

# Political Martyrdom Revisited: Iran's Contemporary Perspective and Insights from the Woman-Life-Freedom Uprising

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## Abstract

Martyrdom holds significant cultural and historical importance in Iranian culture. It has deep roots in Shia Islam, the predominant religion in Iran, and frequently appears in Iranians' collective memory. The concept of martyrdom gained significant prominence during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) when many Iranians, including soldiers and civilians, lost their lives while defending their country. The war led to a surge in a culture surrounding martyrdom, with commemorations, ceremonies and rituals that continue today. Years after the war, new conceptions of martyrdom appeared, and the traditional ones transformed. The latest uprisings in Iran in 2022, with the slogan 'woman-life-freedom', have spurred a lively discussion as to how to consider martyrdom nowadays. This article examines the concept of martyrdom, offering fresh interpretations influenced by generational shifts and the rise of social activism in the 2020s, which diverge from traditional revolutionary ideologies. Drawing from survey data and qualitative interviews, the research proposes a taxonomy of martyr categories.

*Keywords:* political martyrdom; shahadat; Iran; Islamic Revolution; Mahsa Amini protests

## Introduction

In the wake of the uprising, the Woman-Life-Freedom movement catalysed by the tragic demise of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, following her arrest in Tehran by the morality police for supposedly not following the norms of compulsory hijab (modest dress), the discourse surrounding *shahadat* (martyrdom; Farsi) has experienced a resurgence

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within Iranian society. The protesters who met their untimely end during confrontations with the law enforcement forces have frequently been posthumously regarded as martyrs or *shahid* (Farsi) – a designation particularly fervently embraced by their bereaved families. This nomenclature adorns tombstones and obituaries and permeates their admirers’ posts on social media platforms. Consequently, martyrdom has become a subject of animated discussion, prominently featured in televised programs, especially on oppositional channels in exile, that have a significant influence on the Iranian communities inside the country and abroad. These discussions have centred around the loss of lives of protestors attributed to the current political regime. Given the evolving socio-political landscape in Iran, with mounting economic pressures, generational shift and the rise of social activism, scholars are now compelled to scrutinise this phenomenon from a fresh vantage point, as it promises to offer crucial insights into the nation’s contemporary societal and political transformations. The principal focus of this study is thus to explore the recent interpretations of martyrdom in Iran, examining the shifts that have occurred in recent years notably in the aftermath of September 2022 and the Woman-Life-Freedom movement triggered by Mahsa Amini’s death and advocating for gender equality, women’s rights, and freedom from oppressive societal norms and legal restrictions. The main points this article endeavours to address are as follows:

- 1 In light of the recent protests and the discussions that followed, to what extent can Iranians relate to the ‘traditional’ conceptions of martyrdom delineated by religious doctrines and post-revolutionary scholarly interpretations?
- 2 What is the prevailing interpretation of martyrdom *shahadat* in contemporary Iran, including in Iranians’ everyday lives?
- 3 Has the comprehension of martyrdom in Iranian society undergone a metamorphosis recently (with particular emphasis on the period post-September 2022)?

Over the past few decades, especially in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979, the conception of martyrdom in Iran has undergone a dynamic evolution. It has transitioned from a traditional paradigm rooted in mysticism and Persian philosophy to a novel blend of concepts. In Iranian society, martyrdom is now a cultural, spiritual and political archetype. It is emerging as a foundational tenet of the ideology underpinning the post-revolutionary religious democracy as the country’s governing regime brands its political system.

Amid the various efforts made by the Iranian people to enact political change in recent years, as is well exemplified by the Woman-Life-Freedom movement, a shift in the popular understanding of martyrdom seems to be taking place. This prompts a question: Are contemporary perceptions of martyrdom undergoing a discernible transformation, contrary to the viewpoints commonly asserted by official government sources? If they do, what are they a reflection of?

Using content and concept analysis (Olsthoorn 2017: 153-154), this article aims to uncover the intricate layers of meaning in the modern understanding of martyrdom in Iran. The first stage of the research involved two brief surveys administered to 386 participants within private social media groups (Burnham et al. 2008: 97-132). One of them was a pre-existing group of university alumni with a large diversity of age, gender and education majors. Two other groups were formed during the survey's preparation phase based on the participants' geographical location (inside Iran and abroad). The first survey, conducted in the period from November 2022 to February 2023, aimed to determine the general attitude to martyrdom, its place in the contemporary political culture, and respondents' emotional connection to it. While I do not expand on the results of this first survey in this article, the overall results provided valuable insights into the attitudes of Iranians toward what has traditionally been thought of as martyrdom, and it introduced new categories to further elucidate this complex phenomenon. The second survey asked the respondents to rank the listed conceptions of martyrdom from most to least relevant nowadays, eliminate the conceptions they found least appropriate and propose their own categories. The list of martyr categories used in the survey was formed by the author based on the analysis of a range of publicly available sources, such as the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (which shortly describes what individuals can be considered martyrs but does not specify their categories), works of clerics during the Islamic Revolution and in subsequent years, interviews with Iranians on both state and oppositional TV channels in exile, social media posts by Iranians primarily after September 2022, and on my own observations of local communities in Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan and Tabriz and diaspora groups in Canada, the US and the EU between 2009 and 2022. The second survey allowed identifying a subset of ten martyrdom categories that were subsequently explored in-depth during the second stage of the research process through the follow-up online interviews with 22 respondents. The survey participants and interviewees represented a

