

## CHAPTER 4 CULTURE AND ANCHORING SOCIAL MOVEMENT NARRATIVES IN ISLAMIC HISTORY

Individuals have to place new information into an existing historical context. So, there is always continuity between the ideas and symbols that individuals use when framing new social situations (Tarrow 1992). In this respect, people always draw on historical events, traditions and past symbols that have resonance when evaluating a social problem. This is particularly true concerning new cultural values introduced during periods of increased social conflict. In this respect, the tumultuous period of early Islam—a period that introduced new beliefs and practices in the Middle East—has considerable resonance for Moslems. During periods of modern conflict it is natural that these narratives would be used to evaluate current problems

Islam in Iran is a highly developed cultural system of symbols, practices and narratives that can be used by leaders to mobilize people into collective frames of action. It is beyond the scope of this study to offer a complete history of Islam, but this chapter presents important historical narratives that are often used to mobilize people in modern Iran. Following a general outline of Moslem beliefs the specific doctrines of Iranian Shi'ism are discussed. The intention is to provide readers who are unfamiliar with Islam a context for understanding the mobilizing narratives adopted by social movement leaders in Iran during the past century.

One criticism concerning academic descriptions of Islamic narratives is that they tend to make the Middle East appear to be monolithic in terms of its social and cultural development (see Said 1978; Naderi 1990). In this respect, I have distinguished Iranian social and cultural practices from other Middle Eastern regions, but space does not permit a thorough accounting of all these differences. Obviously, Islam in Iran is distinct from Islam

that is practiced in other regions of the Middle East and I discuss the most important of these distinctions throughout the study. Finally, Persian cultural and linguistic traditions that existed before the introduction of Islam affect institutions of Iranian society in a number of ways beyond the differences outlined in this chapter.

### ***Symbolic Narratives and Iranian Social Movements***

#### *The General Narrative of the Life of the Prophet Mohammad*<sup>1</sup>

The life of Mohammad, his family, and his followers continues to act as an example that pious Moslems use to frame life events. These individuals are usually considered exemplars of personal conduct that pious Moslems should emulate. Furthermore, the trials that Mohammad faced in the establishment of the Islamic faith are regularly used as mobilizing narratives during periods of conflict in the Middle East. There is no authoritative source concerning the early life of the prophet Mohammad, but most traditional accounts include the following: In 570, the prophet Mohammad was born in *Mecca*, a city in the *Hejaz* region of Arabia (now Saudi Arabia). Mohammad was a member of a minor clan, the *Hashim*, which was part of the dominant regional tribe, the *Quraysh*. He was orphaned at age 6, and was raised by his grand-uncle (Abdul-Muttalib) and uncle (Abu Talib). Later, Mohammad, age 24, was employed by a wealthy widow, Khadija, to manage her commercial interests. They married a year later. The union produced four daughters and two sons. The sons died as infants, only one daughter, Fatima, survived into adulthood.

In 610, during a month when Meccans traditionally fasted, Mohammad was meditating in the caves outside Mecca when the angel Gabriel visited him. Mohammad was directed, in the tradition of previous Christian and Judaic prophets, to proclaim the unity of God (Allah). Mohammad then revealed the Qoran, the incarnate word of God. Previous monotheistic prophetic traditions are covered in the Qoran, and Mohammad's primary

charge—as God’s last prophet—was to unify these faiths. In this regard, Mohammad is the “seal of the prophets” and the revealed Qoran is regarded as the perfection of all preceding prophetic revelation.

The Qoran offers an account of previous prophetic guidance, but not all of the traditions of the Christians and Jews were adopted. For instance, while Jesus is considered a prophet, Moslems reject the concept of the Holy trinity because it is incompatible with the oneness of God’s being (see *articles of belief* below). Mohammad, while guided by God, never claimed to be anything other than fully human or to have supernatural powers. But Mohammad, and others, did offer accounts that demonstrated times when God intervened into the temporal affairs of humans. For instance, Mohammad stated that God had saved the *Ka’ba* in Mecca from being destroyed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by the Abyssinian leader, Abraha, whose elephants—used to attack the city—mysteriously became sick and died during the siege.

### *The Ka’ba*

During the time of Mohammad’s revelations the *Ka’ba* had long been established as a religious shrine. The *Ka’ba* is a square structure with a large open courtyard in Mecca. Mohammad firmly anchored the *Ka’ba* as a sacred space in Islam by revealing it was built by Abraham and his sons to worship Allah.

And remember that Abraham  
And Ismail raised  
The foundations of the House  
(With this prayer): “Our Lord!  
Accept (this service) from us:  
For thou art the All-Hearing,  
The All-knowing  
(Qur’an, Sura 2:127)<sup>2</sup>

The *Ka’ba* is the symbolic center of Islam where Moslems undertake the primary devotional rituals during their pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. Many of the rituals of the

pilgrimage predate the advent of Islam, but these, and other rituals--such as the fast during the holy month of *Ramadan*--were fused into the Islamic narrative when Mohammad revealed that Abraham built the *Ka'ba*. A new practice of particular importance became ritual prayer, five times daily, while facing Mecca. This devotional act was used to reinforce the concept of both community unity and the greater unity of God.

