Between Karbalāʾ and Tabrīz

Contested Martyrdom Narratives

Moojan Momen

This article is about the contest presently going on in Iran between two visions of martyrdom: the first vision is that of the ruling elite, who have turned martyrdom into a political weapon to be used actively against their enemies; the second is that held by the Bahāʾī community, which maintains a more traditional view of martyrdom, seeing it as a readiness to die in order to bear witness to one's belief, but only as a last resort. While in the former the martyr is actively trying to get himself/herself martyred as a means of achieving a political aim, for the latter the martyr is the victim of circumstances: confronted by an overwhelming force, martyrdom is seen as the only way out without compromising fundamental beliefs. At the outset we need to keep in mind the dual sense conveyed by the Persian/Arabic word *shahādat*: it means martyrdom both in the sense of witnessing, which is the meaning of the Greek root of the word martyr, and as someone who dies for a cause.

I. Martyrdom in Shiite Iran

Whereas for the religious communities in the West and in most countries of the world, the martyrdom motif or 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 narrative is very much part of the active religious life of the majority of the population. Although the martyrs commemorated were killed some 1300 years ago, the memory is kept alive through numerous rituals in present-day Shiite 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, invocations, prayers and numerous other local forms of commemoration. In particular it is the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn on the plain of Karbalāʾ in 680 CE by the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd that raises the emotions of the crowd. Those who caused the martyrdoms of the Shiite Imams are singled out as unjust and evil and are execrated regularly. In this way, the ethos of martyrdom is kept very much at the forefront of the consciousness of the populace.

There has been a considerable shift in this martyrdom narrative however since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, at least in the government-controlled media. It is therefore necessary to describe both the pre-revolutionary and the post-revolutionary narratives. The former narrative involved, in particular, the com-

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memoration of the Imam Ḥusayn travelling from Medina towards al-Kūfā in Iraq and being trapped by his enemies, the army of the caliph, at Karbalāʾ and martyred there. The emphasis is very much on the fact that the Imam Ḥusayn already knew what his fate was before he set off on this journey and his attitude is described by the Persian word "*maẓlūmīyat*" – which denotes the patient endurance of tyranny and injustice and a death that bears witnesses to the martyr's sincerity and moral superiority. This narrative fitted well with the experience of Shiites through most of their history as a persecuted minority. It encouraged the Shiites to bear their persecution with fortitude and patience in the knowledge that their cause was the true Islam and that they would be vindicated through the messianic and apocalyptic return of the Hidden Twelfth Imam.

Since the 1979 Revolution, and under the influence of a discourse led by Ayatullah Khomeini, Ali Shariati and others in the preceding years, the Karbalāʾ narrative changed its emphasis, casting Imam Ḥusayn as a person who rose up against injustice, was prepared to fight it and indeed ready to die in battle for this cause.[1] This narrative is epitomised by the word "*qīyām*", which signifies a rising up against injustice. Inspired by this narrative, Khomeini mobilised the Iranian people to pour into the streets and risk death at the hands of the Shah's security forces, many of them wearing shrouds as symbols of their readiness to die. They chanted "every day is ʿĀshūrāʾ (the day on which Imam Ḥusayn was killed) and every place is Karbalāʾ (the place where Imam Ḥusayn was killed)." This narrative was again used by Khomeini a year later to inspire the people of Iran to join the forces resisting Saddam Husain's invasion of Iran shortly after the Revolution. Wave after wave of untrained child soldiers went to their death in battle against the Iraqis in certainty that this was the route to paradise. This martyrdom narrative enabled Khomeini to continue the war for another six years after all of the territory taken by Saddam Husain had been recaptured, leading to a prolongation of the conflict that was to last ten years in all and result in an estimated 1 to 1.5 million deaths. Khomeini's government was also able to send abroad numerous assassins who were ready to sacrifice themselves to carry out the orders of the government. The martyrdom narrative thus changed from a religious narrative encouraging the Shiites to patiently accept their fate to a political narrative motivating Iranian Shiites to rise up and fight against what the Shiite religious leaders deem to be injustice and tyranny. This change that has occurred in Iran is but one example of a general shift observable in a host of religious communities in many parts of the world: it is part of what may be called the "politicisation of the sacred."[2] The purveyors of this