diverse demographic profile – primarily undergraduate students from Iranian universities (41%) and individuals with advanced degrees (59%) in engineering, architecture, medicine, management, and education. The respondents' age ranged from 19 to 67, with a relatively even distribution of male (48%) and female (52%) participants. Respondents had different religious backgrounds (Shia Muslims - 37%, Sunni Muslims - 20%, Christians - 23%, Bahai - 11%, atheists - 3%), though some chose not to disclose this information (6%). Twenty interviewees were selected to represent diverse demographics with regards to age, gender, religion and profession. The remaining two represented the *shahid* families: a nephew of a platoon commander, who was killed in 1989 by the Iraqi army, and a sister of a veteran in the Iran-Iraq War who was subsequently killed in a military operation in Syria in 2013.

It is important to acknowledge that data collected during the initial analysis of primary sources may be influenced by a lack of objectivity and relevance to authentic societal experiences (Burnham et al. 2008: 194), primarily due to the authors' adherence to the regime's official ideology. In addition, conducting research in contemporary Iran faces specific challenges, as potential respondents can be reluctant to participate in interviews and surveys due to concerns about persecution and associated threats. Iranian survey respondents prioritise safety and anonymity when participating in research with potential political implications due to concerns about government surveillance and possible repercussions for dissent. Establishing familiarity with the researcher and ensuring non-disclosure of personal information were crucial factors in encouraging participation throughout the research process.

I start with a brief overview of the theoretical underpinnings of martyrdom in Iran as seen through the lenses of religion, philosophy and ideology. I then move on to the analysis of the survey and interview responses to finally suggest what the contemporary notions of martyrdom can tell us about Iranian society in the current historical moment.

## **Martyrdom in Religion and the Works of Revolutionary Scholars and Ideologists**

The concept of martyrdom holds profound significance within Islam and Irfan (also recognised as Islamic mysticism or Sufism). Within Islam, martyrdom represents a revered status attained by individuals who meet their fate while defending their faith or engaging in jihad.

This notion is deeply rooted in the Quran and Hadith, emphasising the qualities of self-sacrifice and unwavering courage. Martyrdom in Islam is therefore characterised by a proactive approach, where individuals actively seek out circumstances to attain it and where it typically entails perishing in battle. In other words, in Islam, a martyr 'is called to seek out situations in which martyrdom might be achieved' (Cook 2015: 26-27). However, 'in comparison to the Bible, the Quran does not detail the martyrdom extensively' (Cook 2007: 19) potentially opening it up to novel interpretations as will become apparent below.

*Shahid* (martyr) is the nominalisation form of *shahadat* (martyrdom) that encapsulates the essence of one who has attained the zenith of consciousness. According to Naser Makarem Shirazi, an influential ideologue within Iran's regime and an Islamic scholar, this heightened awareness stems from 'perception through both the lens of empirical observation and the lens of the heart' (Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, n.d.).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, within the religious literature, individuals who have met their end in the path of Islam are routinely designated as *shahid* regardless of the state of their consciousness.

In contemporary Iran, the Ashura rituals, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and emphasising his sacrifice, and the Karbala Narrative are prominent in shaping the understanding of martyrdom. These traditions are related to the Battle of Karbala, where Imam Hussein, a revered figure in Shia Islam, and his companions were martyred in their stand against injustice, associated with the usurpation of power by the ruling caliphate, which they perceived as deviating from the principles of Islam and oppressing the Muslim community. Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is marked by mourning rituals, processions, and passion plays based on the stories about the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. The collective memory of these events continues to play a significant role in Iran's cultural, religious and political fabric, influencing contemporary interpretations of martyrdom and fostering a sense of resistance against oppression and tyranny. During the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978-1979) aimed at establishing an Islamic government rooted in Shia principles, rejecting Western influence in the region and advocating for Iran's self-determination, the Karbala Narrative (Aghaie 2004: 6) and Imam Hussein's martyrdom served as a potent and mobilising force. Eventually, it resulted in the downfall of the Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Having played a pivotal role in rallying support for the Islamic Revolution's objectives,

the revolutionary interpretation of the Karbala Narrative shaped the identity and ideology of the emerging Islamic Republic (Varzi 2006: 51). Since then, Imam Hussein's figure and events in Karbala have continued to be a significant component of Iranian political and cultural life, contributing to the country's ongoing socio-political landscape.

