

**Martyrdom in the Shiite Perspective: The Driving Force behind Collective
Identity and Political Resistance**

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of martyrdom, and its multilateral roles in shaping the collective identity of the Shia and fostering political mobilization within their community. The study demonstrates how martyrdom became a symbol of resistance against oppression and tyranny, through exploring historical narratives and ritual practices, in particular the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Karbala, or what is known by Ashura*. This paper adopts interdisciplinary approaches, ranging from theology, social identity theory and political analysis. It discusses the martyrdom narrative and how it does not only strengthen community integration but also inspires social protest and promotes political mobilization. Historical narratives reveal that the remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn had undergone change: it went from being a religious commemoration to a form of sociopolitical activism that impacted movements around the globe. The principle of sacrifice, particularly as it manifests in martyrdom within Shia rituals and literature, is instrumental in cultivating a shared memory among Shia Muslims. This collective memory motivates and reinforces their opposition to leaders and authorities they perceive as corrupt or oppressive. Essentially, the concept of sacred sacrifice (martyrdom) is deeply linked to

* “Ashura” comes from the Arabic word and means the number ten (10).

political activism, forming a foundation that enables Shia communities to exhibit resilience and adaptability in challenging circumstances. More generally, martyrdom is a fundamental element of Shia identity and serves as a powerful mechanism for political change.

Keywords: Martyrdom, collective identity, political mobilization, Shia community, oppression, tyranny.

Introduction

Shahada or the concept of martyrdom in Islam is best understood through the lens of the Islamic principle of *Jihad**. In turn, to comprehend the meaning of *Jihad* relies on an understanding of the doctrine of enjoining right and forbidding wrong (*al- Amr bi al-Maruf wal-Nahy an al-Munkar*). The concepts of good and bad, as well as right and wrong, are informed by the independent divine source of righteousness, truth, and goodness, which is further clarified by recognizing how the divine message has been faithfully transmitted to humanity through prophethood. Moreover, fully understanding the divine message in Islam requires recognizing the role of the Imam as the embodiment of this message and as the supreme model for guidance. This illustrates how the concept of martyrdom is linked to the entirety of Islam. A deeper understanding of this relationship can be achieved by considering the term 'Islam', which originates from the Arabic root *salama*, meaning 'surrender' and 'peace.' Thus, Islam embodies a holistic and peaceful submission. Therefore, the concept of martyrdom, like all Islamic principles, can only be fully appreciated

* "Jihad" (Arabic word) in its general sense means any legitimate effort that aims to uphold the word of Allah the Almighty; communicate the message of Islam through all material and moral means in hand; and spread of justice, security and mercy in human societies. There are two types of Jihad. The offensive Jihad and the defensive Jihad. The offensive Jihad aims to protect freedom of spreading the call for Islam; removing any barriers it may encounter; and defending those who are under oppression and tyranny. Second, the defensive Jihad which refers to the type of Jihad dictated by the Shariah - based duty of defense when an attack is launched against religion, the Ummah (Arabic word for the whole community of Muslims), the country, the society or the individual (<https://iifa-aifi.org/en/33092.html>).

within the context of the doctrine of *tawhid*^{*}, emphasizing the absolute unity of Allah and complete submission to His will. It can never be understood in isolation.

The narrative surrounding martyrdom, particularly the tragic events of Karbala, serves as an ongoing source of inspiration that shaped the collective identity of the Shia and mobilized them into resisting any forms of oppression and injustice. The commemoration of the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, and his companions is significant in defining the identity of the Shia. The observance of Ashura, i.e. the commemoration of Imam Husayn's death, is a catalyst for social cohesion and political mobilization, fostering resilience and creating opportunities for dissent. To study martyrdom from a Shiite perspective requires an overview of its historical development, theological roots and sociopolitical implications.

