary spaces that allow us to dream of alternatives. In contrast to Iranian government attempts to imitate and co-opt it to shore up its own legitimacy, Arbaeen in Iraq continues to be another world is a temporary reorganization of society on a mass scale; the appearance of an ideal society for two weeks. Zaynab, the Iranian pilgrim who witnessed the pilgrimage in 2003, returned in the late 2010s to take part. She explained:

When you're on Arbaeen, there's no difference between rich and poor. Everyone is equal. It's like you've entered another world without differences between people. Everyone is concentrated on the path. For days, no one takes any money out of their pockets to pay for anything; it's all free. The route is full of people handing out things; there's so many there's not even an inch of space between them. When you leave and return to your life, you long for Arbaeen. You don't understand why the whole world can't be like that. There are 90-year-olds walking, children running. People from all over the world, Muslims and Christians. It's impossible to describe. You have to see it for yourself.

The Arbaeen pilgrimage demonstrates a radical kind of equality beyond capitalist relations.<sup>92</sup> It's no wonder that people frequently call it a "different world," or that relations between people along the path are defined by care and joy.<sup>93</sup> When I undertook the pilgrimage in 2018, the contrast between the mourning ceremony I expected to find and the celebration I encountered was so great as to be almost unbelievable. When I shared my experience (and photos and videos) with friends back in Iran who had expressed skepticism about my trip, they were so surprised that they began to plan their own trips. In the joyful collapsing of social boundaries and hierarchies, free and open communication between people from near and far, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> Interestingly, Baathist authorities decried the effect of distribution of free food during Arbaeen, arguing that it distorted the market for food prices. Hoover Institute, Baath Party Archive, 10 Muharram Files, 01 3134 0002 0154: from *Mas'ul Tanzimat Maysan wa Wāsit*, 7/9/1996.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Its fits closely the image of social solidarity described by the Turners' work on pilgrimage, which they saw as producing a sense of *communitas* for the duration of the pilgrimage. See: Turner, Victor, and Edith Turner. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. Columbia University Press, 2011. This view has since been critiqued as confusing theological idealism and social reality, but, as Coleman has argued, it is possible to recognize that pilgrimage can provide a space for the living out of an ideal vision of social relations while also recognizing that it is not one bereft or totally removed from existing social conflicts. See: Coleman, Simon. "Do you Believe in Pilgrimage?: Communitas, Contestation and Beyond." *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2002, pp. 355-368.

the extent to which young people, women and men alike, enjoy social freedoms, Arbaeen resembles Bakhtin's concept of the "carnival." <sup>94</sup>

As thousands freely gift food and smiles to passerby, men give massages out in the open, young people flirt, and new and unexpected friendships are formed that cross social and geographic boundaries. In contrast to official Iranian representations of Arbaeen that stress – and seek to impose – the solemn nature of Imam Hussein's martyrdom as the 'reason for the season,' the Arbaeen celebrated in Iraq is one of joy and celebration. A 35-year-old female pilgrim from north Tehran named Fatemeh who trekked the pilgrimage with her mother explained: "For me, Imam Hussein is *mazhar-e `eshq* ["the symbol/embodiment of love"]. It's not about martyrdom and all that. It's about standing up for what is right." While Iran's clerical authorities have promoted "martyrdom" as the central theme of Shia ritual, Arbaeen offers a different vision.

Arbaeen's evolution in the last twenty years represents the emergence of a new carnivalesque tradition in Shia Islam. While there are numerous joyful holidays, primarily the birthdays of the Prophet and the imams and linked figures, the true "carnival" tradition in Shia Islam is *Omar Koshun* (the Killing of Omar), also known as *Eid-e Zahra* (Zahra's Eid), which is today banned in Iran. This holiday celebrates the death of the Caliph Omar, seen by Shia Muslims as having usurped Imam Ali's rightful role as leader of the faithful. It is traditionally celebrated with raucous gatherings defined by bodily humor and dancing. These parties are often attended by religious chanters, who trade their usual mourning poetry for songs that mock and insult the perceived enemies of Imam Ali, often with sexual humor. Participants eat foods that cause flatulence like beans, and even loudly fart during the event, as well as snacks that lend themselves to *double entendres*, especially bananas and popcorn (because of their name in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. Rabelais and His World. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1984.

Persian: *chos-e fil*, elephant farts). *Omar Koshun* has been banned in Iran since the 1980s, due to concerns that the holiday could hurt Shia-Sunni relations. In its place *Hafteh-ye Vahdat* (the Week of Unity) has been instituted, featuring speeches on Sunni-Shia unity.<sup>95</sup> Despite this, *Omar Koshun* continues to be celebrated in a limited way underground. I attended several such gatherings while engaged in research. *Omar Koshun* is truly Bakhtinian in the sense of a carnival where everything is topsy turvy, celebrating normally frowned-upon behavior. At an all-male *Omar Koshun* I attended, for example, one attendee wore a belly dancer costume and danced provocatively around the chanter as he sang. Arbaeen is definitely not this.

But Arbaeen draws on a pre-existing carnivalesque tradition around Muharram mourning traditions that has long existed, and that peeks out in different ways in the present. In at least one Iranian village outside Yazd, Muharram processions are referred to as "carnival," particularly where the *taziyeh* theater traditions take on a raucous nature. *Taziyeh* refers to the tradition of re-enactments of the battle of Karbala, often involving hundreds of actors in large public spaces. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century Tehran, every neighborhood had its own *taziyeh* during Muharram, and the largest government-sponsored *taziyeh* at *Tekiyeh Dowlat* had room for up to 20,000 spectators.<sup>96</sup> This tradition, however, is today relatively limited in urban areas, except as a heritage performance. In rural areas, however, it continues to flourish. In many villages, these *taziyeh* have taken on comic themes, including actors dressed in costumes as lions and a variety of other animals and figures not generally considered present at the battle of Karbala. These figures at

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> For a critique of Shia-Sunni "unity" in Iranian official discourse, as well as how it has failed as a political project, see: Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam. Mazaheri, Mohsen Hessam. Sāken-e Khiābān-e Tehrān: Masā'el va Chāleshha-ye Dindāri dar Jomhuri Eslāmi *[Resident of Iran Street: The Problems and Challenges of Religiosity in the Islamic Republic]*. Nashr-e Armā, 2019.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Marashi, Afshin. *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940.* University of Washington Press, 2011, pp. 38-48.

times engage in ridiculous or funny behavior. Alongside the mourning aspect of *taziyeh*, which is always present, they create a humorous aspect, generally absent in mainstream portrayals.

Besides these, it can be said that in general, large Muharram gatherings in the streets of Iranian cities can take on extensively social aspects. Beside the performance of masculinity that the carrying of extremely heavy `*alam* in Iranian Muharram processions entails, these public gatherings are often spaces of flirting and fun, with many young people dressed in their finest black clothing and girls and women heavily-made up. In the 1990s, this produced public discussion of "Hossein Party," as it was called, in reference to what was perceived as a new phenomenon of using the mourning holidays as an occasion for public flirtation. But arguably, this had always been present in the holiday, just in the background.