The writings of prominent figures such as Mahmoud Taleghani, Ali Shariati, or Ruhollah Khomeini are foundational pillars in shaping the ideology surrounding martyrdom in Iran. Subsequent generations of thinkers have expanded upon and refined these foundational ideas, contributing to a nuanced understanding of martyrdom and its significance within Iranian society.

Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani (1911–1979), a prominent Iranian cleric and political activist offered influential insights into *shahadat* in Islam. Recognised for his efforts to harmonise Islamic principles with social justice and political engagement, Taleghani perceived *shahadat* as a profound manifestation of faith, sacrifice and devotion to divine causes. In his view, martyrdom was not confined to physical death but encompasses a spectrum of sacrifices and struggles in pursuing righteousness. Taleghani asserted that martyrdom was the gateway to paradise in the hereafter and to the establishment of justice and social equity on earth. For him, actual martyrs willingly forfeit their comfort, desires and lives to uphold Islamic values and serve humanity. In Taleghani's perspective, the 'souls of martyrs are brimming with joy, and they dream of martyrdom' (Surdykowska 2012: 74).

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989), the architect of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the leader of the Iranian Revolution, played a pivotal role in shaping the concept of *shahadat* in the Islamic Republic. Khomeini's teachings and rhetoric were instrumental in promoting and glorifying *shahadat* among his followers. He regarded martyrdom as a central and honourable facet of the Islamic faith (Osiewicz 2020: 45). Khomeini believed that *shahadat* served to draw closer to God and attain an elevated spiritual status. He deemed those who sacrificed their lives for Islam as true heroes and believed they would be rewarded in the afterlife. Khomeini stressed the importance of selflessness and unwavering commitment to Islam, prioritising these over personal desires and worldly possessions. His rhetoric consistently depicted martyrdom as a noble and heroic act, motivating his supporters to embrace the idea of self-sacrifice for the sake of Islam. In his interactions with followers in 1980, Khomeini underscored the distinct attributes of a martyr and the great honour associated with

achieving this state, quoting the Prophet by saying: 'As the Prophet (peace be upon him) says, all sins will be forgiven to the martyr since the first drop of his blood falls'.<sup>2</sup> Khomeini's advocacy for *shahadat* played a significant role in galvanising the masses during the Iranian Revolution and subsequent conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq War.

Ali Shariati (1933–1977) also an influential figure in shaping the ideology of the Islamic Republic, is renowned for his role in popularising Islamic theology within Iranian society. Shariati engaged his contemporaries in discussions about Islam, traditional national values and religious discourse through extensive publications, lectures and audio recordings. He frequently delved into the topic of martyrdom in Islam, presenting it as a powerful and transformative concept extending beyond mere physical sacrifice on the battlefield. According to Shariati, true *shahadat* transcends armed conflict; it manifests in the willingness to sacrifice oneself for loftier ideals such as justice, freedom and the liberation of the oppressed. Shariati's perspective hinged on the notion that *shahid* (martyr) represents a 'spiritual crystallisation of collective spirit',<sup>3</sup> suggesting that by dedicating their lives to justice, individuals do not merely perish but transition into the values they have upheld. It is noteworthy that Shariati, like many Iranian clerics, acknowledged the existence of distinct tiers of martyrdom contingent upon the motivation and rationale behind self-sacrifice. Shariati believed that 'the highest form of martyrdom entails entering a battle with full knowledge of one's impending demise, all to unveil injustice' (Shariati, Taleqani and Mutahhari 2005: 124).

All in all, martyrdom in the Iranian revolutionary and post-revolutionary ideologic paradigm, exemplified by Imam Hussein's sacrifice, has been profoundly influencing Iran's contemporary political identity. Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emphasised martyrdom as a means to mobilise support for Islamic ideals and resistance against perceived injustices. The current regime's commemoration of martyrs serves to reinforce further its ideological stances, such as Islamic fundamentalism and the promotion of Shia Islam as a guiding force in governance and society, and spur public sentiment against perceived external threats, particularly from Western powers.

## **Inclusive Approaches to Understanding Martyrdom: Findings from Surveys and Qualitative Interviews**

In the light of the martyrdom nomenclature (*shahid*) spreading to those who had lost their lives as a result of the 2022 protests, the question emerged of how the contemporary Iranian general population conceives of martyrdom in relation to the more traditional, officially upheld definitions laid out in scholarly treatises such as those presented above. This section explores a selection of such conceptions, suggesting that the evolving perspectives on martyrdom reflect Iranian society teetering on the brink of substantial social transformations that incite unrest.

