

**BETWEEN KARBALA AND TABRIZ:
THE ROLE OF MARTYRDOM AND
RESILIENCE IN SETTING
BOUNDARIES**

Winchester , September 2012

SHAHADAT

- “shahadat” means “martyrdom” both:
- in the sense of “witnessing”, which is the original Greek meaning of the word,
- and in the sense of someone who dies for a cause.



This paper is about the contest that is going on in Iran at present between two visions of martyrdom:

- 1. The first being that of the ruling elite, who have turned martyrdom into a political weapon to be used actively against their enemies
- 2. The second is that of the Baha'i community, which maintains a view of martyrdom as the readiness to die in order to witness to one's belief but only as a last resort



ACTIVE MARTYRDOM/PASSIVE MARTYRDOM

- Active martyrdom - the martyr is actively trying to get himself/herself martyred as a means of achieving a political aim
- Passive martyrdom - the martyr is the victim of circumstances whereby an overwhelming force is directed towards him/her and martyrdom is the only way out without compromising his/her fundamental beliefs
- Active – Politicized Martyrdom
- Passive – Resilient Martyrdom



MARTYRDOM IN IRAN

- In the West and in most countries of the world the martyrdom narrative is regarded as a relic of the past, as something that belongs to religious history rather than to the present
- In Iran, the martyrdom motif or narrative is very much part of active religious life of the majority of the population.



Although the martyrs commemorated were killed some 1300-1400 years ago, the memory is kept alive through numerous rituals in present-day Shi'i Iran:

- Ritual recitation of the story of the martyrdoms,



- ritual dramas re-enacting the martyrdoms,



- ritual processions in which self-flagellation and other forms of self-injury are carried out,



MARTYRDOM IN IRAN

- In particular it is the martyrdom of Imam Husayn on the plain of Karbala in 680 AD by the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid that raises the emotions of the crowd.
- Those who caused the martyrdoms of the Shi`i Imams are singled out as unjust and evil and are execrated regularly.
- In these ways, the ethos of martyrdom is kept very much at the forefront of the consciousness of the populace.



MARTYRDOM IN IRAN – TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE

- After the Islamic Revolution of 1979 – a shift in the martyrdom narrative
- Previous narrative: Imam Husayn coming from Medina towards Kufa in Iraq – was trapped by his enemies, the army of the caliph, at Karbala – martyred there.
- Emphasis on Imam Husayn knowing fate before he set off on this journey
- Mazlumiyyat - the patient endurance of tyranny and injustice in an act that witnesses to the martyr's sincerity and moral superiority.
- Narrative fitted well with Shi'i experience of being a persecuted minority



MARTYRDOM IN IRAN AFTER 1979

- New Narrative after 1979 Revolution (Khomeini, `Ali Shari`ati and others)
- The Karbala narrative changed to emphasize Imam Husayn as a person who rose up against injustice and was prepared to fight it and die in the battle
- “Qiyam” which signifies the rising against injustice
- Using this narrative, Khomeini mobilized the Iranian people in 1979 to risk death in front of the Shah’s security forces (wearing shrouds as symbols of their readiness to die).
- This narrative used again by Khomeini in 1980 to inspire Iranians to join the war against Saddam Husayn who invaded Iran



BAHA'I MARTYRDOM NARRATIVE

- Foremost martyr is the Báb who was executed by a firing squad in Tabriz in 1850, because of the new teachings he had brought
- Seven prominent followers of the Bab arrested in Tehran – each offered his life if he recanted but all refused and were executed in public
- Baha'i history filled with such martyrdom narratives – in many cases the victim was offered their life and even wealth if they would recant



BAHA'I MARTYRDOM NARRATIVE

- In a handful of cases, lives of exceptional self-sacrifice are considered by Baha'i leaders as martyrdoms even though the person concerned was not actually killed > indicates that willingness to sacrifice oneself by free choice is the important element in the narrative
- The Baha'i martyrdom narrative is closer to the traditional Shi'i martyrdom narrative than either is to the modern Iranian Shi'i martyrdom narrative.



PERSECUTION OF BAHÁ'IS IN IRAN

1979-PRESENT

The Islamic regime in Iran is at present trying to obliterate the Baha'i community in Iran.

This is being done on a physical level by:

- killing Baha'is,
- destroying their holy places,
- levelling their cemeteries and meeting places
- and carrying out ethnic cleansing of most of the villages and small towns where Baha'is used to live.



PERSECUTION OF BAHÁ'IS IN IRAN

1979-PRESENT

Persecution also on the psychological level - black propaganda is seeking to situate the Baha'is:

- as not intrinsically Iranian (claiming that most Baha'is are of Jewish ancestry),
- as the enemy of Iran (accusations of spying for foreign powers such as America, Britain and Israel),
- as the enemy of Islam (that the religion was created by Russia and Britain in order to weaken Islam),
- as participants in the worst excesses of the previous regime (secret police, torture, corruption),
- and as perpetrators of the worst criminal actions (killing opponents, blood libel, bribery and corruption).