#### *Reaction of the Meccans to Mohammad's Prophecy*

Most Meccans did not accept the revelation that the *Ka'ba* was sacred space devoted to monotheistic worship of Allah. The reluctance by the *Quraysh* to accept Islam was based, in part, on the economic importance that the *Ka'ba* had in Mecca. As a pantheon the *Ka'ba* was a shrine where people of many different faiths made ritual pilgrimages. Mecca was strategically placed as a center for trade, but the religious importance of the *Ka'ba*, as a pantheon of many Gods reinforced its importance as a commercial center. So, most prominent Meccans did not accept that Mohammad was a prophet. An important exception is Abu Bakr, a prominent member of the *Quraysh*, who later became the leader of the Islamic faithful (*Caliph*) after Mohammad died.

#### *The Emigration to Medina (Hejra)*

Mohammad was protected from the hostile *Quraysh* merchants by his uncle, Abu Talib, who was the leader of the *Hashim* clan. In 619, both Abu Talib and Mohammad's wife, Khadija, died. Following these events a rival of Mohammad's ascended to prominence in the *Hashim*. Having lost the protection of his uncle and feeling deep remorse following the death of his wife, Mohammad left Mecca. Roughly 200 miles north of Mecca the small trading post of Yathrib was experiencing conflict between three Jewish tribes—the *Banu Nadir*, *Banu Qurayza* and *Banu Qaynuqa*<sup>3</sup>—and two southern Arabian tribes, the *Aws* and *Khazriq*. Over a

period of two years (620-22) many in Yathrib converted to Islam, and later a delegation of believers asked Mohammad to arbitrate the affairs of the tribes.

Mohammad—along with his closest followers (*muhajirun*)—migrated to Yathrib in 622. After Mohammad established his residence, Yathrib became known as *Madinat al-Nabi*, the city of the prophet, which has been shortened to *Medina*. Consequently, Mohammad's residence in Medina now marks the first year of the Moslem calendar. During his time in Medina, Mohammad established many governing practices that are still considered the basis of just governance for many Moslems. Furthermore, periodic conflict with the Meccans resulted in a series of battles that established some important ideological precedents in the Moslem faith.

#### *The Battle of Badr (2A.H. /624 A.D.)*<sup>4</sup>

There were several battles between the Meccans and the Moslems, but the *Battle of Badr* is the most significant in terms of its symbolic meaning to Moslems. Modern leaders often invoke the battle during periods of armed conflict. It was a caravan raid by the Moslems against a wealthy trader, Abu Sufayn, who was returning to Mecca. Estimates of the number of combatants on both sides vary. The Qoran (see quotation below) states that the Moslem side was half that of the opposition. The most important fact is that the Moslems—despite their numerical disadvantage—prevailed.

While Badr was not a large battle in terms of total participants, it is still regarded as the most important that Mohammad fought. It was the first campaign conducted by Mohammad and because the Moslems were outnumbered the victory was seen as a sign that Allah favored them. It also established the doctrinal precedent that a Moslem killed in the defense of Islam was received directly into paradise. The following Sura from the Qoran

describes the importance of the battle. The *Sura* is also important because it juxtaposes the possession of material wealth with the greater importance of closeness to God.

There has already been  
 For you a Sign  
 In the two armies  
 That met (in combat):  
 One was fighting in the Cause  
 Of God; these other  
 Resisting God; these saw  
 With their own eyes  
 Twice their number.  
 But God doth support  
 With His aid whom he pleaseth.  
 In this is a warning  
 For such have eyes to see.

Fair in the eyes of men  
 Is the love of things they covet:  
 Women and sons;  
 Heaped-up hoards  
 Of gold and silver; horses  
 Branded (for blood and excellence);  
 And (wealth of ) cattle  
 And well-tilled land.  
 Such are the possessions  
 Of this world's life;  
 But nearness to God  
 Is the best of the goals  
 (To return to.)  
 (Quran Sura 3:13-14)

### *Mohammad's Return to Mecca*

While in Medina, Mohammad continued to expand his authority by sending expeditions into the different regions of Arabia. He also warred with the local Jewish tribes who did not align themselves with the Moslems. Despite the ongoing conflicts with the Meccans, Mohammad's authority grew rapidly as more people, throughout Arabia, converted to Islam. In 6/628 Mohammad decided to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Traditionally, the pilgrimage period was a time when a general truce among the tribes was observed. By this time, Mohammad had instituted the practice of praying in the direction of Mecca. The *Ka'ba* was an extremely important symbol in the new faith. Moslems had made the pilgrimage to

Mecca previously, but the Meccans stopped Mohammad's group at Hdaybiyya. At this time a general peace was negotiated wherein Mohammad would be allowed to make the pilgrimage the following year. Two years later a breach of the *Hdaybiyya* agreement caused Mohammad to raise an army and move towards Mecca. As Mohammad approached the city most of the *Umayyad* clan, the most powerful of the *Quraysh* tribes, converted to Islam. Mohammad's re-entry into Mecca—only eight years after his move to Medina—was not opposed militarily. His first act upon re-entering the city—which he undertook with his son-in-law, Ali—was the destruction of the idols<sup>5</sup> that existed in the *Kaba*.