Arbaeen is different from either of these examples because it fits squarely within the framework of a religious tradition according to orthodox reasoning. As the  $40^{\text{th}}$  day of mourning, it has a long pedigree in Iraq, and its continued grassroots nature – and the emphasis on horizontal relations of care, giving, and *savāb* (religious merit) permeates the ethos. But by turning this holiday into a celebration of joyful connections, it subverts official representations of Shia Islam and replaces them with a faith defined by horizontal networks of interpersonal solidarity, without transgressing religious orthodoxy in the way the above examples do.<sup>97</sup>

In contrast to daily life, structured by violence, insecurity, and economic uncertainty, Arbaeen is a festival of care and mutual aid. Nearly 25 million people survive for over a week on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> In this sense, it echoes Bakhtin's own work, which sought to challenge the Soviet state's appropriation and conversion of folk culture into something defined and produced from above according to official interpretations of what was correct; in essence, high culture masquerading as low culture. See: Lachmann, Renate. "Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture." Translated by Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis. *Cultural Critique*. No. 11, Winter, 1988-1989, pp. 115-152.

the charity of others. They provide a model of alternative human relations that is grassroots and self-organized. It is an example of radical equality – a kind of "heaven on Earth," as I heard described by many pilgrims. Arbaeen is not only a potentially revolutionary space because of how it is organized or because of the religious meaning of the holiday. It is also revolutionary in the material realities it produces. The yearly necessity of cooking large amounts of food for thousands of people means Iraqi *husseiniyah* are well-trained in the art of feeding crowds. They also possess the instruments to do so, like massive woks and pots. These tools and know-how proved crucial when protests rocked Iraq in 2018, 2019 and 2021-2. Hundreds of thousands marched to end the sectarian political system in power since the US invasion, which divides representation according to religious identity.<sup>98</sup> They frequently raised and reworked slogans that originated from or referenced Ashura and Arbaeen.<sup>99</sup> Protestors occupied major squares for weeks at a time, defending them in pitched battles with police that left hundreds dead.

Control over these spaces was dependent on protestors' physical presence over long periods of time, requiring a constant supply of food. It was precisely the tools used during Arbaeen that were re-used during occupations. Material implements like pots and pans that created the possibility of the Arbaeen pilgrimage in turn facilitated the emergence of spaces of revolution in Iraq's capital. And as Iraqi protestors found their activities restricted by state authorities, many took advantage of the relative freedom of Arbaeen to advertise their beliefs.<sup>100</sup> Individual protestors carried signs such as, "Today I am a pilgrim, tomorrow a revolutionary,"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> For history and contextualization of the protests, see: Ali, Zahra. "From Recognition to Redistribution? Protest Movements in Iraq in the Age of 'New Civil Society." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 15, no. 4, 26 Mar. 2021, pp. 528–542.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> For closer analysis of the slogans, see: Mustafa, Balsam. "All about Iraq: Re-Modifying Older Slogans and Chants in Tishreen [October] Protests." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 58, no. 3, 7 Jan. 2022, pp. 401–420.
<sup>100</sup> This despite the fact that organizers and security forces declared a truce during the pilgrimage. See: Saadoun, Mustafa. "Will Arbaeen Observance Bring Peace or Protests in Iraq?" *Al-Monitor*, 15 Oct. 2019, www.al-

monitor.com/originals/2019/10/iraq-protests-arbaeen.html.

keeping the movement's flame alive and visible. Arbaeen also provided a space for activists to meet free of surveillance by state authorities and paramilitaries.



Figure 40

An Iraqi pilgrim holds a sign in solidarity with protests in Basra along with a cross and Zulfiqar, symbolizing inter-religious unity, 2018. (Photo: Alex Shams)

Foreign pilgrims also take advantage of Arbaeen's relative freedom. Some Iranian pilgrims carry portraits of alternative religious leaders, such as Ayatollahs Sistani and Shirazi, in simple but powerful gestures that challenge Iran's ruling ideology (based on the supremacy of Iran's Supreme Leader). The freedom experienced by Iranians also extends to ritual acts forbidden by the state. While walking on Arbaeen, I met a young man named Ali from the working-class suburb of Khomeinishahr, near Isfahan in central Iran. Arbaeen was the only time Ali or any of his friends ever stepped foot outside of Iran.<sup>101</sup> Ali noted that in Khomeinishahr, many residents were proud and active practitioners of *qamehzani*, cutting themselves with sharp metal chains in Ashura ceremonies and hitting themselves as blood flows. For years Iranian state

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Ali and many others he knew in Khomeinishahr had allowed merchants in Esfahan to use their national ID cards to import goods while evading taxes in return for a small fee. The cost of the merchants' tax evasion was that the local residents would be slapped with a *mamnu* `*ol-khoruj* status, preventing them from leaving the country until they paid the fees. Since none of the residents planned or could afford to travel, they didn't care. The only place they wanted to go, Ali explained, was Karbala – and since they knew the borders were so packed that the guards couldn't check, they shared visas and ripped out the passport pages with entry and exit stamps to cross easily in the melee.

authorities had tried to stop the street parades and detain participants, only to find themselves set upon by chain-wielding crowds. "Even if Imam Hussein himself told us to stop," Ali explained irreverently, his mouth splitting into a devious smile, "we'd yell ' $Y\bar{a}$  Hassan!' and keep at it!" The joke was that the worshippers would continue engaging in the act even if the saint told them not to, preferring to switch allegiance to his brother Hassan than to stop. But in Iraq, where many Iraqi worshipers also engage in forms of self-flagellation that entailed spilling blood, the youths of Khomeinishahr could carry out the ritual without fear of interference from authorities.<sup>102</sup>

While the Iranian government may try to portray itself as responsible for revitalizing Arbaeen – indirectly, at least, by inspiring Iraqi Shia Muslims through the Iranian Revolution – in an effort to bolster its own legitimacy, its actual presence in the pilgrimage is a drop in the ocean. And at times, it can even backfire. Zaynab, whose testimony at Arbaeen in 2003 opens this section, returned for the pilgrimage in 2018, now in her 60s. On her fourth evening of walking alone, as she reached Karbala's outskirts, she approached a large *mowkeb* run by the Imam Reza shrine in Iran. Among the tens of thousands of Iraqi *mowkeb* along the route, a few thousand *mowkeb* are run by associations from elsewhere, primarily Iran, comprising less than 5% of the total. Some Iranian pilgrims gravitate to them hoping to be able to communicate in Persian. As it was near midnight, Zaynab arrived and asked for a place to sleep. She was told there was no blankets available but could lie down on the grass nearby. As a cold wind blew across the path, she angrily snapped back, "So it's all just a bunch of slogans when you say you're ready to serve pilgrims. You don't actually have anything to give out!" She then proceeded to the neighboring grassroots Iraqi *mowkeb*. She recounted that when she asked for a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Interestingly, Edith Szanto also mentions Shia Muslims engaging in self-flagellation as a kind of protest against Iranian state policies, in this case by South Asian seminary students in Syria. See: Szanto, Edith. "Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals." *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, pp. 75–91.

place to sleep, they gave her an area to lie down and apologized for only having a single blanket left to offer. "At the Iraqi mowkeb, the guys were sorry for giving me only one blanket – whereas at the Iranian one, they didn't even apologize for offering me nothing!"