1 This narrative has always existed potentially in the universe of the Shiite discourse and in the past has occasionally been used when Shiite religious or political leaders have wanted to rouse the masses for some purpose. Before the 1979 Revolution this discourse emerged gradually over several decades. 1979 was when this new martyrdom narrative gained general acceptance and replaced the old narrative, at least in Iranian public discourse.

2 Apart from Islamism or "political Islam" in both the Sunni and Shiite world, such politicisation of the sacred has occurred – to cite better known examples – as part of Hindu na-

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new martyrdom narrative have tended to disparage the old Shiite martyrdom narrative, portraying it as weak and passive. In effect they are saying that there is no need to wait for the *parousia* of the Hidden Twelfth Imam; a just world can be established by human effort and the sacrifice of the martyrs. Of course the old martyrdom narrative lives on among ordinary people, but the state's hegemonic control of the media ensures that it is mainly this second revolutionary narrative that is promulgated in public discourse.[3]

II. Martyrdom in the Bahā'ī Faith

This new revolutionary narrative of martyrdom can be set against the narrative of martyrdom of the Bahā'ī community in Iran, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the country. This religion was founded by Bahā'u'llāh (1817-1892), whose writings form the principal scriptures of the community. The foremost martyr of this community is the predecessor of Bahā'u'llāh; called "the Bāb" (1819-1850), he was executed by a firing squad in Tabrīz in July 1850 because of his new teachings. He had in effect proclaimed the end of Islam and the start of a new religious dispensation. He had been tried before a court consisting of the heir apparent and Islamic clerics and had refused to recant. Similarly, a month earlier, seven prominent followers of the Bāb had been arrested in Tehran. Each was offered his life if they recanted but all refused and were executed in public. The history of the Bahā'ī Faith is filled with such stories of martyrdom. In many cases the victims were offered their lives and even inducements such as wealth if they would recant but they refused. In a handful of cases, individuals who have led lives of exceptional self-sacrifice are considered by the Bahā'ī leaders as martyrs even though the person concerned was not actually killed because of their religion. This indicates that the willingness to sacrifice one's life is the important element in the narrative, not any political or social impact the individual has. In a sense then, the Bahā'ī martyrdom narrative is closer to the traditional Shiite martyrdom narrative than either of these is to the modern Shiite martyrdom nar-

tionalism in India, Hindu Tamil separatism and the Buddhist Sinhalese response in Sri Lanka, the campaign for Tibetan independence, the campaign against abortion in the USA. It is also to be found among indigenous traditional religious communities seeking to assert their rights; see for example the use of sacred sites in a campaign "to focus attention on the oppression and liberation of the Hawaiian nation", David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, "Introduction", in: *American Sacred Space* ed. by David Chidester et al., Bloomington, 1995, 3.

3 For more on the two paradigms of *mazlūmīyat* and *qīyām*, see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islām: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, New Haven 1985, 236. Some of the success of former President Ahmadinejad and his supporters may be seen in how he represents a partial reversion to the old narrative, appearing to believe that by creating chaos and inducing an attack on Iran, the advent of the Hidden Imam can be accelerated. However, he also seems to advocate a political martyrdom narrative. He has, in any case, been increasingly sidelined by President Khamenei and his supporters, who cling to the political martyrdom narrative of Khomeini.

