

# A Counter-Narrative for Iranian Tyranny

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ruling regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran is increasingly known for a militant foreign policy posture, abuse of the human rights of its citizens, and a suspected nuclear weapons program that threatens to destabilize the Middle East region. It is in the interests of all parties involved, save for the Iranian regime itself, to bring about the radical reform of Iran's political system, especially in light of its increasing militarization. Any military effort to bring about such change would however be fraught with risks and extremely dangerous. Accordingly, soft power achieved through strategic communication is a much more attractive alternative.

An effective counter-narrative to further delegitimize Iran's regime among its remaining supporters in Iran and abroad--especially among Shi'ite Muslim communities--may be a highly effective tool of "soft power" for promoting such change. The revolutionary Twelver Shi'ism articulated by Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989) forms the basis of the regime in Iran. It contains a set of legitimizing narratives. In particular, the powerful *Karbala master narrative* provides a useful reservoir for antigovernment sentiment, opposition to tyranny, and religious mobilization that can be redirected at the leaders of the regime.

The Karbala narrative conveys an archetypal struggle between good and evil.<sup>1</sup> The hero, Imam Husayn, sacrificed his life in battle against the army of the evil tyrant, the Caliph Yazid. Through his sacrifice, Husayn teaches his followers that it is better to die for freedom than to live under tyranny. In Shi'ite tradition, nearly all of the Twelve Imams were martyred at the hands of tyrannical rulers, most by poisoning. The Shah of Iran was identified with Yazid prior to his overthrow in 1979. The authoritarianism of the current Iranian regime has left it equally susceptible to the Karbala narrative, despite its explicit efforts to co-opt Islam as an instrument of the state.

The late Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi (d. 2001), revered by some as *Imam*, was an outspoken critic of the Iranian regime and its conception of the Islamic state. Shirazi, his family, and followers were actively persecuted. When he died in 2001, many of his followers accused the regime of his murder, perhaps by poisoning. These accusations were bolstered by the conduct of the regime after his death, when soldiers stormed the funeral procession and stole his body. The events fit into the

narrative structure and archetypes of the Karbala narrative. As such, Shirazi could occupy the pious role of Imam Husayn in the mobilization of a narrative against the Iranian regime of the tyrant Ali Khamenei.

## THE IRANIAN REGIME

The ruling regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, led by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has drawn international attention and condemnation for its active pursuit of nuclear technology. Despite official Iranian claims that the nuclear program is intended for peaceful energy purposes, many analysts and international observers have speculated that nuclear arms are the ultimate aim of the Iranian program. This issue is an obvious concern to many in the international community, although American intelligence believes that an Iranian nuclear weapon is not imminent.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the concern is legitimate, especially when understood in relation to the overall conduct and policies of the ruling regime.

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The Iranian election scandal and protests of 2009 revealed an authoritarian state willing to use every instrument of coercion to enforce its will on its people, including lethal force. The limited but promising sociopolitical reforms during the tenure of former President Muhammad Khatami have clearly been set back. The presidency of hardliner Mahmud Ahmadinejad has marked a decided return to international isolation, defiance, confrontation, and revolution-era rhetoric. This shift is alarming, especially when seen alongside active Iranian arms development and public demonstrations of weapons technology. For example, Iran recently unveiled a new long-range unmanned bomber to great fanfare in Tehran called the *Karrar* ("destroyer"). At the unveiling ceremony, President Ahmadinejad referred to the weapon as a "messenger of glory and salvation for humanity" but "an ambassador of death" for Iran's enemies.<sup>3</sup> This is hardly the language of a statesman or partner of the international community. Rather, such instances suggest that the regime sees itself as under-siege and clinging to control in the face of growing internal and external opposition.

The Iranian regime's human rights abuses are well-documented. They have persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, including rival Shi'ite Muslim groups, liberal intellectuals, political dissidents, journalists, homosexuals, and others.<sup>4</sup> The regime has also actively funded, trained, and supported a range of militant proxy groups, including the Lebanese

Hezbollah and militant Shi'ite activists in Iraq, who have carried out acts of terrorism. Iranian resources, which include significant oil reserves, have been utilized to support these activities under the auspices of the state.