Zaynab, a strong supporter of the Iranian government, drew on her experience to portray Iranian authorities as ungracious, incompetent, and interested in scoring political points, in contrast to Iraqis, who embodied generosity and humanity. Iranian pilgrims frequently drew on their experience at Arbaeen to critique their fellow countrymen. A pilgrim from Tehran in his 30s praised Iraqis for being generous despite their poverty, contrasting them with his perception of Iranians as spoiled and ungracious. "It's only the Iranian *mowkeb* that make a big fuss about what they give out, yelling at pilgrims to remember Imam Reza," a saint buried in Iran, and waving flags that read "*Labeyk yā Khamenehei*" ("We dedicate our lives to you, Oh Khamenei!"). "Everyone comes for Hussein," he continued, "and yet these guys come to wave these flags!" While for Iranians not at Arbaeen, the pilgrimage seemed to embody Iranian state authority, for many Iranians who did take part, the pilgrimage created new reasons for critique.

It also gave them an opportunity to build connections with Iraqis that could address, and perhaps start to heal, the animosity of decades past. Sarah, a middle-aged Iranian woman traveling with her family, had stayed several nights in Iraqi homes during Arbaeen. Although most visitors stay in *mowkeb* along the path, many Iraqis from nearby villages invite pilgrims into their homes for dinner and to stay the night. They often appear on the path close to sunset, offering free lodging to weary travelers. Sarah said that she initially hesitated to accept the offer, but then decided it could be an interesting experience – and was better than sleeping around dozens of total strangers in a *mowkeb*. She recalled that when she first entered her Iraqi host's home, she noticed a portrait of a young man hanging on the wall. "I became afraid that their son

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had died in the Iran-Iraq War," she explained, suddenly worried that the Iraqi family might harbor a grudge against Iranians for having killed him. "But when I asked them, they explained that he had been killed by ISIS while serving as a soldier."

For Iranians, the Iran-Iraq War is the defining conflict of their modern history; the majority of "martyrs" visible in Iranian cities are from that time. Iraq looms thus large as a historical enemy, and Iraqis regularly appear as alternatively nefarious or buffoonish villains in historical comedies and dramas about the war. For Iraqis, however, the 1980s conflict was the beginning of a series of wars that continue into the present, and it is less central to their modern history as a result. For Iranians, there is very little popular understanding of the Iraqi historical narrative or the suffering that has been caused by successive wars and foreign invasions. The official Iranian narrative of Muslim unity with Iraqis may work well as a slogan, but it doesn't afford ordinary Iranians a deeper understanding of Iraqis' experiences. Arbaeen, however, makes possible horizontal connections between Iranians and Iraqis that can build substantive person-to-person relationships – including as they stay in each other's houses.<sup>103</sup> "*Hussein yijma'nā*" ("Hussein brings us together") is a common Arbaeen slogan repeated in official messaging. But he does so in ways that are quite unexpected.

If, as we saw in Chapter 3, some Iranians in the 2000s felt that Iraq "needed a Khomeini" to fix the country, a decade later many Iranians were moving to Iraq precisely because it was a space free of his ideology. Despite the government's extensive financial support of Islamic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> By the same token, many Iranians can attend Arbaeen without engaging in such relationships. For example, some young Iranians who identify as "revolutionary" in outlook attend the pilgrimage with images of Iranian wartime "martyrs" clipped to their backpacks. Ironically, they carry the images of men who died fighting against Iraqis – often the same Iraqis who attend the pilgrimage today, given that mass conscription forced Iraqis from all ways of life to take part in the war (just as in Iran). I did not have a chance to talk to any of these young people about how they understood the act of carrying these portraits into Iraq. But it is likely that they did not see it as contradictory, as they would have viewed the Iraqis around them as having been oppressed by Saddam Hussein's regime and thus potentially "on Iran's side." More research with such participants is needed, however, to understand their views.

seminaries in Iran, hundreds of Iranians seminarians moved to Iraq in the late 2010s.<sup>104</sup> Many volunteer during Arbaeen, including a young man named Reza. In his early 20s when we spoke in 2018, Reza had entered the seminary at age 16. Born in a working-class neighborhood of eastern Tehran, he attended a few seminaries in the capital but became disillusioned with what he saw as the ideological nature of his studies. Reza made the difficult decision to move to Najaf. "When I came to Iraq, I felt a sense of total freedom," he recounted, noting that he became more critical of the Iranian government the longer he spent there. He believed that Arbaeen had attracted Iranians from diverse backgrounds – "pro-revolution, anti-revolution, mullahs, rich, poor" - and had helped overcome divisions in Iranian society that the government's imposition of religious political ideology created. He noted that pro-government Iranians had tried to use the pilgrimage to promote their ideology but had been stymied by Iraqi religious leaders, like Ayatollah Sistani, who opposed attempts to use Arbaeen in this way. In 2020, Sistani even went so far as to establish an office of clerics to deploy on the Arbaeen route to dissuade political factions from making themselves visible during the pilgrimage.<sup>105</sup> Sistani, like most religious authorities in Iraq, have kept a largely hands-off approach to the pilgrimage, describing it as an expression of Shia collective identity. They support its organization through services for pilgrims, especially in the shrine cities themselves. But they have refrained from attempting to push political meanings onto participants through this support.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> An estimate from 2018 placed the number at 400 in the years prior, including the grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini. See: Mamouri, Ali. "Students at Qom Seminary Are Leaving for Najaf." *Al-Monitor*, 10 Oct. 2018, www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/10/iran-qom-howza-iraq-najaf-ali-khomeini.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> Mamouri, Ali. "Despite Covid-19, Political Crisis, Iraqi Shiites March on Karbala." *Al-Monitor*, 8 Oct. 2020, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/iraq-arbaeen-shiite-protests.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> For figures like Sistani, this is especially the case due to their broader opposition to the implemention of an Iranian-style religious political system in Iraq. Consciousness of the drawbacks of such a system have emerged in part through correspondence with dissident clerics insdie Iran, like Ayatollah Montazeri. See: Rahimi, Babak. "Democratic Authority, Public Islam, and Shi'i Jurisprudence in Iran and Iraq: Hussain Ali Montazeri and Ali Sistani." *International Political Science Review*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2012, pp. 193–208.

Reza made the most of his time in Najaf, learning conversational Arabic, meeting religious leaders and students from diverse backgrounds, and traveling between the shrine cities. In contrast to a common saying about the dreariness of seminary students' lives in Najaf – *Khubz al-Sha`ir, Ma' al-Bir, wa Ziārat al-Amir* (خبز الشعير، ماء البئر و زيارة الأمير) – meaning that their lives consisted of salty bread, water from a well, and pilgrimage to the shrine – in Iraq, young Iranian students like Reza found a freer and more fulfilling life than back home.