PERSECUTION OF BAHÁ'IS IN IRAN

1979-PRESENT

This black propaganda has two purposes.

- Its primary purpose is to pressure the Baha'is of Iran into abandoning their religion and adopting Islam.
- The second even darker objective is to prepare the minds of the populace for a genocide of the Baha'i community if the first aim fails.
- Compare the steps taken by the Iranian regime with those taken by the Nazi regime in Germany against the Jews and we could see the government in Iran has gone through all of the steps preparatory to a genocide of the Baha'i community.
- "The Babi and Baha'i community of Iran: a case of 'suspended genocide'?" *Journal of Genocide Research*, 7(2), (June 2005), 221–241



RESPONSE OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

- Response of Baha'i Community
 - - Not resistance, opposition or subversion of the government or even any of the traditional pathways of political protest (strikes, street demonstrations, etc.)
 - - Not traumatized, passive victimhood (concentrating on blaming the oppressor, insisting upon just punishment of the oppressor and adequate reparations)
- “The proper response to oppression is neither to succumb in resignation nor to take on the characteristics of the oppressor. The victim of oppression can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action.”



RESPONSE OF THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

- “Constructive Resilience” - a non-violent and non-adversarial stance
- A determined resistance to all pressure to deny their religion or compromise its teachings
- Responding to the persecution by actively trying to building unity and social cohesion through bringing together all of the progressive and peaceful elements in society in order to advance an agenda of social reform through direct neighbourhood action



BAHA'I MARTYRS IN IRAN

The specific role of the Baha'i martyrs in Iran.

I suggest that the main function of the Baha'i martyrs in this story is:

- to lay down boundaries;
- to use their deaths both to assert the validity and worth of their religion and
- to show up the injustice of their persecutors



BOUNDARIES -1. WHAT IS TO BE CONSIDERED A LEGITIMATE RELIGION?

1. What is to be considered a legitimate religion?
 - Islamic government - trying to delegitimize the Baha'i Faith by claiming that it is not a religion but a political movement set up by foreign powers - at first Russia, Britain and now America, Israel
 - In Shi'i Islam – legitimization comes from martyrdom. All of the Shi'i Imams suffered injustice and tyranny and were martyred
 - Martyrdom is the guarantor of truth, a sign of legitimacy and a justification of a cause.



BOUNDARIES –1. WHAT IS TO BE CONSIDERED A LEGITIMATE RELIGION?

- By accepting martyrdom rather than denying their religious faith, the Baha'i martyrs are demonstrating the falsity of the government's position that the Baha'i Faith is just a man-made religion;
- They are stating publicly that there is something in the Baha'i Faith that is worth dying for.
- They are showing the government that by its own religious criterion of truth, the Baha'i Faith is true.
- May even be casting doubt on the government's veracity and moral status – just as martyrdom is the guarantor of truth in Shi'i culture so causing martyrdom and acting unjustly is evidence of perfidy and unbelief



BOUNDARIES – 2. SETTING A LIMIT ON THE ACTIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT

- Government is aiming to create such pressure against the Baha'i community that its members become demoralized, apostasize and become Muslims.
- This would be the best evidence of the truth of their claims that the Baha'i Faith is not a religion but a pseudo-religious movement created by foreign powers to destroy Iran and Islam
- It would show that when pressure was applied, Baha'is were not willing to sacrifice themselves for their religion.



BOUNDARIES – 2. SETTING A LIMIT ON THE ACTIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT

- By not giving in to the violence and persecution directed against them, the martyrs are creating a boundary that blocks the intrusion of the government's ideology, creates a barrier to the erosion of the ideals and morale of the Baha'i community.
- By not bending to the will of the government, despite the pressure and the threats, the martyr is effectively saying "Thus far and no further";
- They thus create a boundary that is an individual one but also becomes the inspiration for the whole of the persecuted community to adopt and help to maintain that boundary.



BOUNDARIES – 2. SETTING A LIMIT ON THE ACTIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT

- By their action the martyrs stop the Baha'i community being reabsorbed into the majority persecuting community which is the aim of the persecutors
- We can see that the Baha'i martyrs are doing the same as a long line of distinguished advocates of passive resistance to tyranny, such persons as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King – standing up to tyranny and injustice but without use of violence.



BOUNDARIES – 3. CONTRASTING VISIONS OF WHAT THEY ARE SEEKING TO ACHIEVE

- The Baha'i martyrs have a vision of what they are seeking to achieve through their martyrdom which stands in contrast to the martyrdom statements of modern Iranian Shi'i martyrs.
- Shi'i martyrs desire that their death will make a political difference – will enable the victory of Islam over the tyrannical powers of the West
- Baha'i martyrs make no political statements; they reveal no desire for the overthrow of the government or ill-will towards those who have forced them down this path. They testify primarily to their faithfulness to God.