American military action against Iran is ill-advised, and may only serve to unify warring factions within the Iranian government itself.<sup>5</sup> Methods to amplify these divisions must be actively explored instead. Military action would also further destabilize the region and harm the country's people and its democratic inclinations at a time when greater support from the international community is needed. The regime will use any such actions as a pretext for a further crackdown on its internal opponents and exploit civilian casualties in a propaganda war against America and its regional allies.

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The exercise of soft power offers a more viable alternative for challenging the Iranian regime. This paper offers a communication strategy that amplifies a foundational narrative to cast Iran's current leadership as the analogue of tyrannical rulers who persecuted and killed the Holy Imams. The next section of this analysis examines the role Twelver Shi'ism has played in modern Iranian politics and nationalism, including the 1979 revolution that installed the current regime.

## **IRAN AND MODERN SHI'ISM**

The emergence of revolutionary Twelver Shi'ism in the late twentieth century was an innovation in Shi'ite attitudes toward politics. The political theory of the late Iranian cleric, the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (d. 1989), expanded the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, or "guardianship of the jurist." Khomeini proposed that a single authoritative Shi'ite jurist could rule a state in the absence (*ghaybat*) of the Hidden Imam, the Awaited One (Imam al-Mahdi) who will reemerge at the end of time. This doctrine broke with centuries of Twelver Shi'ite political passivity, which had a longstanding distrust of politics and an inclination to withdraw from such affairs. Nevertheless, Khomeini's innovative political doctrine succeeded (after years of internal turmoil) in becoming the basis for the authoritarian clerical regime that rules Iran to this day.

In contrast to the political dominance of the Sunni branch of Islam, the Shi'ites were typically in the minority and supported the leadership of a particular line of men from the House of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*). These virtuous and infallible men, according to tradition, were

marginalized, persecuted, and murdered by those in power. The Shi'ites refer to this line of twelve men, descended from the Prophet Muhammad, as the *Imamah* (Imamate). These Imams were recognized as the only legitimate religio-political leaders of Islam and allegiance to them was the definitive determinant of belief. When the line of Imams ended, according to the majority Shi'ite view (i.e. Twelvers), a class of scholars or clerics emerged to lead and guide the Shi'ite Muslim community until the last of the line, the Twelfth Imam, returns from his miraculous occultation (i.e. hiding). The Imams, however, were the only legitimate rulers and Twelver Shi'ite scholars typically viewed governments as necessary evils to be tolerated for the time being, but not to be involved in. The principal historical exception, the Safavid Empire, relied on a host of mystical and heretical doctrines to subvert this dominant view.

## THE BATTLE OF KARBALA

According to Shi'ite tradition and sacred texts, all of the Twelve Imams were murdered (save for the Twelfth) by the internal enemies of "true Islam," usually under the orders of the Caliphs, the rulers of the great Muslim empires. The Shi'ites thereby came to see politics as a profoundly corrupt institution occupied by evil, self-serving men interested in power, wealth, and pleasure. The entire world, it seemed, was a place of suffering and injustice.

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This idea is vividly conveyed in the narrative of Karbala, where the third Imam, Husayn ibn Ali (d. 680), the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was beheaded by the soldiers of the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid, and much of his family was slaughtered. The narrative is recounted in numerous sources, but there is no single canonical account. Tradition reports that Imam Husayn's party included his half-brother 'Abbas, eldest son 'Ali al-Akbar, son 'Ali Zayn al-Abidin (the fourth Imam), sister Zaynab bint 'Ali, infant son 'Ali al-Asghar, and daughter Sukayna, among numerous others. They were encircled by a massive Umayyad army of thousands of soldiers led by Yazid's military commander, Shimr.

After days of negotiation and skirmishes, the battle began on the tenth of Muharram, known as *Ashura* ("The Tenth"). Vastly outnumbered, Husayn's companions went out to face the army and fought heroically (even miraculously) before dying as martyrs under a devastating assault of arrows, spears, and swords. With all the male members of Husayn's party killed, except for his son 'Ali Zayn al-Abidin (too ill to fight), he rode out

to make his heroic last stand. Amidst the ensuing battle, Husayn faced the entire army alone and killed hundreds in one-by-one combat. The treacherous Umayyads finally attacked all at once. After sustaining numerous bloody wounds, Husayn was finally decapitated by Shimr. Thereafter, Husayn's severed head, along with the few survivors, were brought back to the Caliph Yazid in Damascus.