It wasn't just Iranians who found a freer space in Arbaeen. For Shia Muslims from countries where their communities face violence or persecution, Arbaeen represents a space unlike any other. This is especially true given the anti-Shia bombings that have plagued the Middle East and South Asia since the early 2000s. Instead of performing mourning rituals in walled compounds as they do back home, groups carry out rituals openly as passerby stop to watch and join in. The steps, movements, and songs may be unfamiliar, but religious names like "Hussein" or "Haydar" frequently appear, allowing others to follow along and inspiring an awareness of transnational similarities between believers. Posters along *mowkeb* walls advertise Shia Muslim political prisoners in countries as diverse as Azerbaijan, Nigeria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Farhad, a British pilgrim whose family were originally Gujarati Muslims expelled from Uganda in the 1970s, stressed how much Arbaeen felt like a safe space in contrast to the Hajj to Mecca. Taking part in Arbaeen as part of a group of 450 from the United Kingdom, all walking at their own pace and carrying out Urdu- and English-language mourning ceremonies at mowkeb they had reserved for the group, Farhad noted that he felt a peace in Arbaeen robbed from him in Saudi Arabia. "It was a bad experience there; it felt like the guards were watching you the whole time." Saudi authorities have long imposed prohibitions on pilgrims engaging in acts that do not align with Wahhabi practice, such as saying prayers over graves or at the sites of now-

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demolished shrines to holy figures of Shia history.<sup>107</sup> "If you pause at the graves, they come and push you. And not with a feather like at shrines here," referring to furry sticks used to manage crowds at Iraqi shrines. "They push you hard, and they're carrying guns. It wasn't comfortable at all. But here, in Iraq, it feels like being home."

In contrast to the heavily-managed and bureaucratized Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca, in which pilgrims rarely encounter locals, the level of person-to-person contact between Iraqis and non-Iraqis at Arbaeen contributed to a sense of person-to-person connectivity. It also created spaces for women to expand their social roles. In addition to the numerous testimonies of Iranian women I have drawn on in this chapter, all of whom attended the pilgrimage alone or with female relatives, many women from South Asia also attended the pilgrimage alone. Fawzia, a medical student from Karachi, Pakistan in her 20s, for example, made a yearly trek to Iraq to volunteer at the medical tent belonging to a Pakistani *hey'at* that passed out food and drink to pilgrims. In doing so, she not only engaged in a voluntary act of charity but also expanded her social and geographic horizons, facilitated by a pilgrimage that allowed a different kind of role and access to the public sphere than she enjoyed back home.

The ideal world that Arbaeen represents comes to an abrupt halt at noon on the day of Arbaeen itself, when everything stops being free and millions of Iranians rush to get on transportation to the border. As Iraqis return to destinations much closer and easier to reach, hotels in Karbala are booked well in advance or charge astronomical rates, leaving foreigners in a difficult position. I witnessed numerous arguments between hotel employees and pilgrims, suddenly thrust back into the world of capitalist relations. In 2018, the relative weakness of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Bianchi, Robert. *Guests of God: Pilgrimage and Politics in the Islamic World*. Oxford University Press, 2008: pg. 17-18.

Iranian rial vis-à-vis the Iraqi dinar left many Iranians unable to afford even basic provisions and left many feeling cheated or angry at Iraqis, who only a day before they had been praising.

This is the tricky thing about religious rituals that evince an image of an alternative reality: the second they finish, that alternative reality abruptly disappears. But regardless of what happens after Arbaeen, the memory of the pilgrimage itself remains strong in pilgrims' memories. Perhaps it is precisely the temporally delimited dimension of Arbaeen that makes its persistence and existence as a space possible, in stark contrast to the (permanent) shrines that authorities have co-opted and clash over. In this temporary space, participants take part in creating a different version of humanity. This brief glimpse of another world makes the rest of life a little more bearable, if just because it reminds them that the extant order is not permanent, natural, or necessary – that, when human beings are at their most unrestricted, they take care of each other and organize relations differently than the top-down models promoted by states. This, in itself, may not overturn political systems. But in the horizontal relations it makes possible between people, precisely because it is such a heterogenous, self-organized space, it creates connections and visions of alternative orders that can be recalled to imagine a more just world.

## Conclusion

Iranian revolutionary intellectual Ali Shariati, writing in the 1970s, described the Hajj as a transformative experience in which the distinctions between people fell away, symbolized in the waves of humans moving equally over Mecca's hills toward the Kaaba and being received by the city's people. Today, those hills have been bulldozed to create luxury hotels, and the pilgrimage to Mecca is hierarchically defined by visible class distinctions. As luxury hotels increasingly replace travelers' lodging in Iran's shrine cities (see Chapter 2), such scenes are increasingly rare there as well. Shariati's vision of a revolutionary uprising espousing equality in

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the name of Shia Muslim tradition occurred in Iran only a couple of years after his death. But if he were alive today, to see a scene similar to what he referred to, he would have to travel to Iraq.

A week after Arbaeen in 2018 I found myself in a taxi rushing to the Najaf airport, stuck in traffic and late for a flight back to Tehran. As we reached the main airport road, we were confronted by thousands of pilgrims walking. Surprised to see the Arbaeen scene seemingly repeating itself in front of me, I asked the taxi driver what was happening. "This is for the Prophet's death," he explained. "People come from across the south to visit Imam Ali's grave to pay their respects. They left their homes at Arbaeen to walk here and then went back home. Now they've walked back again." As guards blocked the streets to ensure their passage, people offered snacks and juice to the pilgrims. While Arbaeen may be the grandest of Iraq's pilgrimages, it is but one of many holidays that elicits these long walks.<sup>108</sup>

Back in Iran, on a much smaller scale, every year at Muharram these alternative orders emerge again in the independent *hey'at* activities and processions that take over the streets. While generally framed by attendees as religious events, the spaces of sociality they provide challenge our understandings of what a strictly religious public sphere looks like. This became clear in 2020, when due to COVID restrictions the Iranian government banned *hey'at*s from engaging in processions (except for a handful of government-affiliated *hey'at*. The *hey'at* stayed away from the streets of Tehran – but the crowds that usually come out to watch came anyways.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> In Iran, Arbaeen is taken as the prototype of a "walking pilgrimage." However, such examples of walking pilgrimages abound in Shia Muslim history, including the famous 1601 walking pilgrimage of Shah Abbas to Mashhad in Iran (which in recent years has been revived as a popular ritual, seemingly in response to the popularity of Arbaeen). See: Mawer, Caroline. "Shah 'Abbās and the Pilgrimage to Mashhad." *Iran*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2011, pp. 123–147. It is unclear, however, if the other waling pilgrimages in Iraq are based on Arbaeen or if they evolved in parallel but are just less known or well-attended. It is possible, for example, that walking pilgrimages to the other shrines, such as this one to Najaf or the 1990s pilgrimages to Samarra mentioned earlier, attracted more local participation. It is not entirely clear when Arbaeen evolved to become a holiday that attracted people from across Iraq. More research is needed, especially on earlier 20<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century history, to determine the historical geography that Arbaeen draws on.

Hundreds of young people poured out onto the main squares, hanging out, flirting, and smoking hashish until late into the evening. The contrast between the technical, theological meaning of Muharram and the social spaces it engenders became highly visible when the processions were removed, but people insisted on enjoying the atmosphere that usually accompanies them. Interpretations of religion that focus on theology and textual meaning often miss these social worlds or read them as contradicting the "true meaning" of the holiday. But these religious holidays offer not only self organization and mutual aid, like at Arbaeen, but also spaces for meeting. Particularly in Iran today, where authorities have sought for decades to control public morality by policing young women and men's bodies, the use of Muharram processions as social spaces is a defiant, political act, a reclamation not only of public space but of religious ritual and its possibilities.