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rative. Indeed, the closest parallel to the modern Shiite martyrdom narrative is that of the communist martyr from the era of "Heroic Communism" (both types being used for much the same purpose – that of keeping alive a revolutionary fervour once the revolution has succeeded).[4]

At this point we should note that there was certainly the potential in the history of the Bābī and Bahā'ī religions for the second, politicised martyrdom narrative to emerge. Between 1848 and 1853 there was a series of four episodes in which followers of the Bāb were besieged for long periods at various locations around Iran and defended themselves desperately and effectively against the professional soldiers and artillery dispatched. However, their actions were defensive and any tendency to change this to an offensive campaign was held in check by the Bāb and the leading Bābīs. Later in the Bahā'ī religion, when Bahā'u'llāh meditated upon the narrative of the Imam Ḥusayn, he dwelt upon it as a traditional martyrdom narrative rather than an active, politicised one.[5] Moreover, he specifically forbade holy war[6] and seditious and subversive political activity: "Sedition hath never been pleasing unto God, nor were the acts committed in the past by certain foolish ones acceptable in His sight. Know ye that to be killed in the path of His good pleasure is better for you than to kill."[7]The Islamic regime in Iran is at present trying to extinguish the Bahā'ī community in Iran. This is being done on a physical level by killing Bahā'īs, destroying their holy places, levelling their cemeteries and carrying out "ethnic cleansing" of most of the villages and small towns where Bahā'īs live. This targeting also extends to the psychological level: Bahā'īs are deprived of any way of making a livelihood, either in employment or running businesses; access to education is denied to young Bahā'īs; the constant arresting and re-arresting of Bahā'īs leads to psychological stress (since each instance of arrest could result in execution) and an inability to generate income; and finally, a black propaganda seeks to cast the Bahā'īs as not being intrinsically Iranian (claiming that most Bahā'īs are of Jewish ancestry), as the enemies of Iran (accusing Bahā'īs of spying for foreign powers such as America, Britain and Israel), as the enemies of Islam (asserting that the Bahā'ī Faith 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 immoral and criminal actions (killing opponents, bribery and corruption, promiscuity and incest).[8] The Bahā'īs have even been ac-

4 I am grateful to Phillip Tussing for this insight.

5 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán, the Book of Certitude* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2nd ed.), Wilmette 1974, 123-130. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Haifa 2002, 204-207.

6 For example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Haifa 1978, 21.

7 Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, 110. See also Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette 1983, 56-8, 94, 129, 203; ʿAbdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ʿAbdu'l-Bahá*, Haifa 1978, 234-236.

8 On the human rights violations against the Bahā'īs in Iran, see Nazila Ghanea, *Human Rights, the U.N. and the Bahá'ís in Iran*, Oxford 2002; Christopher Buck, "Islam and Minori-

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cused of ritual murder (resurrecting the myth of the "blood libel").[9] The intense atmosphere produced by this black propaganda leaves no room for the Bahā'īs, or indeed more moderate Iranians, to counter it publicly in any format published within Iran (and the state has been successful in blocking the access of most Iranians to sources of information from outside the country). This creates an ethos conducive to the fabrication of bizarre conspiracy theories which can be put forward with no danger of any sane voices objecting.[10] This black propaganda has two purposes: its primary purpose is to pressure Iranian Bahā'īs to abandon their religion and adopt Islam; its second, even more sinister objective is to prepare the minds of the populace for acts of genocide against the Bahā'ī community should the first aim fail.[11]

The response of the Iranian Bahā'ī community to this persecution has not been to take the pathway of traumatised, passive victimhood (concentrating on blaming the oppressor, insisting upon just punishment of the oppressor and adequate reparations).[12] Their response has been described as "constructive resilience": the Bahā'īs have taken a nonviolent and non-adversarial stance that involves responding to the persecution by actively trying to build 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.[13] The word "resilience" also denotes the stance the Iranian

ties: The Case of the Bahá'ís", in: *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 5 (2003): 1-2:83-106; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran", in: *The Baha'is of Iran*, ed. by Dominic Brookshaw et al., London 2008, 200-231; and Reza Afshari, "The Discourse and Practice of Human Rights Violation of Iranian Baha'is in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in: ibid., 232-277.