The context within which Shi'i Islam was developed forms a framework of sociopolitical action and struggle while also incorporating elements of persecution and domination. This context deeply shapes the enduring concepts within Shi'i Islam alongside martyrdom. Martyrdom as a socio-political act challenging an authority, preserving identity, dominating identity has already been covered extensively, yet the interplay between the interpretation across different contexts needs more work. It appears that Shi'ism has always needed conflict: whether historically, or in modern political arenas, there is an impression that this is a religion born in protest (Dabashi, 2011). Scholars from sociology, anthropology, or other disciplines outside of Islamic studies have often and interchangeably used martyrdom as a label for suicide, whereas it is a comprehensive struggle to propagate the religion of Islam and elevate the word of Allah (Dadoo, 2010). In Twelver

^{*} For a better understanding, see:
<https://al-islam.org/allah-yasin-t-al-jibouri/unity-allah-tawhid>

Shi'ism*, martyrdom is regarded not solely as a physical death but as a significant expression of devotion and defiance. It has played a crucial role in the formation of Shia identity, highlighting that martyrdom stands as a declaration of steadfast faith, a pathway to divine closeness, and a method of resistance against oppression and injustice (Hashemi, 2022). How did martyrdom evolve in Shiism? It is important to look into this evolution because it provides insight into the intricate relationship among religious convictions, political action and social identity.

The nascent phase of Islam, as Afsaruddin (2018) notes, has been studied by Shia scholars analyzing the transformations in the understanding of martyrdom and their relevance to modern times. Indeed, a study of mourning rituals highlights how these practices became embedded into the Shi'i belief system, shaping future transformations and expressions of faith (Hussain, 2005). The martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala in 680 CE is a crucial event in Shi'i history. Without doubt, it establishes martyrdom as a strong symbol of defiance against tyranny and injustice. Imam Husayn's martyrdom serves as a model for self-sacrifice and steadfast adherence to truth, inspiring generations of Shia around the world to reflect Imam Husayn's example in their own lives. It is essential to acknowledge that understanding the Imam's true essence involves more than superficial knowledge; it requires insight into their divinely sanctioned role and authority (Niyazi, 2019). Zeeshan et al. (2020) agree with Niyazi's writings, stressing on the fact that this understanding is critical to grasp the great importance of martyrdom within the Shi'i tradition. The Battle of Karbala, where Imam Husayn, a grandson of Prophet Mohammad, was martyred, holds significant meaning. Each year, Shia globally honor the noble deeds of the divine figures, the

* The Twelvers believe that, at the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, the spiritual-political leadership (the imamate) of the Muslim community was ordained to pass down to Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and then to Ali's son Husayn and thence to other imams down to the 12th, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, who is understood to have been born circa 870 but to have gone into occultation - a state of concealment by God - soon after his father's death circa 874. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Twelve-Shia>).

infallible imams, and the descendants of the Prophet. These commemorative events have a substantial impact on the Shia worldwide.

This investigation adopts a qualitative and interpretive research framework that merges discourse analysis with comparative historical case studies. It draws upon social identity theory and collective memory frameworks to explore the formation and application of Shi'ite martyr narratives aimed at enhancing group cohesion. The study's data sources include primary religious and political texts, such as verses from the Quran and Shi'ite hadith concerning martyrdom, modern speeches and writings from pivotal Shi'ite figures like Ayatollah Khomeini, alongside ritual practices such as Muharram* processions and Ashura commemorations. Furthermore, media content, including martyrdom posters, educational materials, and online memorials, was examined. Historical records and scholarly analyses provide context for events such as Karbala, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iran–Iraq War, and Lebanon's resistance.

Among the methods of analysis adopted here is the critical discourse analysis. This method explores ideological language and content analysis to uncover recurring motifs of justice, sacrifice, and resistance. As noted by Fairclough (1995), the critical discourse analysis exposes how texts construct power relations and ideological frameworks. This analytical lens is particularly useful for understanding how martyrdom is framed as both a religious concept and a political strategy within Shi'ite communities. Each case—Karbala, the Iranian Revolution, and the Lebanese resistance—is examined through historical comparison and textual interpretation. Furthermore, secondary sources such as ethnographic descriptions of rituals and interviews enrich the

* Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar. It is one of the four sacred months of the year when warfare is banned. It precedes the month of Safar. The tenth of Muharram is known as Ashura.

sociocultural context and provide insights into how these narratives of martyrdom are perceived and enacted by communities.