The events at Karbala are recounted in dramatic, exhaustive, and gory detail in Shi'ite tradition. They are ritually commemorated every year during the holy day of *Ashura*. In the most extreme instances, ritual commemoration involves acts of self-flagellation and cutting (*tatbir*) to mourn and share in the suffering of Imam Husayn and his family. The story of Karbala is understood as the definitive archetypal struggle between good (Husayn) and evil (the Caliph Yazid) in the world, enacted in terms of freedom against injustice and tyranny.

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*Khomeini was able to mobilize the Karbala narrative against the authoritarian rule of the irreligious Shah.*

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Considering this core worldview of Twelver Shi'ite Islam, the emergence of the Iranian clerical regime is both curious and precarious. Khomeini was able to mobilize the Karbala narrative against the authoritarian rule of the irreligious Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (d. 1980), and overthrow his government. By assuming power, however, the clerical regime took the throne once held by Yazid and other corrupt rulers throughout history. In terms of analogies to the Karbala narrative, the Shi'ite clerics, led by Khamenei, are now in the role of the ruler, the corrupt, tyrannical Caliph Yazid. In order to deflect such potentially dangerous associations, the ruling clerics have astutely directed the "casting" of the tyrant role outward from Iran to the United States, or specific political figures like George W. Bush, Tony Blair, or Ariel Sharon. Nevertheless, substantial vulnerability to this unfavorable analogy in the Karbala narrative remains, supported by the Iranian regime's own authoritarian conduct and brutal crackdowns on its people.

What is missing from a full-fledged and resonant analogy able to mobilize Iran's people against Ali Khamenei and his regime is a potent figure to perform the role of Imam Husayn. As stated previously, the Karbala narrative conveys an archetypal binary conflict between good and evil, or between freedom and tyranny. One cannot exist without the binary opposite. Therefore, the role of Husayn must be filled in order to cast the Iranian regime in the role of Yazid and all the other tyrannical Caliphs who, according to Shi'ite tradition, oppressed the people and murdered the Holy Imams.

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*Shirazi's followers believe he was poisoned by the Iranian regime.*

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A figure that fulfills the role of Imam Husayn is the late Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Mahdi Hussaini al-Shirazi (d. 2001). During his lifetime, Shirazi was a revered and popular cleric, one of an elite group of Grand Ayatollahs (the highest rank in Twelver Shi'ite clerical hierarchy), known for his asceticism and accessibility to the common people. He was also a *sayyid*, a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, which is obviously an important appellation among the Shi'ites. He is particularly associated with the holy city of Karbala, Iraq (although he lived for the final decades of his life in the holy city of Qom, Iran). His followers, the *Shiraziyyin*, are often known as the "Karbala Group" (*jama'at Karbala*).<sup>6</sup>

When he died suddenly of a stroke in December of 2001, his distraught followers believed he had been poisoned by the Iranian regime. Shirazi had long been a critic of Khamenei, as well as Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which he believed would lead to tyranny and dictatorship. Due to his opposition, the Iranian regime regularly persecuted his followers, subjecting them to beatings, arrests, torture, and even execution. The regime's crackdown on Shirazi continued after his death when security forces stormed his funeral procession and kidnapped his body to be buried in an isolated nondescript grave.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that Imam Shirazi (specifically using the title *Imam*) was poisoned by Khamenei and the Iranian regime is ideal for use in a counter-narrative, and certainly within the boundaries of reason given the regime's conduct.<sup>8</sup> Promoting this belief, particularly targeting Ali Khamenei, has the potential to link the ruling government in Iran to the role of Yazid. I explore these claims more fully in the next section.

