

**Martyred Innocence**  
**Children, Sacrifice and the Rationalization of War in Modern Iran**  
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**Draft Paper not for Circulation**

*Note: This paper is a draft not intended for circulation beyond the conference. I have intentionally left out reference and much of the analysis. It is accompanied by a series of images in a separate pdf file.*

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the material and visual culture of Iran during and after the Iran-Iraq war and on the role of childhood in the enactment of national and religious history. Various organs of the Iranian revolutionary regime produced posters, postage stamps, children's books and other media for a variety of related purposes: in a narrow and obvious sense, such materials played a role in perpetuating the revolution, mobilizing the citizenry in the war effort, and casting the conflict against Iraq in Shi'a cosmological terms. At another level, they helped define the role of children in national events and movements, and served an emotive and aspirational purpose in which the representation of ideal childhood promised ideal adults of the future and thereby a secure national and religious polity.

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The conception of childhood as a distinct life stage separate from adulthood is a modern idea that is culturally specific and contextually flexible. It manifests itself in a presumption of innocence (and anxieties over the loss thereof), in severe discomfort over and the regulation of child sexuality, contested ages of consent for marriage, debates over child soldiers (and the changing of the age of conscription in times of special need), as well as in other things. It is worth noting at the start of this discussion that *childhood* is different from the *experiences*, *biology* and *psychology* of children, in that it is an *adult* defined state of being a child. Children, for their part, might not have a say in the definition and legislation of childhood, but they are adept at exerting agency within and manipulating the boundaries of childhood. Child agency arguably contradicts essential properties of the state of childhood, the presumption of

helplessness and innocence. All of these qualities inform the notion of cuteness, which is also a necessary characteristic of the idealized child.

### **Of Iran, Images and Ideologies**

A distinctive richness of its religious visual culture distinguishes Iran among modern Islamic majority societies. In addition to an unusual level of acceptance of representational religious art such as polychromatic images of Imam Ali and the Prophet Muhammad, narrative and other visual arts form integral parts of Iranian religious life.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 not only transformed the country's political structure but it also placed a revolutionary form of Islam at the center of visual and material culture. The public religious rhetoric of Iran grew inseparable from the war with Iraq (1980-88) which became framed as one between (religious) good and evil, and where religion was used extensively to mobilize the Iranian population and to make sense of high numbers of casualties suffered by an exhausted nation. The war led to a nationwide mobilization of Iranians. Their country was almost completely isolated whereas Iraq was supported by Arab states, the Soviet Union, and various permutations of Western powers which changed through the years. A combination of revolutionary zeal and diminishing military resources resulted in the creation of a large volunteer force, the Basij, which drew men outside of draftable age (and some women) actively into the war. A network of clergymen affiliated with the Basij went from town to town exhorting everyone eligible to enlist, with enormous emotional and moral pressure placed on teenage boys and old men to join the fighting. The broad mobilization of relatively untrained and ill-equipped volunteers to go to the battle front where they cleared mines and attacked Iraqi military positions in human waves resulted in very high casualties, making the human costs of war even more of a social reality than they normally are.

### **Books for and Images of Children**

The state was actively in producing visual and material cultural artifacts furthering this ideology, many of which featured children. This included posters and postage stamps, as well as picture books which exhorted children to support the war effort and helped them make sense of

the casualties suffered by Iranians (which would include the children's fathers and other close relatives). Governmental presses published children's books about various aspects of the war, focusing both on creating an enthusiasm for battle and on explaining loss.

These children's picture books, as well as the posters and postage stamps from the period of the war and later works that evoke its memory and symbolism, display a broad variety of artistic styles and influences. Many Iranian artists from the period immediately before the revolution were trained in western artistic traditions, the influence of which is readily apparent in the visual data under review. Revolutionary posters and postage stamps in particular seem strongly derivative of the art of the Soviet and Spanish revolutionary periods (PLATE I). There is also a significant amount of art produced by children (or designed in a naïve style to appear as a children's art).

Books for children are distinct from posters and postage stamps in that the primary intended audience of the former is purportedly children rather than adults. I make this claim guardedly because, as I suggest in the longer version of this paper, children's religious and revolutionary children's arts and literary are intended directly and indirectly at adults, just as children themselves constitute a portion of the audience for public and institutional arts (like postage stamps) ostensibly directed at adults.