The study demonstrates that martyrdom is an integral part of the collective identity and resistance discourse among Shi'ites. The events of Karbala and Ashura (680 CE) are perpetually reinterpreted as foundational symbols. Each year, the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn and his companions is ritually reenacted during Ashura commemorations and passion plays (*ta'ziyeh*). These rituals do not simply mourn an individual loss but rather address a communal injury: in the theatrical mourning of Karbala, the audience becomes part of the performance, and “the grief over the murder is not merely a reaction to the death of one person; it signifies a disruption in the lifeline of an entire community.” (Dehghani, 2014). Consequently, Ḥusayn's sacrifice is woven into the fabric of the community's identity. Indeed, Ashura “was the single most important event in early Islam that defined the Shia type of martyrdom forever,” ensuring that Ḥusayn's death remains a “symbol of resistance and a marker of identity for the minority Shi'a.” (Ahmed, 2022). As such, the commemoration of Husayn's martyrdom operates as a timeless exhortation to resist tyranny.

In the Iranian setting, this symbolic reservoir was activated by the 1979 Revolution and the subsequent war. Revolutionary leaders explicitly framed the overthrow of the shah and Iran's defense against Saddam Hussein in Karbala terms, equating the shah and Saddam with the tyrant Yazid*. The Islamic Republic later institutionalized a culture of martyrdom, canonizing hundreds of thousands of war dead as shahid (martyrs) and organizing mass pilgrimage tours (*rahīyān-e nūr*) to the battlefields. Participants in these tours regard themselves not as tourists but as “pilgrims seeking the divine light of the nation's martyrs.” The government constructed memorials and

* Yazid bin Muawiya bin Abi Sufyan was the second caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate.

shrines for the fallen, featuring golden domes that resonate with the tombs of Imam Ali and Husayn, symbolically connecting those who died in Husayn's service to contemporary martyrs. Iran officially designates those who have died as "martyrs". Consequently, visitors honor these martyrs in a fashion similar to the veneration of sacred religious icons in Shia tradition (Saramifar, 2019). As for Imam Khomeini (Sahifat Al Nour) when asked about martyrdom, he said that it is "a divine blessing granted by Allah, the exalted and almighty; a person can't achieve it by himself." However, he stressed the fact that Allah does not grant this blessing to everyone, but only to those who deserve it.

This confluence of religious and national identity during the Revolution transformed martyrdom into an act of both patriotism and piety. The death of each martyr was depicted as a representation of Karbala – an injustice that calls for remembrance – thus connecting communal memory to the state's ideology of "sacred defense."

Hizbullah, the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon, effectively transforms Shi'ite martyrdom symbols into political mobilization. Scholars like Marco Nilsson (2020) have noted that Hizbullah's propaganda resonates with the local Shia community by leveraging the traditional narrative of Karbala, recounting the martyrdom of Husayn bin Ali in the year 680 CE. The leadership of Hizbullah frequently invokes Husayn when articulating its struggle, framing the Palestinian issue and the conflict with Israel as extensions of Husayn's resistance against Yazid. Concurrently, Hizbullah has cultivated a widespread "culture of martyrdom," publicly commemorating fallen fighters through posters, songs, and celebrations, portraying them as exemplars of selflessness. Studies indicate that Hizbullah incorporates the narratives of martyrs' mothers into its communications, depicting maternal sorrow as a form of heroism, thereby maintaining a "self-replenishing pool of fighters." (Bianchi, 2018). Indeed, Professor of Anthropology, Lara Deeb

(2006) argues that mothers of martyrs are most of the time depicted as symbols of heroism, illustrating how the community venerates familial sacrifice. Consequently, familial and religious principles are employed to normalize the readiness to sacrifice one's life for the cause.

