

Between Karbala and Tabriz: the role of martyrdom and resilience in setting boundaries.

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This paper is about the contest that is going on in Iran at present between two narratives of martyrdom and persecution: the first (identified with Karbala) being that of the ruling elite, who have turned martyrdom into a political weapon to be used actively against their enemies, and the second (identified with Tabriz) is that of the Baha'i community, which maintains a more traditional view of martyrdom as the readiness to die (or endure persecution) in order to witness to one's belief (martyrdom being only a last resort). The paper examines the specific role played by the Baha'i martyrs and the other Baha'is in Iran who have responded to three decades of intense persecution, not by taking on a posture of victimhood or by taking the road towards opposition, subversion and violence, but rather by what has been described by one author as "constructive resilience" (taking a non-violent and non-adversarial stance, that involves 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). Most of this paper is taken up with describing five ways in which the main function of the Baha'i martyrs and the posture of resilience has been to lay down boundaries. It suggests that they are, in this way, laying down boundaries that assert the legitimacy and worth of their religion, preserve the integrity and morale of their community and at the same time contrast their values with those of the government, showing up the injustice and perhaps even, within the context of the Shi'i culture of Iran, the illegitimacy of their persecutors. The paper also looks at some evidence for the effect that the martyrdoms and resilience to persecution may have had.