#### *Mohammad's Life in the Modern Context*

Important aspects of Mohammad's life continue to be reified in the daily life of Moslems—and non-Moslems—throughout the Middle East. In particular, because Mohammad lived among his followers he acts as an exemplar of personal conduct that all Moslems should emulate. In the Sunni tradition, current revival leaders use the period of direct governance by Mohammad as the rhetorical ideal of just Islamic governance. It is invoked as the “Golden Age” of Islamic faith. Likewise, his companions, and his immediate family, also act as exemplars of social conduct. For example, Fatima—the prophet's daughter—is often considered the exemplar of the ideal Moslem woman among religious traditionalist. For example, Fatima as currently considered the exemplar of conduct for Moslem women in Iran, and her narrative—which varies dramatically among different movement factions—has been expropriated by almost all modern groups in Iran (see chapter 11 for further discussion)

In Iran, someone who claims lineage to the prophet is a *seyyed* (pl. *sadat*), and the surname *Seyyed* indicates this direct link to the prophet. Religious leaders who claim this lineage are entitled to wear a black or green turban designating this distinction. Likewise,

political leaders—both Sunni and Shi'i—gain stature through their claims of lineage to the prophet. For example, King Abdullah and King Hussein of Jordan, King Feisal of Iraq and King Hasan of Morocco all claim(ed) lineage to the prophet. In the Iranian Shi'i tradition, the rulers of the Safavid dynasty (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century) claimed lineage to the prophet through his daughter Fatima.

The narrative accounts of Mohammad's life—chronicled in the sayings (*hadith*) and practices (*sunna*)—continue to act as exemplars of conduct in the Moslem world. The *Qoran* also speaks eloquently of forgiveness, which God grants to all sinners who repent. Indeed, each *Sura* of the *Qoran* begins with, "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful." So, like much religious revelation, there is a norm extolling the virtues of forgiveness, particularly with respect to reconciliation between Moslems. There are also doctrines that extol the virtues of actively defending the Moslem faith. Although these same types of narratives exist—or were later created—in both Judaic and Christian traditions, a selective reading of the *Qoranic* text by some has helped foster the idea that Islam is a fundamentally militant faith (see Esposito 1992). In fact, *Qoranic* narratives are immensely flexible, and subtle, as they relate to descriptions of human relations. This is likely one reason why many people find the *Qoran* so compelling. As a practical matter, like many sacred texts, the *Qoran* offers a range of narrative accounts that extol both the virtues of peace with the necessity of defending the faith. In describing relations with the West, or relations among themselves, Moslems have a variety of religious "traditions" they can choose from—some extol peace, others sanction war.

The Battle of Badr offers a nice example of how events in the prophet's life are cited to explain modern circumstances. The parable of this battle is widely known and might be considered comparable to the Hebrew narrative concerning "David and Goliath." It makes for a useful analogy in times of conflict. For instance, Saddam Hussein—despite the fact that he

is a secular leader—referred to the Battle of Badr repeatedly during the Gulf War. In effect, he cast himself and the Iraqis in the role of the over-matched Moslems waging a desperate battle—reinforced by their faith—against an irreligious foe with superior numbers. According to Hussein the Iraqis, like the early Moslems, would prevail because of the righteousness of their cause. Furthermore, Badr established the doctrinal philosophy that those who died in defense of Islam (and now, in the defense of a Moslem nation) would be received directly into paradise. Westerners found Hussein’s rhetoric concerning the “mother of all battles”<sup>6</sup> overblown, but by anchoring his account into a common Qoranic narrative he provided a symbolic metaphor designed to rally Iraqi support, and provided an argument as to why Moslems, in general, should support the Iraqis.

### *Articles of Belief in Islam*<sup>7</sup>

The following constitute the primary beliefs and practices that should be observed by all Moslems. In this respect, these doctrines are generally accepted among Moslems even when they are members of different sects.

1) *Belief in the Unity of God*: Islam is most fundamentally a belief in monotheism and that Allah is omnipresent in the world.

2) *Belief in Prophecy of Mohammad*: Allah has periodically sent prophets to guide believers, but Mohammad is the final prophet who was sent to unify the various faiths. The Qoranic tradition recognizes previous prophets who established the monotheistic faiths of Christianity and Judaism but does not recognize other Eastern faiths (e.g. Confucianism and Buddhism).

3) *Belief in the Message of the Qoran*: The Qoran is the literal word of Allah.

Mohammad is not considered the “author” of the text, but simply the means through which the divine was revealed.

This is the Book;  
in its guidance sure, without doubt,  
To those who fear God;

Who believe in the Unseen  
Are steadfast in prayer,  
And spend out what We  
Have provided for them

And who believe in Revelation,  
Sent to thee,

And sent before thy time,  
And (in their hearts)  
Have the assurance of the Hereafter.

They are on (true) guidance,  
From their Lord, and it is  
These who will prosper.