During an interview conducted with Dr. Sayyed Jaafar Fadlallah, son of late Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Mohammad Husayn Fadlallah*, regarding the thoughts and teachings of his late father in different topics, the concept of martyrdom was brought up. We asked Dr. Fadlallah how the notion of martyrdom is reformulated in the context of *Jihad* and resistance. In an elaborate, yet insightful and interesting answer, Dr. Fadlallah started by defining the word martyrdom which means *shahada*, in Arabic, and stems from the verb *shahida* i.e. “to witness”. He posited that martyrdom is a spiritual rank in which a person bears witness to an experience of which they are themselves a part, and through which the individual becomes a witness to a historical or existential experience: “Just as we might say ‘a witness of the era’ or ‘a witness to the experience’, this implies the human capacity to distance oneself from the experience in order to observe it in its entirety, even while remaining a part of it.” He added “what we are discussing here is a profound cause, for which an individual sacrifices themselves. Their effort becomes a means of embodying this cause in lived reality—bringing its goals into the tangible realm, into the heart of life itself. In Quranic terms, the one who is killed in the path of God is called a *shahid* (martyr) in this sense: that through their sacrifice, they attain this elevated status. Now, not everyone killed ‘in the path of God’ is necessarily a *shahid* in the jurisprudential sense. According to Islamic jurisprudence, a martyr is one who is killed in a battle of truth against falsehood, and justice against oppression. The *shahid*

* Iraqi-born Lebanese Muslim cleric who was a prominent Shi'ite religious leader.

in this sense is not washed, not shrouded, and is buried in their battle garments—but this applies only under specific conditions.”

However, Dr. Fadlallah argued that martyrdom in this broader, theological or existential sense requires the individual to be consciously aware of the greater cause or divine project. The person must be fully integrated into this level of sacrifice for the sake of God—offering everything they have, including their most precious possession: their very self. If they are killed in the course of such a battle, they become part of the realization of this greater cause.

He further explained, “what we are addressing is something that transcends the personal and becomes a cause that integrates into the individual’s own being.” For this reason, according to Dr. Fadlallah, martyrs are mentioned alongside prophets. To that effect, he recited the following verse:

“And whoever obeys Allah and the Messenger will be in the company of those blessed by Allah: the prophets, the people of truth, the martyrs, and the righteous.” [*Al-Quran*, “An-Nisa,” 69]*

Dr. Fadlallah indicated that these four spiritual ranks cited in the verse tell us that such individuals are the ones who possess a transformational role in the course of history. “This is the essence of martyrdom—where giving one’s life in the path of God contributes to making the martyr a witness to the experience, precisely because they gave everything they had for the sake of the greater cause.”, he concluded.

Across these various cases, three prominent themes consistently arise: martyrdom is represented as a pure and justified sacrifice, or a redemptive sacrifice, for justice and faith, the representation

* <https://quran.com/en/an-nisa/69>

of the enemy as historical unjust tyrants, and a ritualized act that is performed as a form of political expression. From the Shia perspective, martyrdom is closely connected to a divine, just cause. It is therefore a conscious selfless sacrifice for a greater cause and not some kind of a random death. Religious rituals and symbols, such as prayer, ceremonial flagellation, and shrine visits, perpetually reinforce the idea that each martyr's death possesses profound meaning. In summary, martyrdom operates as both a social adhesive and a mobilizing ideology: it binds Shi'ite communities through shared memory (Ahmed, 2022) and provides a robust justification for political resistance against perceived oppression (Nilsson, 2020).

Conclusion

This analysis indicates that martyrdom is not solely a theological notion within Shi'ism but also a vital element that shapes political identity and mobilization. The remembrance of Karbala and the sacrifice of Imam Husayn is pervasive in Shi'ite rituals, literature, and political rhetoric. Through reenactments, media representations, and theological frameworks, martyrdom becomes a living tradition that connects the community across temporal and spatial boundaries.

If we draw a comparison between the culture of martyrdom in Iran and the efforts deployed by Hizbullah in the context of community mobilization, we can deduce that the martyr plays an essential role in giving the resistance legitimacy, in rationalizing sacrifice and forming collective identity. This amalgam of religious and political dimensions empowers Shi'ite movements to transform the experiences of pain, sorrow, injustice death and oppression into active resistance, serving a higher purpose thus elevating the Shia from passive to active Shia: transforming oppression into defiance and death into a guiding principle.

What can be further explored in the future is the impact of digital media on constructing martyrdom narratives, particularly among younger and diasporic Shi'ite populations. A clearer understanding of martyrdom can be provided through comparative research with other religions. This study ultimately highlights that martyrdom constitutes an integral part of Shi'ite political theology, serving as both a significant expression of faith and a form of resistance.

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