The following categories of individuals regarded as martyrs have emerged in the survey responses and interviews as ones relevant to contemporary Iranians: Iran-Iraq War martyrs, Islamic Revolution martyrs, religious figures, victims of terrorist attacks, Hajj pilgrims, people killed in minefields, firefighters and border officers, soldiers killed overseas, innocent people dying in disasters, social and political activists. Below, I explore each of these categories in detail.

### ***Iran-Iraq War Martyrs***

Throughout the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War, numerous Iranians laid down their lives to safeguard their homeland. These individuals have been revered as martyrs for their selfless sacrifice in protecting Iran’s sovereignty and upholding its Islamic values. Different institutions, including the state-sponsored Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs and numerous charity foundations organised by individuals, were established to support the families of these martyrs during the war and in its immediate aftermath. These institutions provided the families of fallen soldiers with regular financial support, while the government, in most cases, guaranteed scholarships to their parents, spouses, siblings and children.

Remembered as the Holy Defence, the efforts of the Iran-Iraq War gave the Iranian society a new culture of martyrdom and resistance (Momeni 2019: 179). The Holy Defence perspective encompasses the collective memory and valorisation of the Iran-Iraq War, portraying it as a sacred struggle against external aggression and oppression. Within this framework, martyrdom is glorified as the ultimate sacrifice made in defence of Islam, the nation, and its revolutionary ideals. Many Iranian families have relatives who became *shahid* during the war. Ali, 35, shared this about his family:



I grew up in a *shahid* family; my uncle was killed in one of the operations in Saqqez. I cannot think of him in any other way except as a patriot, hero and martyr. Being a brilliant student in his course, he was among the first in our city to join the Sepah (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). He sacrificed his life to defend Iran, Iranians and his family.

The survey showed that 82% of the 386 participants would include this category in their understanding of *shahid* as they considered the fallen defenders of the Motherland during the war with Iraq heroes and martyrs.

### ***Islamic Revolution Martyrs***

Those who actively participated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution and lost their lives in the struggle against the Pahlavi monarchy are often considered martyrs. This includes individuals who perished during protests or confrontations with the security forces. Remarkably, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, despite the actual uprising taking place in 1978–1979, is considered by the official narratives of the Iranian regime as an ongoing process. Therefore, even those political and religious activists who played crucial roles in the Islamic Revolution and passed away many years later have been recognised as revolutionary martyrs. For instance, Mohammad-Ali Rajai, Iran's second post-revolution president, elected in 1981 but assassinated later that year, is officially acknowledged as a *shahid*. A more recent example is Qasem Soleimani, an influential Iranian military commander who led the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from 1998 to January 2020, when he was killed in a targeted U.S. drone strike. Despite dying long after the Revolution's official conclusion, he is still celebrated as a revolution martyr due to his dedication to the Revolution's ideals.

However, the survey and the follow-up interviews conducted for this study suggest a significant decrease in appreciation of this category. Most survey participants between 19 and 63 (77%) would prefer not to include those fallen in the name of the Islamic Revolution in the contemporary understanding of who can be considered *shahid* as the respondents could hardly relate to the martyrs of the first years of the Revolution and even less to the modern ones. 'It is hard to understand what the purpose of this fight was. The ideals they were fighting for are the biggest tragedy our society can come to. Feels like our youth are coming to the streets to protest against these ideas', said Masih, 21.

And Rahim, 61, explained, 'I would say they have died for what they believed in. I remember that smell of freedom, heroism and the hidden sound of a war drum in our ears, bringing anticipation of becoming a righteous fighter, but now I can't relate to it'.

### *Religious Figures*

Eminent religious figures or scholars who have been specifically targeted or eventually assassinated due to their opposition to the Iranian revolutionary regime have also received official recognition as martyrs. A case in point is Ayatollah Beheshti, who was assassinated in the early years of the Islamic Republic. Official sources unequivocally treat him as a martyr. Any reference to Beheshti in the media, political speeches, interviews, and articles consistently includes the title *shahid*. This practice extends to everyday conversations among ordinary people as well. The ubiquity of commemorative *shahid* street signage bearing the names of these revered figures serves as a tangible testament to their martyrdoms.