9 See for example, http://rajanews.com/Detail.asp?id=50762 (retrieved 12.04.2012).

10 For example, the Iranian government media recently (September 2011) tried to persuade Iranians that the BBC is run by Bahā'īs (this after the BBC Persian service had broadcast a programme on Khamenei that the Iranian authorities did not like), URL http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowcL97Fouo (retrieved 12.04.2012) and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MP4ITa-mucw (retrieved 12.04.2012).

11 The steps taken by the Iranian regime could be compared with those taken by the Nazi regime in Germany against the Jews, a parallel that shows that the Iranian government has gone through all of the preparatory steps for committing genocide against the Bahā'ī community. See Moojan Momen, "The Babi and Baha'i community of Iran: a case of "suspended genocide"?", in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 7/2 (June 2005): 221–241; Friedrich W. Affolter, "The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Bahá'ís of Iran", in: *War Crimes, Genocide, and Crimes Against Humanity* 1:1 (2005), 59-89; Bill Frelick, "Iranian Bahá'ís and Genocide Early Warning", in: *Social Science Record* 24:2 (1987), 35–37.

12 See for example Robert Meister, "Human Rights and the Politics of Victimhood", in: *Ethics and International Affairs* 16 (2002), 91-108; Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Getting to Reparations: Japanese Americans and African Americans", in: *Social Forces* 83 (2004), 823-840. I am grateful to Nazila Ghanea for the latter reference.

13 Michael Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression", in: *Peace and Change* 35:2 (2010), 222-257. A particular instance of this constructive engagement in social programmes in Iran is the efforts made by 54 young Bahā'īs in collaboration with young Muslims to bring literacy and empowerment to deprived areas around Shiraz, an

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Bahā'īs have been asked to take by the Bahā'ī leadership in the course of 160 years of persecution described above. This stance is not one that involves any opposition to or subversion of the government or even recourse to any of the traditional pathways of political protest (strikes, street demonstrations, etc.); instead, it is determined resistance to all the pressure exerted to deny their religion or compromise its teachings. As the present head of the Bahā'ī Faith, an elected council called the Universal House of Justice, has written: "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."[14]

III. Martyrdom as a Setting of Boundaries

This article will focus on the theme of martyrdom, leaving aside questions of human rights violations and potential genocide (although in fact these form a spectrum of religious persecution and much of what is said in this article about martyrdom also holds for the human rights violations). The main topic of consideration is the specific role played by the Bahā'ī martyrs and the contrast between this concept of martyrdom and that being advanced by the religious and political leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These two visions of martyrdom could be called passive and active martyrdom respectively, but the word "passive" is inadequate to describe the stance described above taken by the Iranian Bahā'īs. Thus, in line with the above suggestion, it is perhaps more apt to call these two types resilient and politicised martyrdom. This article suggests that the main function of the Bahā'ī martyrs in the drama being played out in Iran is to lay down boundaries; they seek to use their lives both to assert the validity and worth of their religion and at the same time show up the injustice, and perhaps even the illegitimacy, of their persecutors.[15]

1. The first area in which a boundary is set by the Bahā'ī martyrs concerns the question of what is to be considered a legitimate religion.

The Islamic government has continuously tried to delegitimise the Bahā'ī Faith by setting it outside the boundaries of legitimate religion; by claiming that it is not a religion at all, but a political movement formed and perpetuated by foreign powers – at first Russia and Britain, in more recent years, the United States and Israel. From the Shiite point of view however, legitimisation comes

activity for which they were arrested in 2006 and the Bahā'īs convicted, three of them to a term of imprisonment; see http://www.iranpresswatch.org/post/62 (retrieved 14.04.2012).

14 Letter to the Bahā'īs of Iran, dated 23 June 2009; see http://news.bahai.org/story/720 (retrieved 14.04.2012).

15 This article owes much to the analysis of martyrdom in David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, Cambridge 2007, esp. 1-6.