TESTIMONY OF A SHI'`I MARTYR

- I have the honour of being a martyr at a time when the signs can be seen throughout the world, and particularly in our country, of the victory of the downtrodden and the obliteration of the arrogant . . .
- To my father and mother and brothers and sisters I send my greetings and I desire that, since like every revolutionary Muslim I have fulfilled my obligations, you should not be distressed; rather know that now every sign of the life of the Revolution is a sign of my continued existence and my nearness to you...
- (Testament of Mohsen Farshchi,
<http://www.shohada.ir/newsreader.php?nid=364>)



TESTIMONY OF A BAHÁ'Í MARTYR

- With a sincere heart I seek the good pleasure of God and am prepared for martyrdom. I am free of worry and I consider martyrdom a source of honour for myself and my children . . .
- I have prayed tens of times that God may grant me to drink of the wine of martyrdom and that my sacrifice may result in other friends' release and return to the warmth and comfort of their homes and families.
- (Testament of Masih Farhangi, *Bahá'í World*, vol. 18, p. 285)



BOUNDARIES – 3. CONTRASTING VISIONS OF WHAT THEY ARE SEEKING TO ACHIEVE

- Shi'i martyrs - freely chose their path but they were not placed in a situation where they had to make this choice. Their choice was between living a normal life and going out to be martyred
- Baha'i martyrs – chose martyrdom but this was a choice forced upon them. Their choice was between denying their faith and being martyred



BOUNDARIES —

4. CREATING A BOUNDARY OF VALUES

- The Baha'i martyr creates is a boundary of values between the values and actions of the government and those of the Baha'i community. A boundary that portrays the government's actions for what they are by presenting them with their opposite.
- The Iranian government claims to be based on religious ethics and law and an upholder of the moral order. It claims a Divine mandate for its actions.
- And yet it has to resort to violence in order to maintain its authority. It has to suppress opposition and carry out brutal acts of violence, rape and torture in order to remain in power.



BOUNDARIES —

4. CREATING A BOUNDARY OF VALUES

In its campaign against the Baha'is, the government has killed harmless 80-year-old men and innocent 18 year-old girls. It has killed young women for the “crime” of teaching children’s classes and farmers from remote villages on charges of spying for foreign powers.



BOUNDARIES —

4. CREATING A BOUNDARY OF VALUES

By not opposing the government, but standing up for values of

- truthfulness (refusing to dissimulate their beliefs),
- trustworthiness (in not seeking to subvert the government),
- peacefulness (not resorting to violence even in self-defence),
- obedience to the government (in any instructions that the government gives, short of denying their beliefs),
- forbearance and patriotism (by going first through the due legal channels within the country before appealing to international institutions)

The Baha'i martyrs are demonstrating the clear difference between their values and the values that the government is demonstrating by its actions.



EFFECT OF THE BAHÁ'Í MARTYRS

There is evidence that the “witnessing” of the Baha’i martyrs is having a major impact in three important areas:



EFFECTS – 1. THE CONTINUING RESISTANCE OF THE BAHÁ'IS OF IRAN

- Good evidence that the morale of the Baha'is of Iran continues to be high.
- A number of people publically apostasized in the early days of the Revolution – mostly people from Baha'i families but estranged from the Baha'i Faith and seeking to clarify their position.
- Since that time, the number of apostasies has dropped to a very low level.
- Thus the “witness” of the martyrs does appear to have succeeded in drawing a boundary and prevent erosion of Baha'i membership in Iran.



EFFECTS – 2. EFFECTS ON EX-PATRIOT IRANIANS

- Previously Iranians (even those who left Iran because of the Revolution) disparaged Baha'is – would not utter the word “Baha’i”, distrusted Baha'is
- Last two decades a gradual change with respect shown towards Baha'is and assertions that the rights of the Baha'is should be guaranteed at the same level as the rights of all other Iranian citizens.
- Also anecdotal evidence of a great change among the ordinary citizens of Iran towards the Baha'i community.



EFFECTS – 3. CHANGE IN ATTITUDE OF THE IRANIAN PUBLIC TOWARDS THEIR GOVERNMENT

- Great change in the attitude of the Iranian public towards their own government
- Early years of Revolution – great public support in elections and referenda
- Now the government can only win at elections by employing massive electoral fraud and is facing large anti-government demonstrations and widespread contempt towards it.



EFFECTS – 3. CHANGE IN ATTITUDE OF THE IRANIAN PUBLIC TOWARDS THEIR GOVERNMENT

- Impossible to say to what the contribution of the Baha'i martyrs has been to this – the government has carried out so many other actions that have discredited it with the general population – but some contribution.
- Prominent Iranian lawyers such as Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi have stepped forward to defend Baha'is in danger of death sentence.
- During the demonstrations in the streets of Tehran in summer 2009, one group was heard to chant “Baha'i, Baha'i, Hemayat Mikonim” – Baha'i, Baha'i, we will protect you”.



SUMMARY

- Two martyrdom narratives: active politicized martyrdom (Karbala), advocated by the Iranian government, and passive, resilient martyrdom, advocated by the Baha'is.
- First - seems to have failed in its intent insofar as there is now a general disillusionment in many parts of Iranian society with this narrative and with those who have advanced it
- Second appears to have succeeded in creating a barrier to insulate the Baha'i community, if not physically then at least psychologically, from the aggression directed against it