The children's books produced by state and semi-state presses in Iran rely heavily on visual cuteness in communicating their messages, something that is seen widely in the visual representation of children and which is only recently being studied seriously. (PLATE II: "Alef, Alef, Asmun!" The cover of the first volume in a series of books teaching the alphabet through rhyme. Note that the little girl is swinging for the barrel of a tank, and the profile of a tank is prominently displayed behind the book title.)

### **Cuteness Explored**

Much of the work on cuteness is centered on Japan where cuteness (*kawa'i*) is a substantial element of adult lifestyles and of consumer culture. Adult women aspire to be cute in a defined sense that — it is argued (though not convincingly for me) — is not a sexualized one. Commodity cuteness (such as the corporately planned development of Pokemon or of Sanrio's

Hello Kitty and other brand icons) is a pervasive societal phenomenon, such that even middle aged adult men have “cute” character themed phone covers and electronic “pets”.

While Japanese-style cuteness and cute culture does not have broad global appeal, the essential visual elements of what is considered cute (and the inner qualities promised by these visual signifiers) are recognized widely. Visual cuteness is characterized by some combination of smallness, roundedness, happiness, supplemented by secondary cues such as large eyes and tiny (or entirely absent) noses and mouths.

The basic visual elements that characterize cuteness are easily identified, but what cuteness entails is not. Work on visual cuteness in Japan and suggests that it is characterized by helpless and innocence. But visual materials from the Islamic world examined here challenge that assumption. In the first place, helplessness is not a necessary (or even an important) factor in cuteness or childhood. In the second, innocence can mean different things. That children are cute but not helpless is somewhat obvious and I will not discuss it further, except to draw attention to the fact that childhood helplessness is a cornerstone of adult desires to control children and provide them with an idyllic, completely safe environment which is in contradiction to the world the majority of the world’s children actually live in.

The issue of innocence is more complex, in that it can mean specific things. There is a distinction to be drawn between “innocence” as an ignorance of non-idyllic things, or bad things, and “innocence” as an absence of sin or guilt. Although the separation between the two does not hold perfectly, the materials studied here associate childhood innocence with the latter state — the absence of sin and guilt. As such, innocence, childhood and cuteness are associated with virtue and goodness, making childhood a *moral* state as well as a *biological* one. The innocent are morally good, and children are innocent.

This point is driven home by the Iranian child soldier, who steps out of the cartoonish world of illustrated children’s books to one of historical reality in the national consciousness PLATE III “The Piggybank” depicts the story of a boy who desperately wants a toy gun displayed in a shop window. When he finally has enough money, he breaks open his piggy bank, buys the gun, and dresses like a soldier. The final illustration of the book has him as an adult soldier, with a real gun.

## Martyrdom and Karbala

The boy in Plate III displays characteristics of visual cuteness, but other signifiers tie him to religious themes of sacrifice and martyrdom. In particular, the headband on his helmet — which reads “Ya Mahdi!” — is characteristic of Basij volunteers. Such headbands are a regular feature in the visual representation of Iranian soldiers, and directly evoke the history of martyrdom in the development of Twelver Shi’ism, the form of Islam that dominates in Iran.

The episode of Karbala comprises the central event of early Shi’i history: in 680 CE (61 AH) the Prophet’s grandson Husayn and granddaughter Zaynab were besieged at Karbala by the armies of Yazid (the caliphal claimant) as they travelled with a small retinue of family members and loyal followers. Although this confrontation was of very small proportions, it has resonated as one of the formative moments in the history of Islam. Husayn was killed at the hands of the (proto) Sunni army, as was his infant son ‘Ali-ye Asghar, half brother ‘Abbas and approximately 70 other individuals remembered by Shi’as as loyal to the Prophet. Zaynab and the remaining survivors (who were mostly women and very young children) were taken captive (ie, enslaved) and marched to Yazid’s court.

The memory of Karbala is kept alive in Iranian public culture both through its ritual reenactment in the month of Muharram and through its pervasive evocation at other times in a variety of contexts. Karbala was visually and textually at the symbolic forefront of the build up to the Islamic Revolution: among others, ‘Ali Shari‘ati wrote eloquently about the nature of martyrdom (*shahādat*) as a revolutionary role of cosmic significance, in which the martyr (*shahīd*) is a witness (*shāhid*) to the prevalence of evil, and the struggle against the Shah was routinely likened to the battle against Yazid.