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from martyrdom. In the official history of Shia Islam, all of its leading figures, the Shiite Imams, are considered to have suffered injustice and tyranny and to have been martyred. Most of the public ritual in Shia Islam consists of a mourning for and a glorification of these martyrdoms, particularly that of the Imam Ḥusayn at Karbalāʾ. Thus, in the ethos of Shia Islam, martyrdom is the guarantor of truth, a sign of legitimacy and a justification of a cause.

By standing firmly against the attempts by the government interrogators and torturers and accepting martyrdom rather than denying their religious faith, the Bahā'ī martyrs are demonstrating the falsity of the government's assertion that the Bahā'ī Faith is just a man-made religion; they are stating publicly that there is something in the Bahā'ī Faith that is worth dying for. They are taking on the government and showing that, by its own religious criterion of truth, the Bahā'ī Faith is true. They may even be casting doubt on the government's veracity and moral status because, just as martyrdom is the guarantor of truth in the culture created by Shia Islam, so causing martyrdom and acting unjustly is evidence of perfidy and unbelief (those figures who martyred the Shiite Imams are regularly execrated in Shiite rituals for their injustice and their betrayal of Islam in causing the martyrdom of the Imams). By submitting meekly to martyrdom within the context of Iranian Shiite culture, the Bahā'ī martyrs are forcing the government to re-enact the Karbalāʾ motif; but whereas in 1979 the Shiite religious establishment was cast on the side of the Imam Ḥusayn, this time they are cast as Yazīd and Shimr, the perpetrators of injustice against the Imam Ḥusayn.

It should be noted that this is not the first time that this drama has been enacted on the Iranian stage. Negar Mottahedeh has observed that the role of the Bābī precursors of the Bahā'īs in 1848-53 was "to replay, once again, the scenes in Karbalāʾ and to appeal from this position to the injustices inflicted on the people of the Imam. This appeal calls directly on the nation, whose national identity as Shiʿite is constituted as the supporter of the meek Imam (Imam Ḥusayn) against the unjust Caliph."[16]

2. By standing firmly but non-violently against the government, the Bahā'ī martyrs are creating through their deaths a boundary that limits the actions of the persecuting authority.

In its persecutions of the Bahā'ī community, the Iranian government and the Shiite Islamic authorities are aiming to extinguish the Bahā'ī community and obliterate all traces of its culture. Their ultimate method for achieving this goal is genocide, and they are preparing the minds of the populace for this undertaking through a stream of black propaganda. However, their ideal goal would be for the Bahā'ī community to apostatise and become Muslims. This would be the best evidence supporting the truth of their claims that the Bahā'ī Faith is not a

16 Negar Mottahedeh, *Representing the Unrepresentable: Historical Images of National Reform from the Qajars to the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Syracuse 2008, 143.

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religion at all but a pseudo-religious movement created by foreign powers to destroy Iran and Islam – because it would show that when pressure was applied, Bahā'īs were not willing to sacrifice themselves for their religion. And so the government has been ruthlessly pursuing a campaign of random imprisonments, confiscation of property and denying the Bahā'īs access to employment, education and the law courts, hoping to demoralise the Bahā'ī community and force desertions.

By making a stand and not giving in to the violence and persecution directed against them, the martyrs are creating a boundary, a boundary that blocks the intrusion of the government's ideology, erecting a barrier against the erosion of the ideals and morale of the Bahā'ī community. By standing up to the government and showing that, despite the pressure and the threats, it cannot bend the will of the martyr, the martyr is effectively saying, "thus far and no further"; drawing a boundary in this way turns their act into a source of inspiration for the whole of the persecuted community, who now actively seek to adopt and help maintain this boundary. By their action the Bahā'ī martyrs thus help to maintain the boundaries of the community, preventing it from being reabsorbed into the majority persecuting community, which is the aim of the persecutors.