The walking processions of Iraq similarly disrupt social organization. The act of providing for pilgrims points to relations of debt rooted in the deepest and oldest kinds of human connections – care. Rituals such as multi-day walking pilgrimages only work outside of capitalist time – for how could we make sense of half a country leaving their homes for three weeks at a time to offer gifts to others? And then doing it again on a smaller scale a week later, and again and again throughout the year? The ritual engenders a different conceptualization of time in which the collective belief in the importance of the holiday and its social dimensions cannot be reduced to theological determinism. Arbaeen allows the usual hierarchies of daily life and of religion to fade into the background in favor of a more egalitarian spirit. In these temporary spaces hierarchies recede in importance, while the focus turns to social relations that create different possibilities of feeling, connection, and solidarity – even if temporarily. But it is precisely these temporary spaces that allow adherents to glimpse alternative possibilities of

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social organization, glimpses that not only interrupt the normal social, political, and economic order but also can create unexpected possibilities of revolutionary mobilization.

In this chapter, I have explored two spaces of alterity and opposition to the state's cultural and ideological project of reshaping Iranian citizens and their religious rituals and practices. In contrast to the preceding chapters, where I have outlined the emergence, development, and expansion of the state's cultural project to produce a "modern Islamic society," in this chapter I have focused on how Iranians as well as Iraqis have carved out or participated in the production of ritual spaces that challenge state hegemony over the religious sphere. In doing so, they have created temporary spaces through these rituals that allow participants to imagine possibilities for alternative social orders and that can contribute to the emergence of ruptures, rebellions, and even revolutions, not only in the discursive traditions they negotiate but also in the material connections and realities they produce.



Figure 41

An Iraqi pilgrim walked with a sign that reads: "Today I am a pilgrim, tomorrow I am a revolutionary."

## Epilogue

چه کسی می خواهد من و تو ما نشویم ؟ خانه اش ویران باد! ... من اگر برخیزم, تو اگر برخیزی, همه برمی خیزند! من اگر بنشینم, تو اگر بنشینی, چه کسی برخیزد ؟! چه کسی بنجه دسی با دشمن بستیزد ؟! چه کسی پنجه در پنجه ی هر دشمن دون آویزد ؟! دشتها نام تو را می گویند. کوهها شعر مرا می خوانند

Who is it that wishes for me and you, not to become "we"? That he should face ruin!... If I rise, and if you rise, we all shall rise! But if I stay seated, and you stay seated, who will rise? Who will confront the enemy? Who will lock claws with those of the vile foe? The meadows will call out your name, and the mountains will read out my poem... Iranian poet Hamid Mosaddeq 1

When I left Iran in summer 2021, it felt as if a dark cloud had descended over the country. In June, the country had held a presidential election. But in contrast to the buoyant, competitive campaigns that Iranian presidential elections usually precipitated, the mood that year had been completely muted. The Guardian Council had disqualified the vast majority of people who put their name forward to run, excluding even the Reformist candidates normally accepted within the bounds of electoral competition (Rouhani, the outgoing president, was a Reformist).<sup>2</sup> This left a lackluster group of candidates, many of whom were unknown or not particularly liked. But it was clear from the selection who Iranians were meant to choose – Ebrahim Raisi.

A chief justice and head manager of the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad from 2016-19, Raisi had lost the 2017 presidential election. After his loss, he was subsequently appointed head of the judiciary, seemingly as a consolation prize, by Khamenei. Many speculated that Khamenei

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For more on the rise of 1960s "Guerilla poetry" in Iran, see: Vahabzadeh, Peyman. "Rebellious action and "guerrilla poetry:" Dialectics of art and life in 1970s Iran" in Talatoff, Kamran (ed.) *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks*. Routledge: 2015, pp. 103-22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Hassanzadeh Ajiri, Denise. "'Reality Is Even Worse': Reformist Hopefuls Banned from Iran's Parliamentary Poll." *The Guardian*, 19 Jan. 2016, www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/jan/19/iran-guardian-council-blocks-reformists-february-parliamentary-poll.

was hoping to groom the awkward, uncharismatic Raisi as his successor. Raisi had previously been a top judge during the 1980s, presiding alongside others the mass executions of political prisoners in 1988. His undemocratic, engineered rise in 2021 recalled the darkest days of repression in Iran, when elections had barely a semblance of free choice and dissenters could be brutalized or killed for the slightest public infraction.

After years of conducting research on shrines in Iran, I was struck by how much the election campaign recalled many of the arguments that had been crystallizing in my head. Raisi had presided over a period of continued expansion in the power, clout, and economic wealth of the Imam Reza shrine, whose endowment was in the billions of dollars and was one of the main economic engines of eastern Iran. The fact that he had been appointed to lead it pointed to its central political importance. The endowment had developed a massive portfolio of investment inside and outside Iran, cultivating relations with members of the Revolutionary Guards and drawing on Iran's growing influence in neighboring countries like Iraq to extend its reach. The shrine saw tens of millions of visitors yearly, including millions of foreign pilgrims. And Raisi had drawn on his position in Mashhad to extend his political power locally, in tandem with his father-in-law Ahmad Alamolhoda, the Supreme Leader's representative in the city. Mashhad is Iran's second-biggest city and home to a diverse, youthful population and a cosmopolitan landscape; Raisi had worked with Alamolhoda to repress social freedoms and ban activities, like concerts, that were elsewhere in Iran perfectly legal. His rationale was that Mashhad was a "holy city," and as the seat of Imam Reza, it was unbecoming for pop concerts to be held in city limits (despite being one of Iran's largest, wealthiest, and most developed major cities, second only to Tehran). Raisi seemed to embody exactly the conceptualization of the shrine and the nexus of political, economic, and spiritual power that, in the rest of my dissertation, I was describing.

In the weeks before the election, authorities – perhaps recognizing that a large proportion of the public felt that the government had gone too far in banning real competition from the election – began a campaign to drum up enthusiasm for voting. Authorities had always pointed to the regularly high turnout in presidential elections – between 70-80% – as a sign of the Islamic Republic's legitimacy. Even as they engineered the result by handpicking the candidates, they feared a low turnout could undermine their frequent appeals to popular legitimacy. Indeed, it was a point of pride among officials that the current system of government had come to power in a popular referendum, in which the majority of Iranians voted for an "Islamic Republic." No matter that it was unclear what this system would entail in practice when Iranians voted in 1979; for those in power, it was proof of the "Republican" nature of their divine system.

In May 2021, posters appeared across the country with the slogan: "The Islamic Republic is a Shrine." The posters were based on a quote from the will of Qassem Soleimani, assassinated the year before on US President Trump's order: "Today, the camp of Hussein, son of Ali [i.e. Imam Hussein], is Iran. Know that the Islamic Republic is a shrine, and if this shrine remains, the other shrines will also remain. If the enemy destroys this shrine, no shrine will be left; neither Abrahamic shrines nor Mohammadan shrines." <sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Mohammadan (*Mohammadi*) here meaning Muslim.