With the Iran-Iraq War, the comparisons to Karbala were so varied and pervasive that the period of the war can be viewed in apocalyptic terms, with time folding between Karbala and the 1980s, when a Sunni Arab tyrant (Saddam Hussein), an oppressor of Shi‘as, engaged in an unprovoked and vicious attack against innocents. As such, it was not just *fighting* in defense of the (virtuous) homeland but *dying* in the war that became the most complete way of reenacting sacred history. This phenomenon is broadly reflected in the visual materials related to the war. For example, PLATE IV is a reproduction of a painting in which a motherly woman carries the body of a dead young man in a posture derivative of a Pieta, but which is also likely to evoke memories of Fatima or Zaynab in the minds of many Shi‘as. She stands in front of an ethereal

host of headless soldiers — these are the Martyrs of Karbala led by ‘Ali on his white horse. The foreground is occupied by modern soldiers with guns, while the middle is filled with the corpses of soldiers, cruelly hoisted on posts.

The evocation of Karbala carries into children’s picture books, eliding the demarcation between the world of idealized childhood — in which death and disease have no place — and the world of adults at war. PLATE V (“Cute Little Warrior”) shows the cover of a children’s book about a little boy who dreams of joining the war. He plays at being a soldier, rearranging his family living room as a fort and fighting battles against his toys, using oranges as grenades (PLATE VI). “Attacking from all sides, I surround the enemy and target them; I am the guardian of the faith and the homeland, I am the rightly guided warrior!”

As in “Piggy Bank,” the little boy in “Cute Little Warrior” is wearing a religious headband, emblazoned in this case with the slogan “Oh Husayn!” This book also ends with a picture of the boy as an adult soldier with real weapons.

The ideal of the boy soldier depicted in picture books reinforced a nationwide movement encouraging boys to join the Basij. They were explicitly told to do this only if they had the explicit permission of their parents. However, as has been seen time and again in numerous contexts (the First and Second World Wars being notable examples), there is an implicit admiration for boys who lie to their parents and military recruiters about their age, such that protestations concerning ages of conscription or of adult permission are neither effective nor sincere.

### **Real Boy Soldiers**

The virtuous Iranian child par excellence in this model is Muhammad Husayn Fahmideh, who attached grenades to his body and threw himself under an Iraqi tank at the battle of Khorramshar in 1981. He was 12 years old, and had disobeyed his parents and lied in order to join the Basij. The memory of Fahmideh is kept alive in Iranian national culture through lessons about him in schools, stories about him in popular media, and recurring use of him in state discourse. PLATE VII shows a commemorative pair of stamps from 2012 entitled “Dedication and Sacrifice;” the stamp on the right celebrates a tenant farmer named Riz Ali Khajavi who, in 1962, saw that a landslide had blocked the railroad tracks in front of an approaching passenger

train. Khajavi tore off his coat in freezing weather, attached it to a stick, set it alight, and then ran toward the approaching train. The driver saw him and successfully stopped the train without any casualties. This famous *Degqān-e fadākār* (“Dedicated Farmer”) is a staple of Iranian social studies classes, and has been joined by Fahmideh who is represented in the second of the pair of stamps. As in the case of the farmer Khajavi, Fahmideh needs only visual cues to tell his story (a soldier crouching in the desert, an exploding tank), evidence of the level to which this story is familiar to its audience. Unlike the farmer, Fahmideh is shown in portrait style, a common way in which martyrs are represented visually in Iran. His status as martyr is also enforced by the white doves flying in the top left corner above him.

Fahmideh’s status as a national hero is apparent from a pair of commemorative stamps (PLATE VIII) marking the 1986 Universal Day of the Child. The pair comprises a child’s painting of his heroism on the left, and a photograph on the right accompanied by Khomeini’s words in praise of him. The painting evokes his story iconically (a crouching soldier, tanks with Iraqi flags). Khomeini’s words in praise of him are morally descriptive: ‘Our guide (*rahbar*) is that boy of twelve years of age. The worth of his little heart is greater than could be described by hundreds of tongues and hundreds of pens. He threw himself under an enemy tank with a grenade and destroyed it. And he drank the sweet elixir of martyrdom.’