(Quran Sura 2:2-5)

4) *The Belief in the Day of Judgment*: This is the same doctrinal belief that exists in forms of Christianity. At some time in the future there will be a period of reckoning in which the faithful will be led into paradise. The passages dealing with the Day of Judgment are numerous in the Qoran and are the most striking in terms of their poetic construction. In general, these passages juxtapose a series of impossible events (e.g. “when stars fall from the sky”) with the fear that these events inspire in non-believers. The fear of the condemned is often contrasted to the euphoria experienced by the faithful. The following passage is a good example of this style, and is also interesting because it includes a condemnation of female infanticide.

When the sun

(With its spacious light)

Is folded up  
When the stars  
Fall, losing their luster

When the mountains vanish  
(Like a mirage)

When the she-camels,  
Ten months with young,  
Are left untended;

When wild beasts  
Are herded together  
(In human habitations)

When the oceans  
Boil over with a swell

When the souls  
Are sorted out  
(Being joined like with like)

When the female (infant)  
Buried alive, is questioned—

For what crime  
She was killed;

When the Scrolls  
Are laid open

When the World on High  
Is unveiled

When the Blazing Fire  
Is kindled to fierce heat

And when the Garden  
Is brought near.

Then shall each soul know  
What it has put forward.

(Qoran Sura 71: 1-14)

In both the Sunni and Shi'i traditions the Day of Judgment is often accompanied by the idea that a man—in the Sunni tradition the “Mahdi,”<sup>8</sup> in the Shi'i tradition the “Imam”—will appear and collect the faithful.

5) *The Belief in Angels in Jinns*: The angel Gabriel revealed the word of Allah to Mohammad and angels act as Allah's intermediaries on earth. Fallen angels are called “shaytans” and their leader is Iblis.

#### *The Articles of Faith in the Modern Context*

While the previous constitute the norms of Islamic faith they should not be regarded as completely static values that are never negotiated and changed by individuals. Some believers adopt very literal interpretations of the preceding articles of belief similar to the manner that a Christian fundamentalist might interpret the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Others believe these articles can have new meaning in a modern context. For instance, one current debate in Iran revolves around the problem of whether knowledge of the *Qoran's* perfection is possible given the imperative that only Allah is infallible. Some argue that because only Allah has complete knowledge, interpretations by humanity of the Qoran's message (particularly the process of determining law [*feqh*]), must necessarily be imperfect. Furthermore, because humans communicate using language—which changes over time—perfect knowledge is unattainable. By adopting this principle, some hermeneutic scholars often reason that humanity will never completely understand the perfection of the *Qoran*—or the perfection of Allah—and that religious meaning must be constantly negotiated through debate within the wider community (*omma*) of Moslems. Many modernist social movements in Iran, particularly the women's movement, sometimes support hermeneutic scholarship because it

allows them to maintain their Islamic faith but also reject “social” practices (past interpretations of the Qoran) that make them second class citizens.

Some Moslem traditionalists, who use an elaborate process of Aristotelian reasoning that is specifically designed to discern *the original intent* of the *Qoranic* message, regard this type of modernist scholarship as heresy.<sup>10</sup> From their perspective this pedagogical approach undermines the absolute authority of the *Qoranic* message by stating that any interpretation is equivalent to another.<sup>11</sup> Of course, traditionalists also oppose this approach because it undermines their authority, and the painstaking process they use to interpret Islamic law for close to a thousand years, that attempts to divine the original meaning of the *Qoranic* message.<sup>12</sup> This debate is central to the “New Religious Thinking Movement” that is discussed further in Chapter 12.

Current Iranian governance is based on Shi’i religious doctrine associated with the Day of Judgment. In this respect, the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, who will rise and lead the faithful when the world is in a state of crisis, remains the symbolic head of state in the Iranian governing system. In the absence of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam those with religious training who are able to interpret his will are afforded a special standing by the Iranian constitution. In effect, those with traditional religious training, in the absence of the Shi’i spiritual leader, have authority that has now been codified into the current Iranian governing system. In particular, the Leader of the Revolution (*Rahbar*) and *Guardian Council*—two powerful Iranian institutions—are required to be filled by those who have considerable religious training.

### ***Articles of Practice in Islam***

The articles of practice are strictly prescribed acts that pious Moslems should perform which symbolically demonstrate their acceptance of Islam. They also demonstrate the unity of believers in the larger community. The following are the primary articles of practice:

1. *Profession of faith (Shahada)*: The profession of unity of God in which a Moslem states: “There is no God except Allah and Mohammad is his messenger.”
2. *Daily ritual prayer (Salat)*: Prayer is usually undertaken five times (often three times in Iran) a day and is often preceded by the call to prayer (*adhan*) and ritual cleansing (*wudu*) of the body. The prayer process itself results in the complete prostration of an individual as a means of demonstrating subservience—complete acceptance—of Allah. It is conducted according to the sequence of prayer that was established by Mohammad.

The twilight prayer on Friday, similar to Sunday in the Christian tradition, is often preceded by a religious sermon. In the Shi’i tradition the sermon is often delivered from the *minbar*—a lectern or podium that is elevated above the worshippers.

3. *Almsgiving (zakat)*: A religious tithe generally used to help the poor, provide for the public good and to aid pilgrims. In some cases it has been institutionalized by the state. It is generally 2.5 % of a person’s wealth.
4. *Fasting (sawm)*: During the month of Ramadan (ninth month in the Moslem calendar) a daily fast—from sunrise to sunset—is required of all adult Moslems who are not sick or otherwise unable to perform the fast. The fast includes abstinence from smoking and drinking water. The final day of fasting ends with the *id al-fitr*, a feast that celebrates the end of the fasting period.

5. Pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*): Moslems are obligated, if they are able, to make the pilgrimage to Mecca once in their life. The pilgrimage is undertaken during the eighth and thirteenth of *Dhu al Hajjah*. It includes a series of tightly scripted, symbolic actions that reinforce the unity of Islam. An individual who makes the pilgrimage is conferred the title of *hajji* (men) or *hajjah* (women).
  
6. *Jihad* (holy war or individual struggle): Jihad is not always considered obligatory, or as part of the “five pillars” of Islam, but is generally considered the collective responsibility of all Moslems. It is often used to describe the physical defense of Islamic tradition against outsiders, but it can also mean the daily struggle with self (*al-jihad al-akhbar*) to remain a righteous Moslem on the straight path.

#### *Debate Over the Articles of Practice*

The most important aspect of the Islamic articles of practice as they relate to social movement theory is that they can offer a remarkable framework for mobilizing individuals. In particular, every day in the Islamic Middle East is fastened to a schedule designed to maintain group unity through ritual prayer. The days, weeks, and months in the calendar reinforce the obligations that Moslems have to their community, and also reinforce the obligation to be righteous when presented with temptation. Of course, some areas in the Middle East require a stricter obedience to these traditions than others. For example, closing businesses during prayer is strictly enforced in Saudi Arabia and Iran, but not as rigorously enforced in other Middle Eastern countries.

### *Shi'i Religious Narratives*

Shi'i religious belief is distinct from that of the Sunni's. The majority of Iranians in Iran are Shi'i, and much social movement activity in the late nineteenth and twentieth century used the specific events in the Shi'i historical tradition to anchor modern collective protest. There is considerable debate between different Moslem groups concerning the succession crisis that occurred after Mohammad's death, and the subsequent martyrdom of Hossein at Karbala. So, the account below is primarily a narrative history written from a largely Shi'i point of view. As such, it is not a factual "historical" account, but more an accounting of the events that the Shi'i regard as the most important historical events that led to the founding of their faith.

#### *The Succession Crisis following the Death of Mohammad*

Following the death of Mohammad in 632 there was a succession crisis concerning who should follow him as leader (*Caliph*) of the Moslems. There were three general divisions among groups that were the impetus for the major sects that exist in modern Islam.

*The Sunnis* believed that the Caliph should be chosen through consensus among the elders of the *Quraysh* tribe. Following impassioned speeches in support of Abu Bakr—among the first converts to Islam and someone who accompanied Mohammad during the emigration to Medina—he was chosen by the leaders of the *Quraysh* to become Caliph.

*The Shi'is* believed the closest living male descendent of the prophet was the legitimate successor to Mohammad. Therefore, the *shi'at Ali* (partisans of Ali) believed that Ali, the prophet's cousin who had also married Mohammad's only surviving daughter, was the rightful Caliph. Fatima—Mohammad's daughter and the wife of Ali—gave speeches on Ali's behalf during the succession period. The Shi'i believe that following Ali's death his descendents were the rightful Caliphs. The Sunni believe that Ali submitted to Abu Bakr's authority. The Shi'i believe that Ali never submitted to Abu Bakr.

The *Kharijites* first sided with Ali, but later formed the opinion that the most pious Moslem among the entire community of believers should become Caliph. They later fought against Ali.

The first three Caliphs, Abu Bakr (632-34), Umar (634-44) and Uthman (644-56) were all from the *Quraysh*. Ali eventually assumed the title of Caliph for the entire Islamic community after the assassination of Uthman. Ali fought in two civil conflicts. The first, the Battle of the Camel, is named after the camel that Ayisha<sup>13</sup>—a young wife of the prophet Mohammad opposed to Ali<sup>14</sup>—rode at the front of the soldiers who were massed against Ali's army. Both Shi'i and Sunni accounts state that Ali was magnanimous following victory in this battle and allowed Ayisha to return to Medina.

Following this victory, Ali established his base of power in modern day Iraq, but was later challenged by Mu'awiya, a military general and governor of Syria. In 657 the two men's armies battled each other near the Euphrates River. The Shi'i account states that Mu'awiya—as a means of avoiding defeat—had his soldiers place the *Qoran* on their lances (symbolizing the unity of belief among those fighting) and asked for arbitration to be conducted to resolve the dispute. Ali accepted arbitration out of sincerity of belief despite the fact that he would have likely prevailed in battle. But the process of arbitration weakened Ali's claim as rightful Caliph and *Kharajite* dissent increased as the arbitration continued. A Kharajite later mortally wounded Ali while praying and Mu'awiya ascended to the position of Caliph.