While roughly half of all interviewees (44%) strongly agreed with associating religious figures with the status of martyrs, it is intriguing that 63% of the survey respondents were ambivalent about whether these religious figures should be incorporated into the martyr classification. They acknowledged that, due to the influence of the educational system, society, and state institutions, they have become accustomed to appending the title of *shahid* to deceased religious figures from an early age. However, they often do not do it consciously. The fact that in the survey findings, merely 13% of the participants opted to exclude religious figures from the martyrdom categorisation as irrelevant today might also be indicative of the significant influence of these figures on the collective consciousness through deeply entrenched homage within everyday-life traditions and language.

### *Victims of Terrorist Attacks*

Iranians who died in acts of terrorism, both inside and outside the country, are often regarded as martyrs. This includes victims of attacks attributed to militant groups or acts of violence perceived as targeting the Islamic Republic or its interests. Notably, individuals involved in nuclear projects who were either shot or killed with explosives in Mossad-linked attacks, particularly in the early 2010s, are considered martyrs for dedicating their lives to their country's well-being and strategic goals. The information extracted from the interviews contravenes this

conception. Although it is believed that the death of people caused by acts of terror is a tragedy, many respondents see it as too far from the self-sacrifice of soldiers of the Iran-Iraq War; in the majority of interviews, the respondents would prefer categorising them as victims, who tragically lost their lives due to the acts of violence. For example, Fatemeh, 43, said: 'I feel sorry for the victims of terroristic attacks, but don't find an act of martyrdom here, as it seems this person has got into trouble randomly due to injustice. They haven't been fighting for or against something'.

### *Hajj Pilgrims*

The Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. As a paramount religious obligation (along with the faith creed, prayer, fasting and charity), it attracts to Mecca millions of Muslim participants each year. Among them, Shia Muslims from Iran also partake in this sacred journey. Tragically, the Hajj pilgrimage has been marred by incidents resulting in fatalities, including stampedes, overcrowding, accidents and other lamentable circumstances. For example, in September 2015, a collapsing crane claimed the lives of over 100 individuals, including 11 Iranian citizens. Another calamity during the same year, known as the Mina stampede, resulted in the deaths of 464 Iranian pilgrims. In numerous obituaries, these victims are posthumously honoured with the title *shahid*. However, many survey participants (42%) and interviewees (54%) expressed doubts regarding including these cases in martyrdom categories, citing a lack of conscious self-sacrifice or traditional heroic elements typically associated with martyrdom. Majid, 42, explained:

I have been to Karbala several times and to Mecca once. I see pilgrimage as a part of my value system and my duty. It is a very different experience nowadays compared to centuries ago. I can arrange a safe trip, get an excellent place to stay, and prepare for this mission. If something happens to me during the Hajj, I would consider it an accident caused by negligence or lousy luck, not martyrdom.

While labelling these individuals as martyrs resonates with the prevailing sentiments and traditions among religious Iranians, this classification deviates from the conventional definition of martyrdom.

Traditionally, martyrdom emphasises action against injustice or in defence of specific religious principles or beliefs, whereas the circumstances surrounding these individuals' deaths do not fully align with these criteria.

### *People Killed in Minefields*

After the Iran-Iraq War, there have been documented instances of civilians inadvertently traversing minefields, with a particular concentration of such occurrences in the regions close to Iraq's border. These trespasses have, regrettably, resulted in severe injuries and fatalities. In time, a custom has emerged whereby these individuals have been posthumously recognised as martyrs, and their memory venerated through visits to the sites where these tragic incidents happened. The most renowned of these endeavours, known as 'Rahian-e Noor' or 'Travelers of Light', is a pilgrimage program instituted by the Islamic Republic of Iran. It entails an organised dispatch of groups of Iranian citizens, usually religious youths, to visit sanctified sites integral to Shia Islam, including the revered Ahl al-Bayt shrines, associated with the familial lineage of the Prophet Muhammad and situated in Iraq, Iran and Syria, but also locations such as Shalamcheh, an Iranian town on the border with Iraq that was one of the first targets of the Iraqi invasion in 1988 and is now known for a war memorial complex. What is significant here, is that visiting Shalamcheh entails risking one's life or health given the vast concentration of undiscovered, but still active, minefields created during the Iran-Iraq War. These areas serve as enduring symbols of heroism, altruism and sacrifice. Consequently, instances, where participants of the Rahian-e Noor caravan have inadvertently perished in mine explosions, are officially deemed martyrdom, per the narrative espoused by the government. However, the reaction to such occurrences, as well as the subsequent public discourse surrounding them, manifests a pronounced polarity contingent upon the political and religious inclinations of the populace. Adherents sympathetic to the official ideological tenets of the regime may endorse the official posthumous classification of martyrdom as both 'correct and honourable'. In contrast, the younger generation, characterised by a more secular worldview, is inclined to perceive this designation as propagandistic and 'inappropriate'. For example, Armina, 21, explained: 'Strange adventure. I don't think it is appropriate to call martyrs those who neglect their safety and join dubious activities for no reason'.