## THE DEATH OF THE IMAMS

The word *Imam* literally means leader or one who stands in front. It is a common designation for a prayer leader in Sunni Islam, but in Shi'ite Islam the term is a special appellation for the infallible line of leaders descended from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima al-Zahra (d. 632) and her husband Ali (d. 661). In very special cases, a revered Shi'ite scholar or jurist may be granted the title of *Imam*, perhaps suggesting that the revered person had a spiritual connection to the Hidden One, Imam al-Mahdi. The founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was given the title of *Imam* by his devotees. Unlike the Holy Imams, however, Khomeini ascended to

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absolute political power and died of natural causes. His revolutionary victory does not fit the narrative of the Holy Imams, all of which (save for the Twelfth) were martyred.

The first Imam, Ali ibn Abu Talib, did achieve the position of Caliph (r. 656 until 661) after being passed over three times, but faced violent opposition from at least three Muslim factions, namely the Syrians under Muawiyyah, the supporters of Aisha, and finally the schismatic Kharijites. Ali was ultimately assassinated by a Kharijite, who reportedly used a poisoned sword to kill him. Poison, in fact, proved to be the assassination method of choice in the Shi'ite accounts of the Holy Imams. Ali's successor, Hassan, was reportedly poisoned in a plot by the Caliph Muawiyyah in 670. His brother Husayn, the third Imam (also known as the Master of Martyrs), was not poisoned, but killed and beheaded in a lopsided battle on the plain of Karbala. The remaining Imams, save for the twelfth, are all believed to have been poisoned by the ruling Caliphs.<sup>9</sup>

According to Shi'ite belief, the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, disappeared at Samarra, Iraq, in the late ninth century. There was reportedly great confusion among the Shi'ites after the death of the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-Askari al-Zaki, over who his successor would be. It was eventually determined that the Imam had secretly had a son in 868 and allowed only his most trusted associates to know of the child's existence.<sup>10</sup> The Caliph reportedly even imprisoned the twelfth Imam's mother, Sayqal, in order to force her to reveal the location of her son, but she refused and escaped. As the enemies of the Imams tried to hunt the child down, he entered into a miraculous occultation in 873 (or 874), hidden from the world. This "Hidden Imam" continues to live in this state for as long as God deems it necessary, and he will one day reappear as the messianic *al-Mahdi* and take control of the world to restore justice and equity.<sup>11</sup>

The historical record may be at odds with the particular accounts given in the Shi'ite traditional sources, but the narratives themselves are what remain important: The tyrannical illegitimate political rulers, the Caliphs, and their agents, poisoned the Imams who were the righteous true Islamic leaders descended from the Prophet Muhammad. This is the core element of the narrative that is important for our interests regarding the figure of Imam Shirazi.

## THE DEATH OF SHIRAZI

After many years of house arrest in the city of Qom, Shirazi died suddenly of a stroke in December of 2001. Many of his followers believed that Shirazi was assassinated, likely poisoned, by Khamenei and the regime.<sup>12</sup> These allegations assumed the form of conspiracy theories that fit perfectly into existing Shi'ite narratives about the martyrdoms of the Holy Imams at the hands of tyrannical rulers. These beliefs were further strengthened by the Iranian regime's shocking conduct following Shirazi's death.

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*Iranian security forces, dressed in camouflage, stormed the procession, attacked the pall-bearers, and stole Shirazi's corpse.*

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As the massive funeral procession for Shirazi traveled toward his home in Qom, Iranian security forces, dressed in camouflage, stormed the procession, attacked the pall-bearers, and stole Shirazi's corpse, which twice fell to the street during the chaos, before stealing it away in a waiting minibus.<sup>13</sup> Images of the scene later made their way onto the internet (see below), despite a state media blackout in Iran that depicted nothing unusual about the funeral.<sup>14</sup> In defiance of Shirazi's own burial wishes, the regime's security forces buried Shirazi's body in the Hazrat Fatemah al-Massoumeh Shrine in Qom without the presence of his family or their permission.<sup>15</sup> The grave in the floor of the shrine is nondescript, difficult to reach in a women-only section, and monitored closely by the state security forces. In 2005, it was reported that a group of women from Shirazi's family, including Shirazi's own daughters, visited the grave and offered prayers at the site when they were beaten and arrested for several hours by Iranian security forces.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 1: Iranian security forces storm Shirazi's funeral procession on December 19, 2001