In the Shi'i tradition (see Fisher 1980; Momen 1985; Tabataba'i 1975) Ali not only knows of his impending martyrdom, but also his assassin. Despite this knowledge, Ali embraces death because it will be an opportunity to enter paradise. In Fischer's (1980) account he describes how Ali, struck while praying in the prostration position (*sidja*) cried, "O God, most fortunate am I!" Furthermore, during the three days that Ali—mortally

wounded—lay dying, he is said to have offered kindness to his assassin. When it became apparent he would die, Ali then expressed remorse that his assassin, according to the precepts of Islamic law, would also have to die. He orders him to be killed with one blow (the same number he had endured) and then instructs that the man’s family not be persecuted.

Following Ali’s death, the Shi’i regarded the ascension of Mu’awiya to Caliph as illegitimate. Furthermore, they regard the descendents of Fatima and Ali as the rightful leaders of the Moslems. There are sub-sects within Shi’i community, but most believe that there were twelve Imams, starting with Ali and ending with Mohammad ibn Hasan. He is commonly referred to as the “rightly guided” (the *Mahdi*) and “the awaited.” The twelfth Imam is currently in an occult<sup>15</sup> state, neither in heaven or of this earth, and will—during the day of judgment—lead the faithful in a final campaign against evil (see Momen 1985: 23-45).

*The Martyrdom of Hossein*<sup>16</sup>

*Every day is Ashura. Every land is Karbala.*  
[Imam Ja’far al-Saddiq]

Hossein’s martyrdom at Karbala is a defining frame of reference—a general life lesson—for all pious Shi’i Moslems. Hossein was Ali’s second son. He died while trying to reclaim the Caliphate. This event—which occurred on the tenth month of the Moslem calendar, *Moharram*—is re-created by Shi’is during the *Moharram* processions each year. *Ashura*, the tenth day of *Moharram*, is the day that Hossein was martyred by followers of Mu’awiya’s son, Yazid. During the Iranian Revolution the slogan, “Every day is Ashura, every land is Karbala,” was often used by supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The slogan, in both its original and modern context, states that the righteousness of the Shi’i cause, exemplified by Hossein’s bravery at Karbala, is a daily, life-guiding philosophy. The event is comparable, in terms of its importance as a life guiding philosophy, to the meaning that

devout Christians assign to the example of Christ's suffering on the cross. In effect, the example of Hossein's martyrdom, and his actions throughout the siege of Karbala, is the exemplar of righteous Shi'i conduct that the faithful should emulate.

According to the Shi'i tradition, following the death of Ali his first son, Hasan, is said to have negotiated an agreement with Mu'awiya wherein the position of Caliph would revert back to the family of the prophet following Mu'awiya's death. Instead, Mu'awiya poisoned Hasan and then created a dynastic succession of the *Ummayah* clan. His son, Yazid, later assumed the position of Caliph. Following Hasan's death, Hossein, refused to recognize Yazid. Instead, Hossein pressed his claim that he was rightfully Caliph and attempted to rendezvous with supporters in southern Iraq.

At Karbala, on the first day of *Moharram*, Hossein and his companions were surrounded by Yazid's army and forced to camp in the desert while being denied water. Hossein refused to submit to Yazid's authority, even though this would have spared his life. On the tenth of *Moharram*, the day of *Ashura*, after ten days of the stand-off, all of the men in Hossein's group—except for two of his sons (the fourth and fifth Imams)—were killed by Yazid's army.

The following is a basic account of this narrative. A master storyteller (*rawda-kwhan*), or the dramatic representation presented during a *taziyeh* (passion plays) would be far more elaborate. Still, this account includes the main points of the traditional narrative. It was written by Ramzin Sabri and is available at the al-islam.org website ([www.al-islam.org/short/Karbala.htm](http://www.al-islam.org/short/Karbala.htm)). It is clearly written for a foreign (non-Iranian) audience as an introduction to the events that occurred during *Moharram*. Parts of the translation are rough, but it is presented because it gives a basic, popular account of the narrative from an Iranian perspective (as it would be presented to a foreign audience). The letters in parenthesis (pbuh) are shorthand for “peace be upon him”

By the afternoon 70 brave persons had sacrificed their lives in Karbala to save Islam. All had fought under nerve racking conditions, severe thirst, dehydration, exhaustion, and agonizing feeling of what would happen to the family of the Prophet (pbuh) afterwards. Husain endured all that and more, for he saw all his beloved ones brutally cut to pieces, including children. Remaining the only one, Imam Husain was to face the enemy head on. Precisely at that moment Imam Husain heard his baby crying incessantly, agonizing because of the thirst. Imam Husain's love for his family was unbound, especially for a suffering baby. He held the six months old baby, his youngest son (Ali Asghar) in his arms, and appealed to the enemy fighters for some water for the baby. Imam wanted to awaken their conscience and stir their human feelings but the stone-hearted enemy, instead of giving water, zoomed an arrow toward the agonizing baby and killed him instantly. Imam Husain was shocked. He felt an unbearable wave of pain. The sight of the limp baby in his arms was agonizingly painful. He filled his palm with the blood of the baby, and threw it upwards toward the sky, complaining to Allah (swt), "O' Allah, O' my Lord! My consolation is the fact that Thou in Thine Majesty are witnessing what I am going through."