Participating in the Rahian-e Noor campaign does not necessarily imply that individuals consider the people killed during these caravans to be martyrs. Saleh, 49, shared his memories:

As a student, I joined the Rahian-e Noor caravan with my cousin. There was a guy in our group who hit a mine. Fortunately, he stayed alive but was severely hurt and became an invalid. I still remember that horrific day and would probably ban this kind of activity, as it is impossible to guarantee the safety of participants. Martyrdom, in this case? I think if we add Rahian-e Noor to martyrs, it is dishonouring actual martyrs.

### *Firefighters – Border Officers*

In earlier sections of this article, we focus on expounding the case of soldiers who met their demise on the battlefield, in the Persian language tradition, and earned the revered title of martyr. This traditional construct is deeply ingrained within Persian sources' linguistic and cultural fabric. However, it is noteworthy that commemorating individuals as martyrs is not limited exclusively to military personnel but extends to individuals in diverse vocations, including firefighters who meet their unfortunate ends while diligently discharging their duties. A poignant illustration of this phenomenon is the tragic incident involving the Plasco Building, a towering 17-story structure dedicated to commerce and trade. In 2017, this tower succumbed to a devastating conflagration and ensuing explosions, resulting in the untimely demise of 20 individuals, many of whom were valiant firefighters. The entire nation was plunged into a state of mourning for selfless martyrs and honouring their unwavering commitment to safeguarding the lives of others. This category once again emphasises not only a willingness to sacrifice one's life as essential for a broad audience to acknowledge an individual reaching the status of a martyr. It also focuses on the idea that 'dying for somebody rather than something' makes a potential martyr more acceptable and leaves no place for alternative judgement. Recognising the cases of firefighters as instances of martyrdom, Iranians value social consciousness and responsibility to society. The survey results too revealed predominant agreement (89%) among respondents in categorising this category of individuals as martyrs. Here, the conception of a martyr is very close to such notions as 'saviour' and 'hero' – a 'secular martyr' (Koehler 2020 after Hoffman and McCormick 2004: 254). Such martyr-hero confronts evil and self-sacrifices to save people's lives (Koehler 2020: 124).

### *Soldiers Killed Overseas*

The situation with soldiers dying in military operations in other countries during peacetime was quite different, as the slight majority of survey respondents (67%) questioned the purpose of the self-sacrifice. However, there is no doubt about considering 'modern fallen warriors' as martyrs in the official narratives of the Iranian regime. The case of Mohsen Hojaji, an Iranian soldier and a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), stands out as a salient exemplar of sacrifice and martyrdom within contemporary Iran. Hojaji's compelling narrative emerged as a symbol of dedication and sacrifice in the modern Iranian context. His journey led him to enlist in the IRGC, where he volunteered for various military operations, including deployments to Syria as part of Iran's assistance to the Syrian government during the ongoing tumultuous Syrian Civil War. Mohsen Hojaji's untimely demise in 2017 in Syria was not just mourned but also elevated to a status of national heroism and martyrdom in Iran. His legacy rapidly permeated various social media platforms and Iranian media outlets, accentuating his unwavering courage, selflessness and commitment to safeguarding the interests of Iran. Hojaji's family has been featured on state television talk shows, and documentaries chronicling his life and sacrifice have been produced. Additionally, the esteemed memory of Mohsen Hojaji is perpetuated through the naming of the streets after him in several provinces of Iran, including Bushehr, Markazi and Hormozgan.

In contrast to this conspicuous government attention and state media coverage, Hojaji's case emerged as one of the most memorable and simultaneously contentious episodes in recent years. It elicited multifaceted questions from the Iranian people—participants in the survey and social media commentators included. Among these questions are doubts concerning the nature of the conflict Mohsen Hojaji was engaged in—whose war was he fighting? Furthermore, observers have questioned the appropriateness of romanticising the ostensibly purposeless death of a young family man who left a vulnerable child bereft of paternal care. Indeed, these questions collectively underscore a pervasive sense of scepticism concerning the rationality and justification for the self-sacrifice of young Iranians in military conflicts that lack official Iranian involvement or take place outside the national borders. Atisa, 51, explained: 'The death of this young man touched me. The problem is that the street named after him can't return a father to the family. I don't get the purpose of our kids dying elsewhere, even heroically'.