Since his death in 2001, Shirazi's followers have bestowed the revered title of *Imam* on him, just as the regime granted the title of *Imam* to Khomeini, and even consider him to be the *mujaddid* (renewer of the

faith) of this century.<sup>17</sup> The modest room where Shirazi used to live in Qom has been turned into a shrine of sorts, where visitors can come and take photographs of his turban or his simple mattress lying on a bare floor.<sup>18</sup>

## KARBALA AS COUNTER-NARRATIVE

A narrative is defined as a "coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form."<sup>19</sup> When the resonance of a narrative endures over time, becoming transhistorical and deeply embedded in a particular culture, it is a master narrative. It is readily understood, identified with, and audiences feel little need to question its message. The Karbala narrative is one such master narrative.

The Iranian clerics made heavy use of the Karbala master narrative to mobilize the revolutionary sentiment against the Shah and assume control of the state in 1979. Since that time, they have deployed the Karbala narrative (albeit tenuously) against opponents of their regime, particularly against foreign powers such as the United States. The Iranian regime, led by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, portrays itself as the guardian of a pious Islamic state in a world plagued by injustice and godlessness.

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A counter-narrative can be understood simply as a strategic reframing of a set of circumstances using an alternative or variant of the narrative. The overthrown, U.S.-backed Shah of Iran had attempted to legitimize his government's rule with its own narrative, recalling Iran's (Persia's) pre-Islamic past and its imperial dynasties. This narrative failed as a counter-narrative to that being promoted by the Shi'ite religious establishment. The Shah's counter-narrative failed to refute the claims and analogies being drawn to Karbala. The Shah's conscious self-identification with pre-Islamic (pagan) kings or emperors (e.g. Sassanians) actually reinforced the image of the Shah as an irreligious, corrupt, tyrant who opposes Islam. Far from legitimizing his own rule, the Shah's narrative reinforced those who identified him with the tyrant Yazid.

An effective counter-narrative must, at a minimum, do one (or all) of three things: (1) diffuse the claims of the original narrative by inverting or recasting its analogies; (2) foster doubt about its legitimacy; or (3) supersede them with a narrative of greater resonance. The Karbala

narrative has potential to accomplish all three with respect to the current Iranian regime.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Karbala narrative has been intertwined with Persian (Iranian) nationalism since the time of the Safavid Empire, when the rituals of Twelver Shi'ism were cultivated by the state as a bulwark against the rival Sunni empires on its borders, the Ottomans, Uzbeks, and Mughals. Any faction that fails to control the narrative does so at its own peril, as the pro-American Shah learned firsthand. There is an excellent study of this phenomenon by Kamran Scot Aghaie, entitled *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*. Aghaie argues that: "[The Karbala narrative's] religious symbols and rituals constitute the single most pervasive expression of social, political, and cultural ideals throughout the past century and a half in Iran . . . [cutting] across ethnic, regional, class, political, economic, and social categories."<sup>20</sup>

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*Opponents of the Iranian regime should mobilize the Karbala narrative against it.*

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Practitioners of strategic communication should direct their attention to the Karbala narrative and explore ways to mobilize it against the authoritarian Iranian regime, especially targeting the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. An effective counter-narrative must be rooted in the cultural history of the region, and cannot be pushed overtly. In short, it cannot be used as propaganda. Rather, the goal should be to amplify and strengthen an existing cultural narrative.

The followers of Imam Shirazi have already demonstrated an ability to utilize the internet and new media to disseminate the teachings of their revered teacher. These voices could be amplified and situated in the narrative context of Karbala through new media. This may maximize its use as a counter-narrative against the regime and its claims to represent the Twelver Shi'ite Muslims of the world, including populations in Lebanon, Iraq, and Pakistan, among others. The use of online video to depict Shirazi and Khamenei in these archetypal roles is one method of doing so. Another is a documentary film in Farsi exploring the alleged assassination (i.e. poisoning) of Shirazi. The regime itself has utilized such productions in order to try and discredit or obscure the events surrounding the death of Neda Agha-Soltan during the post-election unrest in 2009.