#### AL-HUSAIN BY HIMSELF:

Imam Husain (a.s.) was alone, one man against thousands. He took them on, fighting them bravely, and kept fighting, receiving many wounds in the process. Thousands of enemy fighters were surrounding him but none dared to move toward him. The silence was broken when Shimr screamed for an attack, then screamed again, threatening, and in response they attacked collectively,

and one sword fell on Imam Husain's left wrist and deeply cut his left hand. The blood gushed like a fountain. Another sword was soon to follow and it hit his upper back. Imam Husain (a.s.) felt numb as he fell to the ground, bleeding profusely. He was near the point of shock, even though staggering he tried to stand by leaning on his sword. Then he received the fatal blow.

It was at this point that Shimr, whose mother was a disbeliever, came forward and severed Imam Husain's noble head from the body, the noble head kissed often by the Prophet (pbuh)! Shimr and others had the audacity to carry it on the tip of a spear to Yazid, 600 miles away!

Umar Ibn Sa'ad ordered the horsemen to trample upon the supine bodies of Imam Husain and all others killed, to disfigure them even further, as if the wounds, the bloodied bodies, and the headless forms were not enough.

For three days the exposed bodies of the martyrs were left lying in the desert of Karbala. Afterwards, the people of the tribe of Bani-Asad, who were not far away from the battlefield, helped bury them.

Umar Ibn Sa'ad and his forces (representing Benu Umayya) took the women and children as prisoners in shackles, put them on camels, and proceeded in a caravan from Karbala to Kufa. At the forefront of the procession were the heads of Imam Husain (a.s.) and his followers on the tip of spears. The scene was both grotesque and pathetic. This was the leftover of the beloved family of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh), in such a deplorable unimaginable condition, all caused by people who called themselves Moslems! (*Karbala: Chain of Events* is available at [www.al-islam.org/short/Karbala.htm](http://www.al-islam.org/short/Karbala.htm))

*The Martyrdom of Hossein in the Modern Context*

The majority of Moslems in Iran are Shi'i, and the constitutional basis for the legitimacy of the current governance is tied firmly to a system of Shi'i beliefs as outlined by Ayatollah Khomeini in *Islamic Governance* ([1970] 1981). As such, the Iranian narratives concerning the martyrdom of Ali and Hossein are used to legitimize current governance in Iran. Furthermore, awareness of the specific rituals associated with the martyrdom of Hossein is fundamental to understanding the ebb and flow of some social movement activities in Iran.

Fischer (1980), an American anthropologist who studied seminaries (*madrasas*) in the holy city of Qom, believes the account of Hossein's martyrdom—combined with the symbols and institutions that support this account—constitute a *Karbala paradigm* that was used to mobilize people during the 1978 revolution. Indeed, throughout the movement periods surveyed in this study there is a correlation with an increase in protest intensity occurring during *Moharram*. Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999) also regard the symbolic content of this narrative to be of primary importance in “staging” revolution. Likewise, current Iranian religious leaders associate Khomeini's doctrines as important in the re-establishment of the “culture of Ashura.”<sup>17</sup>

The narrative tradition concerning the life of Hossein offers a ready-made analogy for both identifying, and counteracting, injustice. For example, in the hands of a skillful orator the irreligious Shah of Iran (in both the constitutional period and during the Iranian revolution) was usually personified as Yazid. The Iranian faithful—unable to prevent Hossein's martyrdom—now had a chance to redeem Hossein's death in their current struggle against injustice. This narrative account performed a number a framing functions in all the movements surveyed in this work (see Hunt et al. 1994). First, it helped identify social problems such as irreligious attitudes within the government. By comparing Reza Shah to Yazid, as Khomeini did repeatedly, he later allowed for supporters of the revolution to enjoy

a measure of redemption in their ongoing revolutionary struggle against the Shah and the West. Furthermore, because there are specific religious rituals dedicated to this event, and because the narrative accounts of Hossein's martyrdom are well known, narratives of social protest existed in the Iranian historical consciousness that were easily fashioned into modern movement frames by religious leaders. These symbolic rituals are outlined in the following chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> The following information is available in any introductory text on Islam and the Middle East. *The Straight Path* (Esposito 1991) offers a more in depth summary. I have also used Armajani and Ricks (1987) and Tawfik (1997) as general text books.

<sup>2</sup> This translation of the Qoran is slightly different than translations done from Iranian sources. The parenthesis represent the translator's additions made to the text for clarity. There are many different translations of the Qoran into English and there is considerable debate concerning how the Qoran should be translated. I like Yusef Ali's translation for personal reasons, likely because it was the first translation that I read as a student. In particular, he did attempt to retain some of the lyrical elements of the Qoran in his translation and commentary. Other translations render the *suras* into sentence and paragraph form. This makes the narrative aspects of the Qoran easier to understand, but eliminates the lyrical form of the work. Of course, any translation from traditional Arabic into English is going to be imperfect.

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars point to this period as the beginning of Jewish and Moslem animosity. The record is mixed. In particular, while both Jews and Christians are afforded second-class status in the *Qoran*, they were not generally persecuted and were allowed to establish fairly stable communities throughout the Middle East until recently. Currently, many Jewish communities in the Middle East (in Syria, Yemen and Iran) have declined or disappeared completely. In this particular instance the Jewish tribes appear to have never accepted Mohamed's leadership, and he accused them, repeatedly, of siding with the Meccans. In particular, several passages in the *Qoran* speak of the tribes "making pacts" and then going back on their word during conflict. As a result, after each engagement with the Meccans, the different Jewish tribes were often assaulted and banished from Medina. Currently, this period of conflict with the Jewish tribes gets wide coverage in the Arab press and the Qoranic passages that detail this conflict get wide coverage in the Middle East.