3. Through their martyrdom the martyrs are also setting a boundary for the Bahā'ī community, impelling it to maintain its non-adversarial and nonviolent stance.

It is a remarkable fact that, despite the severe persecution, the unwarranted denial of human rights to which the Bahā'ī community has been subjected and also the removal of both its national and local leadership through arrests and executions, there have been no instances of any Bahā'īs breaking from the self-imposed stance of nonviolence and non-adversarial constructive action. In other words: there have been no credible examples of Bahā'īs forming or joining subversive or terrorist groups in the more than three decades since the present round of persecutions began with the Islamic Revolution. Accusations of involvement in terrorism is a regular part of the black propaganda directed at the Bahā'ī community by the Islamic Republic's government but no credible evidence has emerged of any such case and no independent observers have ever reported such a case.[17] Of course, the Iranian government would have been delighted and would have relentlessly publicised any such breach by the Bahā'ī community, for this would justify its attacks on the community.

[17] There are regular attempts by the Iranian authorities to try to link the Bahā'īs to any cases of terrorism that occur in Iran; for example the attempt by officials of the Information Ministry to link the arrest of seven national Bahā'ī leaders to the terrorist bomb blast in Shiraz in April 2008 was initially reported on http://www.qodsdaily.com/news/daily/818.html, but this accusation was clearly spurious and this report can only now be found on the Wayback Internet archive site: http://web.archive.org (retrieved 14.04.2012).

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Martyrdom is the epitome of this pathway of non-adversarial resilience that the Iranian Bahā'ī community has chosen. In the absence of a local or national leadership to direct the community, the Bahā'ī martyrs may well have inspired the Bahā'ī community's discipline to maintain this stance.

4. The fourth boundary that the Bahā'ī martyrs have drawn lies in their vision of what is to be achieved through their martyrdom, which contrasts to the martyrdom goals of present-day Iranian Shiite martyrs.

Perhaps nothing highlights the difference between the two sets of Iranian martyrs, Bahā'ī and modern Iranian Shia, more than the testamentary statements made by these martyrs. In the case of the Shiite martyrs these statements are filled with a desire that their death will make a political difference – contributing to the victory of Islam over the tyrannical powers of the West (the "Great Satan"). Also, these statements disclose that, although the people concerned freely and deliberately took a path that would lead to their martyrdom, they were not placed in a situation where they had to make this choice. Their choice was between living a normal religious life and going out to be martyred.[18]

> 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 [...].[19]

In their testamentary statements the Bahā'ī 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. The statements reveal that although they have made a choice for martyrdom, this was a choice forced upon them. Their choice was between martyrdom and denying their faith.[20]

> 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.[21]

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18 See a range of these martyrdom testamentary statements in Persian at http://www.shohada.ir/archiv.php?nserv=5 (retrieved 10.09.2011).

19 Testament of Muḥsin Farshčī, http://www.shohada.ir/newsreader.php?nid=364 (retrieved 10.09.2011).

20 See a number of these martyrdom testamentary statements in *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. 18 (1979-1983), Haifa 1986, 284-289.

21 Testament of Masīḥ Farhangī, ibid. 285.

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5. The fifth boundary that the Bahā'ī martyrs create is one marking a division in the values held by the government and those of the Bahā'ī community. This boundary discloses the government's actions for what they are by juxtaposing 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 and to force the population to behave and dress in accordance with its norms and stipulations. It has to suppress opposition and carry out brutal acts of violence, rape and torture in order to keep its grip on power. In its campaign against the Bahā'īs 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.

Through their non-adversarial, nonviolent response, by standing up for the 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 (to any directives the government issues, short of denying their beliefs) and their forbearance and patriotism (by going first through the due legal channels within the country before appealing to international institutions), the Bahā'ī martyrs are demonstrating the clear difference between their values and those the government is actually demonstrating in practice. Here the Bahā'ī martyrs are following in the footsteps of a long line of distinguished advocates of passive resistance to tyranny, persons such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King – except of course that the Bahā'īs do not engage in civil disobedience but rather focus on constructive resilience.