Figure 42

Three versions of "The Islamic Republic is a Shrine" poster. On the left, Iran is covered in a metal grill [zarih] of the kind that surround the tombs of saints in shrines. In the center, the flag of Iran is topped by a golden shrine dome. And on the right, the map of Iran is made to resemble the plaza used by pilgrims to enter the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad (located top-right).

The ubiquitous shrine imagery of the campaign left little doubt about who Iranians were supposed to vote for. The blatant engineering of the elections even led seasoned Reformist politician Mostafa Tajzadeh, a former deputy minister, to decry the irony of the invocation of the shrine. Referencing Khamenei's ever-present slogan that if Iran had not "gone there" to "defend the shrines," Iran's enemies would have "come here" and torn the country apart, Tajzadeh commented: "We were worried about Iran becoming war-torn like Syria. It didn't. But the Ba'ath party [i.e. Syria's authoritarian ruling party] became the model for our ruling system."<sup>4</sup> A year later, Tajzadeh was imprisoned for publishing "falsehoods against the system," among other charges.<sup>5</sup> Such political persecution became increasingly common; one of my friends in Iran who had attended a political discussion of around 20 people in a private home, where she passionately argued for those present to boycott the elections to protest the lack of choice, was called up for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> <u>https://twitter.com/mashabani/status/1399659359202861057</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> "Prominent Iranian Reformist Tajzadeh Sentenced to Five Years in Prison." *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 12 Oct. 2022, www.rferl.org/a/iran-tajzadeh-reformer-five-years-prison/32079225.html.

questioning by intelligence agents soon after Raisi's victory – even though, she told me while rolling her eyes, she had decided at the last minute to vote anyways. She was one of less than half of Iranians who voted; voter turnout was just under 49%, one of the lowest turnouts recorded in modern Iran.<sup>6</sup>

But even as political space closed, Iranians continued pushing back in ways little and big. Only a few months later, protests broke out across southwestern and central Iran in response to water shortages that were a combined result of global warming and poor management of Iran's limited water resources. In Esfahan, thousands of all ages poured into the streets to protest the drying-up of the Zayandeh Rood river that runs through the city center. In one of the most iconic images, security forces on motorcycles drove through the dry river bed toward the crowds while a single woman in a long black chador – marking her as a woman from a religious background – stood in front of them with her fist raised in defiance. Even as authorities securitized the public sphere to the extent that even peaceful marches were rapidly met with militarized enforcement, Iranians continued to raise their voices – and fists.



Figure 43

A screenshot of a video widely-circulated on Iranian social media depicting a woman confronting security forces in Esfahan.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Hafezi, Parisa. "Khamenei Protege Wins Iran Election amid Low Turnout." *Reuters*, 20 June 2021, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-sole-moderate-presidential-candidate-congratulates-raisi-his-victory-state-2021-06-19/.

A year later, in fall 2022, even larger protests broke out after the death of Mahsa Zhina Amini, a young woman from Iranian Kurdistan who was detained while visiting Tehran for being improperly veiled. In the year since Raisi's election, morality police had become far more present, visible, and strict in public spaces than they had for years been under the former President Rouhani, who had relaxed enforcement of "Islamic" clothing regulations. Amini died in custody, and in outrage at her perceived killing by security forces for not fully covering her hair, protests broke out in Kurdistan and then across Iran against state repression carried out in the name of Islam. Tens of thousands participated across the country, and the protests lasted for months, with hundreds killed as security forces repressed them and rounded up demonstrators.

While authorities drew on a playbook they had used frequently against the protest movements of the last half-decade – claiming that protestors were against Islam – many religious Iranians vocally rejected these tactics. Hundreds of images from the protests depicted women wearing veils and those without standing in solidarity, in reproach of state efforts to define proper Iranian or Islamic conduct and polarize society. Some denounced publicly any "flag, Quran, or mosque that defends oppression," and many more privately expressed deep misgivings about how blatantly their faith was being used as an excuse to kill people on the streets.<sup>7</sup> People fought back against President Raisi's plan to make all of Iran into a shrine.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Daragahi, Borzou. "'How Do We Defend This?': Pious Conservatives Speak out against Iran Regime." *The Independent*, 20 Oct. 2022, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-mahsa-amini-khameini-conservatives-b2206737.html.



Figure 44

Two images from the 2022 protests. On the right, a man walks in Esfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Square with a poster that reads: "Why did the morality police kill Mahsa Amini unjustly?" The word used for "unjustly" (*mazlumāneh*) is that used widely in poetic recitations of the Battle of Karbala to describe the slaughter of innocents at the hands of villainous foes. He thus deploys this religious vocabulary against the state.

These two revolts would eventually be crushed. But they created connections between people and memories of dissidence that could not be destroyed. "I lost faith in other Iranians over the last few years," a young woman who participated in the protests in Tehran told me. "I had lost hope. But being on the street, with all these people around me yelling the same slogans for freedom, after a long time, I've felt hope again." In the protest crowds, feelings of solidarity, of fighting together, and of being protected by others were nourished through their practice, healing divisions and suspicions between people fostered by years of repression. Each of these protests created horizontal connections and friendships between people, as they saved each other from security forces, repelled attacks together, and raised their voices in unity. These connections were activated over and over again during the course of the uprising – and were strengthened so they could be activated again in the future. The "political spirituality" that

Foucault had described witnessing on the streets of Tehran during the 1979 Revolution – and the desire to fight for a future even if its parameters were uncertain – seemed alive and well.

Indeed, what was most striking about the revolt was that for years, almost every Iranian I had spoken to of various political stripes had stressed that they did not want a revolution. "We went through one already, we saw what could happen, and we don't want to try that again," was a common refrain, as people stressed the need for reform but not the overturning of the system. Indeed, even Foucault penned an essay with the title "Is it useless to revolt?" after he witnessed Iran's descent into tyranny following the triumph of the 1979 revolution.<sup>8</sup> And yet, as became clear over and over again on the streets of Iran, there is a perpetual allure of revolution, of total change, of making the unthinkable real, that does not diminish with time or experience. The second the opportunity presented itself, thousands poured into the streets, revealing the indelible human desire for freedom, inspiring others to rise up and throw off the chains of fear.

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These tensions were a constant presence in my research. As I explored the contours of a state project to cultivate a particular vision of revolutionary selfhood, I also saw repeatedly how people pushed back, in ways little or small. At shrine after shrine, where the state sought to build a hegemonic narrative that naturalized its authority, I saw how devotees and ordinary people found ways to dissent. In the hills above Shiraz, for example, is a shrine dedicated to Baba Koohi, a 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century Sufi mystic who died in a cave there after retreating from the world. The shrine is well-known to Iranians because the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystical poet Hafez, who is widely read, meditated at the shrine. For years, the site had been a refuge for like-minded mystics. But in the late 2000s, authorities renovated the shrine, building gates around it that limited access to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel, and James Bernauer. "Is It Useless to Revolt?" *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 8, no. 1, Apr. 1981, pp. 2–4.

certain times. When I visited on a Thursday afternoon in 2021, the beginning of the Iranian weekend, it was closed. But despite this, crowds still gather beside it, as musicians play *daf* drums and loudly sing mystical poetry, as crowds clap and children dance. These actions are forbidden by authorities – constituting an unauthorized concert, beside a holy site no less – and when I visited, the singers warned the crowds not to videotape them, for fear that they could suffer repercussions through the transmission of the video in social media. But despite the fear, they continued to hold ecstatic recitations, keeping the tradition alive despite authorities' attempts to bureaucratically remove them.