The word *rahbar* for “guide” was used as a title for Khomeini; his use of it in a formal statement concerning Fahmideh consciously places the boy in a position of religious/moral leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran, complicating notions of childhood innocence. The elision of innocence into visual cuteness (which is characteristic of most representations of children) is demonstrated further in the poster in PLATE IX. This painting shows Fahmideh ostensibly at the moment of his departure for the front. The image is decidedly sad — the boy’s face shows grim determination, not enthusiasm and excitement at the prospect of battle and its glories, while the girl wails as she clutches the Quran. In this image, the boy and girl stand in for adult anxieties and emotions very explicitly: the graffiti on the wall is of statements by Khomeini (included the one concerning Fahmideh translated above), and the overall message is the apocalyptic evocation of the martyrdom of Husayn. As is retold every year in popular commemorations, Imam Husayn and his mother Fatima (and in some versions his sister Zaynab as well) knew all along what fate awaited him, yet he went through with the events of his life out of cosmic necessity. Like Husayn’s grieving mother and sister, the girl in PLATE IX takes

solace in her faith and makes no attempt to alter the course of the religious guide's (*rahbar's*) martyrdom.

### **Counterpoint: Child Soldiers**

Much of the international literature dealing with the participating of boys in the Iranian war effort takes a strongly opinionated view of child participation in war, and one that condemns Iran for not fitting within global norms of behavior in this regard. Several books and articles further the opinion that Iranian boys were coerced or brainwashed into participating in the war by Khomeini and the revolutionary religion elite.<sup>1</sup> Such a position fails not only to acknowledge the agency of preteens, but often also fails to place the Iranian experience within global practices and rules about children, the age of majority and war.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address such questions in any detail, but it deserves to be highlighted that the age of conscription for males has frequently been linked to concepts of maturity which are inseparable from the age of majority for marriage, which has only very recently (and broadly unenforceably) been raised to 16 or 18 in many so called developed societies. Similarly, many developed countries (and especially the Anglo-Saxon majority ones) have argued against 18 as a universal age of maturity for joining the military. In the case of the US, the country passed the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA) in 2008, forbidding the US from providing military assistance to countries and/or groups that accept volunteers under the age of 15 or conscript soldiers under the age of 18. The act provides no exclusions for non-combat service roles such as cooks, messengers or sex slaves. Since its passage, the President of the US has waived the CSPA in the name of national interest in the majority of conflicts in which the US has any political or economic interest (including in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen). Exceptions

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include: R.D. Kaplan(1984), "Bloodbath in Iraq: The Ayatollah's Child Soliders vs Saddam Hussein's Entrenched Army," *The New Republic*, **190:13**: 21-23; I. Brown (1990), *Khomeini's Forgotten Sons: The Story of Iran's Boy Soldiers*, London, Grey Seal; and J. M. Davis (2003), *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance, and Despair in the Middle East*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.



tend to be countries in which the US does not support the government, such as Syria, Sudan and Myanmar.<sup>2</sup>

### **Innocence, Cuteness and Virtue**

As I've alluded to earlier, there is a broad tendency to equate childhood cuteness with innocence. But innocence takes two distinct (if interrelated) forms — innocence as helplessness and innocence as virtue or sinlessness. But the latter, virtue, is itself of two kinds — the virtue of those who are sinless *because they have not sinned yet*, and the virtue of those who *have done good*. Infantile virtue is the former, the virtue of self-sacrifice the latter. Thus, in the example of the exemplary Iranian Muslim child, cuteness functions as one of several signifiers of innocence, and innocence as a quality essential to virtue.

The deployment of visual innocence as existing in an affective relationship with virtue is best illustrated, perhaps, by observing the intersection of gender with virtue/innocence, especially as it is inflected by age. With very few exceptions, the paradigm of virtue as sinlessness twins very young males with older females. This is in part due to the fact that (arguably) an infantile female is redundant with her male age cohort (PLATE X is an exception to this rule). The more important factor, however, is that, as illustrated directly by the examples of Fahmideh and somewhat less overtly by the boys in “Piggy Bank” and “Cute Little Warrior,” the ultimate act of virtue is that of sacrifice.