<sup>4</sup> For this chapter, important events are given their date in the Moslem tradition. Mohammad's residence in Medina is year 1.

<sup>5</sup> The destruction of idols is often re-counted in both the Islamic and Christian narratives. Obviously, this account continues to have resonance as a standard for action in some places of the world. Most recently, it was the rationale for destroying the giant Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban. This is no longer normative social behavior for most Moslems.

<sup>6</sup> This is essentially the same language used to describe the battle of Badr in that it was the first, or "the mother," or "the battle that began all battles" in the Islamic narrative tradition.

<sup>7</sup> These articles of belief are available in any introductory text. See Esposito (1991) *The Straight Path*.

<sup>8</sup> There have been periodic movements led by men who have proclaimed to be the "Mahdi." The most successful was in the Sudan, in the late nineteenth century, when Abdullah Hasan, "the Mahdi," gained considerable support and managed to establish control over Khartoum. Abdullah Hasan killed a British hero, General Gordan. "The Mahdi" died six months following his victory in Khartoum. His followers retained control over Sudan for eight years. His descendents still have a popular following in the country.

<sup>9</sup> The term “fundamentalist” has gained popular usage in the West as a description of nearly all Islamic movements. It is not a good description of many movements, although some should be considered, like their Christian counterparts, as “fundamentalist” if they ascribe to a literalist interpretation of the Qoran. Probably the most “fundamentalist” interpretation of the Qoran is the Hanbali school that is the official state religion of Saudi Arabia. It was a revolutionary school during the nineteenth century, but is now integral to the doctrinal authority of the Saudi monarchy. By way of contrast, many revolutionary Islamic doctrines encourage the use *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) that sanction the use of analogy in interpreting Qoranic texts.

<sup>10</sup> This can led to charges of heresy. In Iran, Abdol Karim Soroush sometimes adopts hermeneutic strategies and is consistently attacked by supporters of traditionalist. I once observed a well-known feminist Moslem-American hermeneutic scholar, a convert, who had a less than polite reception from the predominately Moslem-Arab audience in attendance. In this case, both Arab men and women argued that it was important to come as close as possible to the original intent of the Qoranic message. This scholars rebuttal was straightforward. She argued that Qoran was a living text, subject to modern interpretations, and that her interpretation of the Qoranic message was as legitimate as someone else’s. She also took issue with the idea that anybody in the “modern” age could read the Qoran in a “traditional” manner.

<sup>11</sup> In Iran, where this debate has important political and social consequences. One conservative religious leader recently stated, “If you encounter someone who says that they have a different interpretation, punch them in the nose.”

<sup>12</sup> See Tabataba’i [1988] and Motahhari [1988], particularly “*Is the Qoran Understandable?*”

<sup>13</sup> Ayisha, despite the fact that she is the source of many *hadith*, has not fared as well as Fatima as it relates to being the exemplar for Moslem women. In fact, she is often considered the antithesis of how a Moslem woman should behave. Mernassi (1975; 1991) has a tried to resurrect and refashion the story of Ayisha. Mernassi was initially spurred into this endeavor when, in discussing women’s rights issues in Morocco she continually encountered the saying, related to the Battle of the Camel, that roughly translates as: “allowing a woman to lead people into battle is a sure sign that disaster will follow.” Mir-Hosseini (1999) has indicated that this account is common in Iran as well.

<sup>14</sup> One popular account says that Ayisha was opposed to Ali because she was once mistakenly left behind while traveling with Mohammed’s caravan—but was later returned to the group by a Islamic soldier—and Ali suggested to Mohammad that she might be accused of adultery with the man who returned her. To avoid the appearance of impropriety, Ali suggested that she should be divorced. Mohammad, who is usually said to have enjoyed Ayisha’s company immensely, responded that at least four men of sound reputations must witness adultery for it to be proven. Fischer (1980) relays this narrative in his work. As a practical matter these conditions make adultery difficult to prove in Islamic society. I once had a professor of political science, an Iranian-American, explain that it was hard to find four “reputable” men who might also find themselves in the position to “observe” adultery. Still, the punishment for this offence is often harsh (death) and continues, sporadically, to be enforced in some Moslem countries, particularly in rural areas.

<sup>15</sup> The occultation of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, in the Shi’i experience, means that he is both “hidden” from his followers, but also imbued with supernatural powers.

<sup>16</sup> Momen (1985) has the best overview of Shi’i Islam, including a more in depth description of the events described in this chapter.

<sup>17</sup> See *Imam Khomeini and the Culture of Ashura*. International Congress on Imam Khomeini and the Culture of Ashura, 1995). A paper delivered at one of these conferences, Hamid Algar’s discussion of Khomeini’s Gnostic work, is available online at <http://www.khomeini.com/gatewaytoheaven/Articles/PersonalityofImam.html>