### *Innocent People Dying in Disasters*

As a general observation, it is noteworthy that the term 'martyr' is not conventionally attributed to individuals who tragically lost their lives due to natural disasters or accidents. Notably, there are no mentions of such cases in religious texts or official proclamations. Nevertheless, some families employ the term 'martyr' when composing obituaries for their deceased relatives. This usage is rooted in their belief that the untimely demise of their loved ones reflects the divine will, facilitating their ascent to the highest plane of *taslim*, which signifies submission to the will of God. This particular category of martyrdom has emerged from the compilation of materials extracted from obituaries I studied in a local community during my stay in Iran (primarily in Shiraz, Isfahan and Tehran) from 2011 to 2019 and has been subsequently elaborated upon through the interviews. A notable characteristic of this conceptualisation of martyrdom lies in its origin among individuals and local communities.

### *Social and Political Activists*

Individuals actively involved in social or political activism and who meet unfortunate ends while championing specific causes, such as those related to human rights, democracy or social justice, are, on occasion, posthumously recognised as martyrs by their adherents and like-minded individuals. This category has had particular resonance during the 2022 uprising following the tragic passing of Mahsa Amini.

In a recent analysis, A.R. Murthy aptly proposed the concept of *political martyrdom* (Murphy 2023: 467) as a pertinent contemporary phenomenon helping to explain the process of surrounding ascription of martyrdom in contemporary Iran. The notion of political martyrdom draws on the Christian religious traditions and encompasses instances of self-sacrifice for the betterment of society, often stemming from resistance to state authority and its actions that are met with objection. In the case of Mahsa Amini, attributing her demise to police violence eliminates the possibility of associating her with several of the previously mentioned martyrdom categories because she neither died during the Iran–Iraq War nor was assassinated or killed while on pilgrimage.

Moreover, designating her as a martyr remains complex because she was not a political or social activist, and her death, although triggering the unrest, occurred prior to it during her peaceful stroll in Tehran. Her passive role and the absence of active resistance against oppression or

leadership in the uprising present challenges to such categorisation. While many survey respondents suggested that Mahsa Amini's passing can be framed as a form of martyrdom (39%) due to the profoundly distressing and painful nature of her death, the prevailing sentiment among the majority of the survey participants (72%) was that she was a victim of the regime cruelty and served as a *symbol* of the Woman-Life-Freedom unrest.<sup>4</sup> This perspective reflects specific theoretical ideas, wherein individuals are regarded as symbols, shedding certain personal traits while retaining specific social attributes (Breckman 2019: 69-71). In the case of Mahsa Amini, these attributes included her status as a young woman from an ethnic minority (Kurdish), her personality, which friends and family described as sincere and genuine, and her alignment with the philosophy of the Woman-Life-Freedom movement, often encapsulated in the slogan in Kurdish language *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* (also meaning *Woman, Life, Freedom*).<sup>5</sup>

Since September 2022, reports from the oppositional news agencies and blogs of social activists in exile, as well as social media posts by families of deceased protestors, have been demonstrating a broader usage of the term 'martyrdom' than what is typically found in the works of clerics or statements from prominent political figures in Iran. Even the term 'a martyr of the Motherland liberation', which emerged during the Islamic Revolution, now carries fresh interpretations, especially regarding young activists killed by the government. The expanded use of the term 'martyrdom' diverges from the conventional understanding within the Islamic Republic's political doctrine and the objectives of the Islamic Revolution. Drawing parallels with the ethos of combatting injustice exemplified by Imam Hussein, many young protestors perceive the current regime as oppressive and seek to liberate Iran from its grasp.<sup>6</sup> This expanded usage encompasses accidental fatalities during protests and the execution of protestors by the government.

Most of my interviewees (69%) linked the tragic death of a young boy during the anti-governmental protests to Mahsa Amini's case. In 2022, the killing of Kian Pirfalak,<sup>7</sup> a 9-year-old, during a crackdown on the Mahsa Amini protests was blamed on the state security forces. Despite not being an active protestor, Kian Pirfalak, has since been considered a martyr because of who killed him. His martyrdom classification is ambiguous to some respondents, yet his death's profound impact on Iranian society within and outside Iran is undeniable. Amir, 29, explained:



Political and economic reasons make people in Iranian cities and towns go to the streets and protest. The tragedies of Mahsa and Kian show that the political system in this country cannot provide us with the minimum personal safety. How many other innocent martyrs must sacrifice their lives for those who still pretend to sleep?

It is important to emphasise that, in comparison to Mahsa Amini, Kian Pirfalak, despite his young age, can be regarded as an activist. After Kian's demise, his family shared his written notes and paintings devoted to social justice.