Further down, in the city center of Shiraz, large swathes of historic urban fabric have been bulldozed in recent decades to make way for the expansion of Shah Cheragh shrine. Atop demolished former homes, today sits a big mall oriented toward pilgrims. Amidst these homes was the House of Bab, a holy place for Iran's Baha'i community. An unrecognized religious minority of around 300,000 people, the Baha'is have been persecuted since their inception by every successive Iranian political regime.<sup>9</sup> Despite repeated outbreaks of mob violence, however, the House of Bab had never been destroyed. But in the 1990s, as part of the area's redevelopment, a boulevard was built atop the site, curving awkwardly right across the building, and a large mosque was erected immediately beside the place where it once stood. Authorities did not at any point announce that they were destroying the holy site; instead, they drew on a bureaucratic logic of efficiency to remove it from existence in the name of ensuring a better flow of traffic.<sup>10</sup> Baha'is are forbidden from officially existing as such in contemporary Iran, and any

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For more on the history of the Bahais, see: Cole, Juan. *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East.* Columbia University Press, 1998.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The use of bureaucratic logics of efficiency are comparable to the urban renewal projects of the United States in the 1950s and 60s, when highway construction and expansion were directed toward lower-income neighborhoods of color, leading to devastation in city after city that primarily uprooted African-Americans. Although each project was articulated in terms of efficiency, an analysis of the choice of specific routes in projects across the country reveals an overarching logic of racial discrimination and segregation.

attempt at openly worshipping at the site would likely lead to major repercussions. But on numerous Baha'i websites, images of the area – and a specific electricity transmission pole beside the newly-constructed boulevard that is said to mark the exact location of the house – are circulated, offering opportunities for digital pilgrimage. And at some Baha'i temples, orange trees are grown that are said to come from the seeds of orange trees once planted in the house's garden, taken out of the country decades ago by a Baha'i pilgrim.<sup>11</sup> This memorialization offers a counter-memory to the official narrative embedded in the newly-renovated shrines and urban fabric. And they are a constant in sites across Iran, especially where homes have been demolished to make way for shrine expansion but nothing has been built in their place yet.<sup>12</sup> These acts may not overthrow unjust rule, but they keep the memories and narratives of injustice alive, as well as the hope of a future where they could possibly be addressed.



Figure 45

An empty lot near Shah Abdol-Azim shrine in Nafarabad neighborhood of Rey, south Tehran, where homes once stood. The area is being destroyed bit by bit to allow the expansion of the shrine. Nearby, former occupants of the home gather regularly beneath a tree that remains standing after the home was destroyed. (Photo: Alex Shams)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Research with Bahais in Shiraz is needed to know if they visit the site or mark it in anyway. For more info on the orange trees: "Orange Tree Is a Living Reminder of the Bab." *Bahais of the United States*, 25 Oct. 2019, www.bahai.us/orange-tree-is-a-living-reminder-of-the-bab/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> In Nafarabad near Shah Abdol Azeem in south Tehran, some members of households still gather beneath the trees of their gardens that remain standing, even as the house has been destroyed. See: Azizi, Shadnaz, et al. *Hashti Tehrāni*. Artstor: 2017.

Even Ali Shariati, the intellectual whose application of leftist thought to Islamic history made him the idealogue of the 1979 Revolution, would eventually be disowned by it. Although today, his name graces streets across Iran, the sale of his works was limited for years, and his family members have faced political persecution, especially as they became critical of the political system. Yet even though he died in 1978, his association with the Islamic Republic has undermined his popular legacy in Iran. Once, as I was talking to an electrician near my home in Tehran, he asked what I did and I told him I was an anthropologist. Seeing his confusion at my response, I explained: "It's the study of society, similar to sociology." I added: "Like Ali Shariati, he was a sociologist." Immediately, his face turned sour. "Shariati? That guy? He was always talking up loads of bullshit." He continued: "When I was a kid, before the Revolution, I used to have Shariati's books. Once, the cops saw I had them and slapped me right across the face. They beat me up for it. Years later, I finally read one of his books, and I thought: 'What is this bullshit?' I got slapped across the face for this?'"

Despite the sullying of his legacy, many of Shariati's critiques of the pre-1979 order seem even more relevant and penchant when applied to the post-1979 order. He noted, in a particularly angry passage, that revolutionary Shi'ites should "turn their backs on the opulent mosques and magnificent palaces of the Caliphs of Islam and turn to the lonely, mud house of Fatima." <sup>13</sup> He continued:

Choose the principle of being ready to protest against the existing conditions, where the ruling government, religious leaders and aristocracy try to show that everything is in accordance with the Will of God, the Divine Law and the satisfaction of God and his creatures. Such things, to the ruling government, included their conquests, their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Shariati, Ali. "Red Shi`ism vs. Black Shi`ism." *Dr. Ali Shariati: Red Shi`ism vs. Black Shi`ism*, www.iranchamber.com/personalities/ashariati/works/red\_black\_shiism.php. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

plundering of mosques, associations, schools, gifts, trusts, and charities and the observance of religious ceremonies and practices. <sup>14</sup>

The irony is that today, the houses of the Imams have been turned into palaces, with shrines more opulent than ever before. But this time, it is being done by a government ruling in the name of revolutionary Shia Islam.

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In the wake of the repression of the September 2022 protest movement, nicknamed the Zhina Uprising, authorities announced that morality police would no longer crawl the streets stopping Iranians for being improperly outfitted. Instead, they would implement "modern" techniques to enforce the rules. This meant the use of facial recognition technology to identify violators, as captured on a network of CCTV cameras that has steadily expanded across Iranian cities in recent years. They stressed that since it would be enforced remotely with tickets and fines, they could avoid unfortunate incidents such as Amini's death in custody. With the support of domestic technology experts and their innovations, and some help from experts from China, authorities could enforce their clothing rules on the nation's population – in a "modern" way.

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to explore how since 1979, Iranian authorities have sought to build a "modern Islamic civilization," imagining that through a modernization of religion and religious places, Iranian society as a whole could bloom into its most perfect version. Indeed, as if in response to some critics who have argued that the project of political Islam is to bring Muslims back to "1,400 years ago" – i.e. the age of the Prophet Muhammad – the vision of Islamic governance and selfhood cultivated and promoted by Iranian authorities is resolutely modern. It is precisely the sense that modernity is good, but must be implemented in an authentically local way, that motivates the shape of the projects that have emerged. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Ibid

deployment of modernity as a tool of authoritarian resilience and of repression has repeatedly had the opposite effect of that which is intended, turning Iranians against it. But it has also captured, and limited, Iranians' imaginations.

I interviewed Pouria in Tehran in 2019. He was from a religious background and had previously taken part in the Green Movement. But he became disillusioned after the movement was repressed. He felt that the concentration of economic power in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards as well as endowments, particularly the Imam Reza shrine, limited economic opportunities and was irreversible. "The power and connections they have let them do whatever they want," he explained. "This country is their property. Khomeini came and made a revolution, and he went to war. Now it belongs to them. We're just renters here." This sense of desperation was common, even among nominal government supporters who felt the economy was under a stranglehold of businessmen and foundations connected to the state.