IV. Impact of the Bahā'ī Martyrs

The striven-for impact in creating these boundaries is only achievable if they become known – to the other Bahā'īs in Iran and to the Iranian population in general. Hence the active campaign of the world Bahā'ī community to publicise the Bahā'ī persecutions in Iran is of major importance. While primarily intended to draw the attention of national and international organs to the human rights violations going on in Iran, it is also generating a secondary effect, drawing the attention of Iranians to this matter. There is evidence that the witnessing of the Bahā'ī martyrs is having an impact in three important areas.

1. The continuing resilience of the Bahā'īs of Iran. There is good evidence that the morale of the Bahā'īs of Iran continues to be high. While a number of people publically apostatised in the early days of the Revolution, most of them were individuals, born into Bahā'ī families, who had already become estranged from the Bahā'ī community and were seeking to clarify their position. Since that time the number of apostasies has dropped to a very low level. The witnessing of the

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faith by the martyrs does indeed appear to have succeeded in drawing a boundary and preventing erosion of Bahā'ī membership in Iran. As indicated above, the martyrs may well also be contributing to the Bahā'ī community maintaining its stance of constructive resilience.

2. While the Iranian government vilifies the Bahā'ī martyrs as traitors, spies and purveyors of corruption, and is able to clamp down fairly effectively within Iran on any other portrayal of the Bahā'ī martyrs and of the Bahā'īs in general diverging from this line, it is not able to control the flow of information to Iranians outside Iran. Although these are in the main people who fled the Revolution and may thus be expected to be sympathetic to the Bahā'īs suffering in Iran, this was certainly not the case in the years immediately after the 1979 Revolution. Thanks to decades of black propaganda spread by officials and clerics even before the Revolution and the inability of the Bahā'īs to gain any access to the media to counter this, most of the Iranian population, even intellectuals and scholars who might be expected to be more rational and neutral, have often voiced extreme and uninformed views about the Bahā'ī Faith because of their life-long exposure to this black propaganda. Over the last two decades however, a gradual but very radical change is discernible among expatriate Iranians. Where previously even the word "Bahā'ī" was not usually even mentioned or occasionally uttered disparagingly, this has changed into respect and indeed assertions that the Bahā'īs should be guaranteed the same level of rights as all other Iranian citizens. The few still maintaining the discourse of hatred and disparagement are treated as extremists, as relics of the past or agents of the present government, and certainly as not belonging to the Iran of the future. This change is reflected on websites, in the expatriate Iranian media (newspapers and television stations) and at scholarly conferences.[22]

There is also anecdotal evidence of a great change among ordinary citizens in Iran towards the Bahā'ī community. Despite government's attempts at isolating, ostracizing and "othering" the Bahā'īs, prominent Iranian lawyers such as Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi have stepped forward to defend Bahā'īs facing the death sentence. Furthermore, some of the political parties taking part in the 2009 presidential elections tentatively broached, for the first time in Iran's his-

[22] For an example of such change, see the article by the Iranian intellectual Bahram Choubine, "Sacrificing the innocent: Suppression of Baha'is of Iran in 1955", http://www.iranian.com/main/2008/sacrificing-innocent (retrieved 10.04.2012); see also the list of Iranian intellectuals and scholars gathered at a conference in July 2011 at the University of Toronto on: "Intellectual Othering and the Baha'i Question in Iran", which included such persons as Mohamad Tavakoli, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, Farzaneh Milani, Homa Katouzian, Mehrangiz Kar, Abd al-Karim Lahidji, Reza Afshari and Ramin Jahanbegloo. There is also the open letter signed by 42 prominent Iranian expatriates (and subsequently over 200 further signatures were added), expressing their dismay and regret at the persecutions that the Iranian Bahā'ī community has suffered over the last 160 years; URL: http://www.iranian.com/main/2009/feb/we-are-ashamed (retrieved 12.04.2012).