Socially validated female forms of sacrifice are distinct from male ones, and come at a later age when they are linked semiotically either with virginal purity or with motherhood, two states which are not entirely distinct from each other. PLATE XI displays a stamp issued in 1987 on the occasion of Nurse's Day, which in Iran is celebrated on the birthday of the Prophet's granddaughter Zaynab. The image of a female nurse — her face barely visible — completely clad in pure white and comforting a male child is exemplary in juxtaposing the standards of male and female virtue, where the adult female serves as a chaste and pure, self-effacing care giver (reminiscent of Zaynab) to a good looking boy whose injury and green bandage are evocative of a self-sacrificing soldier.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.humanrights.gov/the-facts-on-child-soldiers-and-the-cspa.html>

As illustrated by PLATE XII, the role and age based distinctions between the virtuous male and female are upheld even when the females are celebrated as martyrs. This stamp issued in 2009 commemorates the death of Marwah Sherbini, an Egyptian woman who was stabbed to death in a hate crime in front of her husband and two year old son while she was in a German courtroom (her husband was stabbed multiple times as he tried to protect her, and was shot by police who mistook him for the attacker rather than the white German actually responsible). The Iranian stamp celebrates her as a martyr; but as the text on the stamp makes clear in three languages (Persian, English and Arabic) she is a martyr to the “veil and justice (*shahīdeh-e hijāb va ‘adālat*). Her headscarf is prominent in her martyrological portrait, as is a green banner above her with the Islamic credal formula (*shahāda*) upon it, emphasizing her virtuous religious character. This is underscored further by the Qur’anic verse under the dripping blood which reads “For what sin was she killed?” (*li-ayy dhanb qutilat*).

The virtue of self-sacrifice therefore signifies different things for males and females: males sacrifice themselves by *embracing* death for the sake of religion and country, while females either engage in self-effacement or, when they do actually die themselves, it is not through the active embracing of death but as the passive martyr who is killed because she upholds virtue (this passivity is actually complex and ambiguous, in that active choices are inherent in it, as is the concept of gift giving).

Boys figure prominently in the representation of self sacrifice as a male religious virtue. PLATE XII shows two stamps issued in 1987 to celebrate the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Iran-Iraq War. The most prominent feature of both is the colored silhouette of a young boy with a gun, the image of whom is identical except that in the one on the left his headband reads “Ya Mahdi!” and in the right “Ya Husayn!” Other stamps commemorating the Basij, such as the one in PLATE XIII, also show young boys at war (in this case together with an old man).

The ultimate analog to the boy-soldier in the virtuous act of sacrifice is the son-sacrificing mother. She exemplifies female virtue in this act, in that she is willing to give her son as a gift of sacrifice and to bear the suffering and grief that would inevitably accompany his loss to martyrdom. PLATE IV, displaying two postage stamps, make this role clear. The stamp on the left celebrates the Basij on the occasion of the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Iran-Iraq war. It shows three generations of male soldiers gazing off the frame, with a veiled woman standing off in the background, looking outward, toward the men as well as the viewer. The stamp on the

right is explicit in juxtaposing male and female roles and linking them to religious virtues. It commemorates (Iranian) Woman's Day, which is celebrated on the birthday of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and mother of the martyred Imam Husayn. The main feature of the image — situated above the two-tone group of protesting women -- is a veiled woman holding a little boy in her arms. The boy (ostensibly her son) is wearing the headband characteristic of males going off to war, this one bearing the slogan "Oh Zahra!" (an epithet for Fatima). Above them is the religious slogan "God is Great!" (*Allahu akbar*). The collapsing of the modern Iranian moment with that of Karbala is complete, in that the woman directly evokes both Fatima and her infant son Husayn who is destined for martyrdom, *as well as* Zaynab who holds Husayn's son, the martyr-to-be 'Ali-ye Asghar. To put the message in Shari'ati's terms, the male bears witness (ie, does *shahāda*) through his death, and the woman bears witness by living on and being a continued witness to the martyrdom.

## **Conclusion**

*The conclusion is the material I plan to present at the conference and therefore is not included here. I will be exploring notions of visual affect in relation to adult expectations and anxieties related to children, innocence, virtue and religious/existential success.*