The ideal time period for the dissemination of such messages is the month of Muharram leading up to the holy day of *Ashura*. This is the time when Shi'ite Muslims are most aware, emotionally, spiritually, and

physically, of the Karbala narrative. Any attempt to eliminate the dissemination of the message, or crackdown on Shirazi's supporters, would only feed into the Karbala narrative of political persecution and further cast the Iranian regime in the role of Yazid the tyrant, who rules by violence rather than piety. The State Department may be able to facilitate such efforts, especially among university students, through books, leaflets, radio broadcasts (e.g. Voice of America, Radio Free Asia), television (e.g. Al-Hurra) or previously mentioned web-based assets such as blogs.

The United States would also do well to cultivate relationships with the *Shiraziyyin* at home and abroad, and encourage improved freedoms for their communities in eastern Saudi Arabia by using its influence with the Saudi monarchy. The United States needs allies in the Muslim world who believe in coexistence and democracy. The *Shiraziyyin* appear to be a natural fit. However, the significance of the group must not be overstated on a global scale, because they are a minority of Shi'ites, who are themselves a minority in the Muslim world, vastly outnumbered by the Sunni branch of Islam and its various subsets.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed explanation and analysis of the Karbala narrative, see chapter 7 of Jeffrey R. Halverson, H. L. Goodall, and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Mazzetti and David E. Sanger, "[U.S. Persuades Israel that Iran's Nuclear Threat is not Imminent](#)," *The New York Times* (August 19, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> William Yong and Robert F. Worth, "[Iran's President Unveils New Long-Range Drone Aircraft](#)," *The New York Times* (August 22, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See the "[Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#)," (2008).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. "[The Cracks in the Iranian Regime](#)."

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>7</sup> Azadeh Moaveni, "[Invasion of the Corpse Snatchers](#)," *Time* (Dec. 21, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> For example, in 2005, when a group of women, including Shirazi's daughters, attempted to pray at his grave, they were beaten and arrested. The murder of Imam Shirazi by the Iranian regime, and the subsequent desecration of his body and attacks on his family, all fit perfectly into the Karbala narrative in an almost scripted fashion. It should also be noted that Imam Shirazi was a proponent of democracy (articulated as *shura*), nonviolence, and an opponent of nuclear weapons.

<sup>9</sup> The fourth Imam, Ali Zayn al-Abidin (d. 713), was reportedly poisoned on the orders of the Caliph al-Walid. The fifth Imam, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 733), was reportedly poisoned on the orders of the Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik. The sixth Imam, the revered Jafar al-Sadiq (d. 765), was reportedly poisoned on the orders of the Caliph al-Mansur. The seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim (d. 799), was reportedly poisoned while imprisoned in Baghdad on the orders of the legendary Caliph Harun al-Rashid. The eighth Imam, Ali al-Rida (d. 818), was reportedly poisoned on the orders of the Caliph al-Ma'mun. The ninth Imam, Muhammad al-Taqi al-Jawad (d. 835), was reportedly poisoned on the orders of the Caliph Mu'tasim. The tenth Imam, Ali al-Naqi (d. 868), was reportedly poisoned on the orders of the Caliph Mutawakkil. Finally, the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-Askari al-Zaki (d. 874), was reportedly poisoned on the orders of the Caliph Mu'tamid.

<sup>10</sup> Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1980), 40.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. "[Iranian Secret Service assassinates Ayatollah al-Odhmaa Sayyed Mohammad Shirazi](#)," "[The First Anniversary of the Assassination of Islam's Martyr](#)," and "[An Outline of Ayat Shirazi's Views & Teachings](#)."

<sup>13</sup> Moaveni (2001).

<sup>14</sup> See "[Scenes from the Funeral Procession](#)."

<sup>15</sup> Moaveni (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Khurasani, "[Iran Authorities hold Late Marjay Ash-Shirazi's Sons and Women](#)," *JafariyaNews.com* (August 11, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Louer, 195.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See chapter 1 of Halverson, Goodall, and Corman, (2011).

<sup>20</sup> Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), xi.