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tory, the possibility of granting Iran's Bahā'īs full rights of citizenship and religious freedom. During the demonstrations in the streets of Tehran in the summer of 2009, one group was heard to chant "Bahā'ī, Bahā'ī, ḥimāyatat mīkunīm" (Bahā'ī, Bahā'ī, we will protect you).[23] The evidence is too patchy at present to know whether this change represents a major shift in the perceptions of the whole population or only that of small urban pockets of educated middle-class Iranians who are in close contact with Bahā'īs. It is not really known if there has been any change among the urban poor or the rural population. There is, however, also anecdotal evidence of many people in Iran converting to the Bahā'ī Faith, despite the dangers this would entail; as apostates from Islam they would incur the death penalty. Certainly there have been references to such conversions on the websites of individuals close to the central government.[24]

3. The actions of the Bahā'ī martyrs have contributed to the great change in the attitude of the Iranian public towards their own government. Thirty years ago, the government enjoyed widespread support and easily carried referenda on such matters as adopting the Islamic constitution. At the present time however, the government remains in power only by committing a long list of human rights abuses, while demonstrations take place and contempt towards it is widespread. Of course many factors are contributing to this, but the Bahā'ī martyrs must play some part in this reversal of sentiment. Furthermore, the deluge of government media propaganda against the Bahā'īs (far out of proportion to any realistic assessment of a possible threat they might pose) and their attempts to whip up moral panic amongst the people by claiming that the Bahā'īs are posing a threat to Iran's societal and religious values, may well be an indicator that the actual panic is within government circles over the potential of the Bahā'īs to inflict great moral and religious damage on the government in the minds of the public.[25]

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23 See the video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtU9FMsP1pQ (retrieved 12.10.2011). I am grateful to Adib Masumyan for this reference.

24 See for example the article by Rasul Jafariyan at http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/161539 and interview with Ḥujjatu'l-Islām Sayyid Ḥusayn ʿAlī Mūsawīzādih at http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13900724001154 (retrieved 15.04.2012); see also http://www.iqna.ir/fa/news_detail.php?ProdID=627381 (retrieved 15.04.2012). I am grateful to Erfan Sabeti and Omid Ghaemmaghami for these references. The author has also met several Iranian refugees who have stated that they have become Bahā'īs in Iran in recent years. Specific details cannot be given since this would compromise the safety of these individuals and their families.

25 On this government media campaign, see the document published by the Bahā'ī International Community, *Inciting Hatred: Iran's media campaign to demonize Bahá'ís*, at http://www.bic.org/resources/documents/inciting-hatred-book (retrieved 14.04.2012).

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V. Conclusion

This article has contrasted two martyrdom narratives. Symbolised by the town of Karbalā', the first has been the predominant narrative in the speeches of Iranian leaders since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 as well as the Iranian media. It can be described as an active or politicised martyrdom where the martyr seeks out death without it being forced upon them, their goal to convey a political message or achieve a political or military aim; it is part of a wider phenomenon: the politicisation of the sacred. The second martyrdom narrative is symbolised by the place name Tabrīz and has been the narrative of the Bahā'ī martyrs in Iran. It can be described as a passive or resilient martyrdom because the victims do not seek out martyrdom but have had a choice forced upon them: between death and denial of their faith. The intention of these martyrs is to be witnesses to the truth of their religious position. While the 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 fostered and proposed it, the second appears to have succeeded in creating a barrier to insulate the Bahā'ī community, if not physically then at least psychologically, from the aggression directed against it.[26]

[26] Some of the concepts in this article were presented and discussed on two e-mail lists (Tarikh and Varqa) and I am grateful to those who participated in this since it led to improvements in the article. Some specific changes made as a result are acknowledged in the footnotes. I am also grateful to Negar Mottahedeh and Sasha Dehghani for their comments on this article.

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