Similarly, the notion of dying in confrontation with the official powers appears relevant to the two other cases suggested by my interviewees: that of Nika Shakarami and Khodanoor Lejei. Nika Shakarami, a 16-year-old student and blogger, went missing during the 2022 anti-government protests. When, after a few days, the news about her death reached her family, the government attributed it to a fall. However, based on a range of evidence and witness accounts, Nika Shakarami's family accused security forces of her abduction and murder.<sup>8</sup> Khodanoor Lejei<sup>9</sup> was a 27-year-old man severely injured during the 2022 protests and tied to a pole to bleed to death.<sup>10</sup> Despite official government accounts suggesting that his death was not related to the protests, many Iranians on social media views him as a martyr due to his participation in the anti-government protests. Lejei was treated inhumanely before his death; his crucifixion-like imagery and Balouch Sunni minority group affiliation further made his case very similar to the one of Mahsa Amini. Some social media users shared edited versions of Lejei's images, drawing parallels to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, to underscore the profound suffering endured by the protester before his death due to the regime's oppressive actions.

The case of Mohammad Moradi,<sup>11</sup> an Iranian citizen, who committed suicide in Paris to draw the attention of the global Iranian diaspora and the international community regarding the protests, brings yet another new perspective to the discourse of political martyrdom. Following his demise, Mohammad Moradi has been frequently called a *shahid*, with people commemorating his life and viewing his sacrifice as a potent act of despair deserving recognition. Seen as an *altruistic suicide* (Durkheim 2002 [1897]: 180), Moradi's death fits well into the view of martyrdom involving self-sacrifice. Martyrdom is often associated with religious or ideological motivations, while altruistic suicide

is primarily rooted in a strong sense of duty or obligation to one's community or society (Oakley 2011: 8). In other words, ideological motivations stem from deeply held beliefs or principles that drive individuals to act in alignment with broader ideological goals, religious norms or political preferences. In contrast, a sense of duty to a community involves a commitment to serve and support the well-being of one's local social group, driven by personal connections and shared values within that community. Scholars tend to highlight the distinction between altruistic suicide and martyrdom. Altruistic suicide is seen as a manifestation of a destructive psychological disorder, whereas martyrdom arises from heroic action and a willingness to die rather than a desire to do so. In Mohammad Moradi's case, these two commitments came to overlap both in his act and the interpretations that followed.

In conclusion, the cases of deaths of protesters (Nika Shakarami, Khodanoor Lejei and Mohammad Moradi) and those more passively involved but targeted by the regime (Mahsa Amini and Kian Pirfalak) expand our understanding of martyrdom in contemporary Iran by demonstrating its relevance in contexts beyond traditional settings. The incidents mentioned above highlight how individuals sacrificing their lives for causes such as democracy, human rights, or social justice can be regarded as martyrs, broadening the scope of martyrdom beyond historical or religious contexts and bringing it closer to the realities of modern-day activism and societal struggles. Among cases described above in separate categories, soldiers killed overseas, victims of terrorist attacks, and social and political activists represent different angles of the concept of political martyrdom, each illustrating the diverse contexts in which such sacrifices occur: from fighting for the existing government and ideology to battle against them. Firefighters exemplify a specific form of secular martyrdom, highlighting the significance of social values when the duty to protect lives transcends professional boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

The Woman-Life-Freedom uprisings in Iran have sparked significant changes in the traditional concept of martyrdom, which was once strongly endorsed by the state. This article has explored the evolving public preferences, political shifts and ideological transformations that have blurred the previously clear lines of martyrdom within Iranian society. Through examining the shift from a religious understanding of martyrdom to the conceptions incorporating political and secular martyrs focusing on the image of social activist martyrs who died

during the 2022 uprising, we could trace the changing dynamics of martyrdom in Iran. At the same time, it is essential to note that the traditional concept of martyrdom, rooted in religious and nationalist ideals, still holds significant cultural and historical value for Iranians. For example, the memory of the Iran-Iraq War martyrs continues to be honoured within Iranian society, with the sacrifice of these individuals during the war still shaping the collective memory and identity of the nation. But the emergence of new understanding of martyrdom suggests a shifting societal perspective that challenges traditional notions associated with martyrdom, emphasising factors beyond religion and war. This evolution reflects broader changes in societal values, perceptions, and interpretations of sacrifice and heroism within contemporary contexts.

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## NOTES

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- 9 'Khodanur Lejei, a fighter standing at the intersection of discrimination and class inequality' 2022. *Radio Zamaneh*. <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/739846/>. Accessed on 15 August 2023.
- 10 In internet resources, there are at least two versions of how Khodanur Lejei died. Some sources claim he was wounded by police and left to die on the pole to which he was tied. Others suggest that after being shot and spending a considerable amount of time tied to the pole, he was later taken to the hospital but was denied assistance, being perceived as a protester.
- 11 'Activist Moradi's Death in France Shakes Distressed Members of Iranian Diaspora' 2022. *Arab News*. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2224426/world>. Accessed on 9 August 2023.

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