In the wake of the 2022 protests, a slogan spread on social media: "Woman, Life, Freedom," based on a Kurdish leftist, feminist chant. It came to define the feminist, leftist, and women-led character of the uprising. In response, another slogan spread: "Man, Homeland, Freedom." It emerged possibly as a retort, and possibly as a complement. It soon became picked up by those against the revolt inside the country, who saw it as an embodiment of everything wrong with the uprising (and the need for strong male figures), as well as by supporters of Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former monarch who had for decades fashioned himself as an alternative to the Islamic Republic from exile. The fact that this slogan, which inverted the feminist vision of the revolt and replaced it with a masculinist vision of the homeland, could be adopted by both spoke to the shared masculinist imaginaries that both conservative discourses draw on.

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The lack of democratic space and alternatives inside Iran pushes people to look for heroes, encouraging an anti-democratic tendency that could as easily be applied to General Qassem Soleimani as to Reza Pahlavi. But the 2022 protests were, at their core, a demand for the fulfilment of the promises of the 1979 revolution: social justice, equality, freedom, and independence. Indeed, the mobilization of women was one of the key accomplishments of the Revolution – and in the protests on the streets in 2022, this project was moved forward. But efforts to hijack this revolt and make it something else abounded. What was needed was an alliance of revolutionary forces in Iran and outside with religious Iranians who opposed state repression – and it was precisely through the horizontal connections being built on the streets of Iranian cities, and the ensuing public debates, that such an alliance could be imagined. Sometimes, these connections were forged in prison cells.

Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, a journalist, women's rights activist, and member of parliament who is also former president Rafsanjani's daughter, was first arrested in the aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement protests. She was then repeatedly arrested in the years since. Devoutly religious, she wears a long black chador. Her experience in prison has marked her; when she has emerged, she has repeatedly gone to meet Iranians from persecuted categories, such as Baha'is and converts to Christianity. As a result of her experiences in jail, she came to support the separate of religion and government. In the wake of the 2022 protests, she argued: "I believe that a religious government is no longer fit for the country. We have corrupted religion. ... I say I want transformation because I believe that a religious government does more damage to religion and ideological governments can do more injustice. They can more easily exploit

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people's beliefs and hide behind them." <sup>15</sup> These sentiments have always existed among some religious intellectuals, but have become increasingly common in recent years. They are voiced, even though it is a crime to argue for political secularism in contemporary Iran.

As the twists and turns of the uprising make clear, every moment is deeply contingent. This is something that became clear to me during my research. Much of what I have described in these chapters was not necessarily the result of a grand scheme whose goals were clear from the outset. Instead, decisions were made, things developed and changed, and shifts happened. Past events that from the perspective of the present seem pre-planned were often spontaneous reactions to uncertainty. Much of what has occurred in Iran in the last few decades was, in part, a response to events and processes abroad, in particular the US-led War on Terror that militarized the region to an unprecedented extent. But these processes can take different turns in an instant.

I didn't begin my research looking for geopolitics. I was fascinated by shrines as holy places. The more time I spent researching them, the more I understood how they fit into a much larger story. I realized that the shrine has emerged as a centerpiece of state governance and ideology, even if it didn't start out that way. It has ended up a tool of statecraft, expansion, and protection and projection of power, one that is rooted in Iranian and regional geography. The more I followed the trail of shrines in Iran, the more I was surprised, not only by how much the state was re-imagining religion, but also by how much the project seemed to be backfiring.

For example, in other Muslim-majority countries, it is considered highly disrespectful and potentially dangerous to insult religious figures. And in many regions, Islamic parties have widespread support, often emerging out of many of the same reasons that, in 1979, many

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Shahrabi, Shima. "Faezeh Hashemi on Her Incarceration, Protests and the Opposition." *IranWire*, 7 Apr. 2023, iranwire.com/en/politics/115276-iranwire-exclusive-faezeh-hashemi-on-her-incarceration-protests-and-the-opposition/.

Iranians supported the emergence of an Islamic Republic. But in Iran, very few people espouse such a vision of an ideal Islamic society. Indeed, because people are living in a postrevolutionary state defined by attempted implementation of Islamic ideals, for many Iranians, such ideas today sound ridiculous. And because of the Islamic Republic's failure at creating an ideal society, Islam itself has come under popular critique in a way I could never have imagined elsewhere. In Iran, I frequently heard blasphemy and ridicule directed toward the Prophet Muhammad and other revered Islamic figures expressed in public. At some points in my research, it felt like every time I stepped in a shared taxi, I was entering a conversation that would inevitably shift from cursing government officials to cursing Islam and everything associated with it. The fact that the state had drawn on Islam to authorize and legitimize its rule had had the effect of making Islam a topic of public debate in ways I could never have imagined. It is in part to understand these surprising moments that I have written this dissertation.

In this dissertation, I have sought to explore the process that led Iran here. In **Chapter 1**, I explored how the modernization of shrines was deployed by the state as part of a cultural project that involved re-narrativizing Iranian history and its landscape as a sacred geography, as well as how it became an opportunity to 'correct' Iranians' practices of Islam, produce a new pantheon of 'political' saints, and to discipline bodies and minds. In **Chapter 2**, I examined how this project was tied to an economic transformation of Iran's shrine cities that drew on an existing transnational network of Shia Muslim pilgrimage. I looked at how Qom was turned into a model of the state's brand of Islamic modernity through the neoliberalization of existing networks of shrine-linked capitalism, producing the city as one oriented toward foreign pilgrims and visitors and, in the process, uprooting and disentangling local communities from the urban landscape. In **Chapter 3**, I turned my attention to Iranian pilgrims' experiences on pilgrimage in

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neighboring Iraq as well as Iranian authorities' roles, alongside the US military, in transforming Iraq's urban geography since the 2003 invasion. I argued that architecture and urban planning played a key role in the sectarianization of Iraq's landscape as well as the production of sectarian fear among Iranian pilgrims, reshaping their sense of religious identity and (in)security in the process. I then looked in **Chapter 4** at how this regional context of militarization had been incorporated into ideal models of masculinity promoted by the state and cultivated at shrines in rituals links to the Basiji paramilitary. I tied this to the state's increasing securitization of the domestic landscape, examining how these dynamics were tied to class conflict in Iran that surged in the latter half of the 2010s. Finally, in **Chapter 5**, I examined how Iranians and other Shia Muslims have continued to draw on religious rituals, particularly those tied with shrines, to create heterogenous spaces where alternative realities can be imagined and horizontal connections can be produced, away from top-down state-led projects.

Through this dissertation, I hope to have shed light both on how the Iranian state wields power as well as how ordinary Iranians contest that power, highlighting the dynamics that have shaped, in particular, religious Iranians' understanding of the Islamic Republic's vision of an ideal Islamic society and its project for the cultivation of ideal Islamic selves, as well as how they have contested it. I hope to have contributed to an anthropological understanding of power dynamics and state-society relations not just in Iran or Muslim-majority societies, but also globally.

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