Martyrdom in the Shia Culture

Abdul Javad Falaturi

Summarized and translated by Hamid Farnagh

Abstract

In the Shia tradition there is a continuous legacy of martyrdom, from the belief that Islamic history was derailed when political power passed out of the hands of the holy Prophet Muhammad's family (p.b.u.t) in the 7th century.[1]

The Shias believe that Imam Ali b. Abi Talib (p.b.u.h), the cousin, companion, and son-in-law of the holy Prophet (p.b.u.h) was the only rightful successor to him, and that Imam Ali's specified descendents were the rightful heirs to the leadership of the Muslim community.

Key word

Martyrdom (shahadat)

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

During the Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties, Islamic scholars and intellectuals who supported the rights of the holy Prophet's family and descendants (p.b.u.t), were frustrated at their treatment and frequent assassination and tended to expand upon their martyrdom. These works became very important in the Shia literature and helped to delineate it as distinct from Sunni conceptions of martyrdom.

An excellent example of this veneration of Shia martyrs is found in the writings of Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967), which captured the suffering of the Prophet's descendants. Although he himself was not a Shia, his martyrology of the descendants of the Prophet included the stories of 189 family members killed by the time of its publishing.[2] The power conveyed by the stories of these martyrs has provided significant propaganda for the Shia community throughout the centuries and ensured that martyrdom is an essential part of their belief system and history. It is difficult for a non-Muslim to grasp the power and depth of feeling *shahadat* (martyrdom) wields in Shia Islam, so perhaps it is best to let one of them attempt to describe it:

The story of *shahadat* and that *shahadat* challenges is so sensitive, so exciting that it pulls the spirit toward the fire. It paralyzes logic, It weakens speech, It even makes thinking difficult. *Shahadat* is a mixture of a refined love and a deep, complex wisdom. One cannot express these two at the same time and so, one cannot do them justice.[3]

The first great martyr venerated in Shia Islam is Imam Ali b. Abi Talib, who became the fourth Caliph (656–61) after the assassination of 'Uthman. Imam Ali (p.b.u.h) won many battles as Caliph, but when the battle of Seffin in 657, against the Syrians ended in a draw, he had to agree to a process of arbitration. This greatly angered those who would become known as the Kharijites (Khawarij), who believed that by agreeing to a process of arbitration, Imam Ali had denied God's will to be expressed on the battlefield. Imam was forced to fight the Khawaraj at the Battle of Nahrawan in 658, where he defeated them. Relatives of the Kharajites who were killed by Imam Ali's forces at Nahrawan, longed for revenge against him, and the daughter of one of the deceased convinced a man to assassinate Imam 'Ali (p.b.u.h) in return for her hand in marriage. In 661, the new husband assassinated Ali with a poisoned sword while Imam was leading a worship service in Kufa (present day Iraq). The symbolism of Ali's death is very powerful ,with his being assassinated as he was praying and reciting from the Quran at the time of his attack.[4]

The assassin is said to have recited Quran 2:207 as he killed 'Ali: "And of the people is he who sells himself, seeking means to the approval of Allah. And Allah is kind to

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

[His] servants." The assassin's quote of this particular verse is worth noting because this same verse is used in modern times to help justify suicide bombing attacks.

As significant as the martyrdom of Imam Ali is the martyrdom of his younger son, Imam al-Husayn in Karbala, in Iraq in 680. After Ali's death in 661,his elder son, Imam al-Hasan (p.b.u.h), agreed to let the governor of Syria , Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan, take the caliphate and the unchallenged political rule of the Muslim world. Although those who would later become Shia considered Imam al-Hasan to be their true Imam.[5]

Imam Al-Hasan died a short time later and the Shia recognized his younger brother, Imam al-Husayn, as their new Imam. Imam Husayn remained mostly quiet in Medina, until Mu'awiya's death in 680. Before his death, Mu'awiya, proclaimed his son, Yazid, as the new Caliph .Yazid had many problems including being a womanizer, prone to corruption, and publicly drinking alcohol. Accepting an invitation from the citizens of Kufa to organize forces to overthrow the problematic Yazid, Imam Husayn (p.b.u.h) left Medina with his family and only a small band of supporters despite warnings of the extreme danger from many, including surviving Companions of the Prophet. Husayn was very aware of the dangers. He publicly stated to the Muslims in Mecca that he knew he would be martyred and that they should also offer their lives in "the path of God."[6]

The Umayyad governor, viewed this relocation as a threat and dispatched troops to find Imam Husayn's party. The Umayyad troops found him and his party on the Euphrates River in Karbala, Iraq, on the 10th of Muharram, or Ashura in the Muslim hijri calendar) and prevented them from getting water. Slowly dying of dehydration, the Ummayad troops killed members of Imam Husayn's group ,one by one, including all of his family except one son. Imam (p.b.u.h) was witness to all of this, as he was one of the last to die, fighting nobly to the end, to obtain water for the women and non-combatants and caring for his fallen children.[7]

According to the Muslim historian Tabari, the night before his death, Imam Husayn gave the following speech:

You see what this matter has come to. Indeed, the world has changed, and it has changed for the worse. Its goodness has retreated, and it regards good as bitter. There remain only the dregs, like the dregs in a jar, sordid nourishment like unhealthy fodder. Can you not see that truth is no longer something that men practice, and falsehood is no longer desisted from? So that the believer rightly desires to meet God? I can only regard death as martyrdom, and life with these oppressors as a tribulation.[8]

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

Husayn's belief that martyrdom was his only option in the face of the oppression and tyranny of the corrupt Yazid defines how Shias came to view *jihad* and martyrdom. Imam Husayn (p.b.u.h) was not a battlefield dead; he knew he was going to be killed before he left Medina, but risking death was something he thought long about, and decided to do anyway because it was the righteous thing to do. Once surrounded and under siege, he rejected the offers of compromise by Yazid's governor that would have allowed him to live, as compromising with evil was not an acceptable option. Husayn and all of his fighters were massacred, their bodies trampled by horses, and their heads severed and mounted on lances in a grim procession that left Karbala for Kufa. Eventually, his head was delivered to Yazid in Damascus.

Navid Kermani eloquently describes the humiliating effect the brutal murder of Husayn and the desecration of his body had on the Shia:

The humiliation of the murdered son-in-law of the Prophet, perpetrated –out of all people – by the leader of the Umayyads, the most fervent opponents of the Prophet, constitutes more than a shame to those defeated [by the Umayyads]. It represents the restoration of the pre-Islamic rule of the nobility that Islam seemed to have done away with. The fact that, in the following year, Yazid ordered a three-day massacre in Medina, and a year later the destruction of the Kaba, completes the picture of the usurpation…To the Shia, the betrayal of everything that Muhammad represented by divine decree…is the original event upon which they interpret the entire subsequent and failed history of Islam, which has been stolen by the Sunnis—the Fall of man as a historical event.[9]

While virtually all Muslims are horrified at what happened to al-Husayn and his family, among Shias the horror is transformed into guilt, sorrow, and an extreme focus on mourning that is reminiscent of how some Christians view the death of Jesus.[10]

The Shias often refer to Husayn as *As-Sayyid al-Shuhada* (The Master of the Martyrs) and use Husayn as a baseline to compare all other acts of martyrdom.[11] This obsession with mourning for the martyrdom of al-Husayn, and the rituals associated with its commemoration during the 'Ashura, form a part of the chasm that divides the two main sects of Islam.

Another theological difference between Shia and Sunni Islam that affects their understanding of martyrdom is regarding when and how to wage *jihad*. Specifically, Shias believe that *jihad* can only be doctrinally launched under the leadership of the rightful (infallible, Ma'soum) Imam. Since the twelfth Imam entered occultation in 873, this poses a problem, since only the Imam was infallible enough to judge when *jihad* should be waged. But

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

this ideology has not always been adhered to; for example, some prominent Shia '*Ulama* during the Safavid Empire (1502–1779) supported the Safavid kings' claims that they had authority to reign as just kings, and that all of the judicial functions, including declaring a defensive military *jihad*, could be performed by the '*Ulama*. This was a little change from the previous Shia tradition of withdrawal, which was only made possible by Shia Islam becoming the official religion of the Safavid Empire.[12]

Later, during the Qajar period in Iran, Shaikh Ja'far Kashif al-Ghita (1812) proclaimed that the *mujtahids* (scholars authorized to infer legal rulings) had the duty to defend Islam by declaring defensive *jihad* during the occultation.[13] The '*Ulama* declared a defensive *jihad* in 1804 against the invading Russian army, but after that, the '*Ulama* practiced quietism and mostly avoided politics until the 1960s. However, there was not, nor has there ever been consensus amongst Shia scholars on who has the authority to declare *jihad*. Though the predominant contemporary view is that no one may fulfill the whole responsibilities of the Imam in his absence (including the declaring of *jihad*).It is interesting to note that during the Iran-Iraq war, the leaders of Iran, who were prominent Shia scholars, avoided using the term *jihad*, even though it was clearly a defensive war.[14]

The specific differences in Shia martyrs like Imam Husayn (p.b.u.h) are informative for illustrating why the concept of martyrdom developed differently over the centuries in Sunni and Shia Islam. For Sunnis, who form the majority population and historically were in charge of the Muslim caliphate, martyrdom was typically a choice to fight, a victory and death in a fight against non-Muslims. For Shias, a persecuted minority, martyrdom was usually imposed upon them, and almost always by other Muslims! These historical differences may help explain critical contemporary differences in how Sunnis and Shias views. While contemporary Sunni literature and videos go to great lengths to quantify and glorify the rewards for martyrdom, validating an individual's choice, there are no comparable materials in the Shia Islam. In Shia history, martyrdom was not an option but something that was imposed, so there was no need to justify an individual's choice. These differences will be important during the analysis of the most common contemporary expression of martyrdom in Isis suicide bombings.

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

References

1- Martin Kramer, "Hizbullah: The Calculus of Jihad," in *Fundamentalisms and the State*, eds. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 540.

2- Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 52–43.

3- Shari'ati 'Ali,Kavir , 154.

4- Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam,p.*5

5- Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam,p.*55.

6- Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai, Shia Islam 197–200 (Sayyid Hossein Nasr ed.& trans., 2d ed., State University of New York Press 1977) (1975), as quoted by Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History,* 329.

7- Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*,pp.56–57.

8 Tabari, The History of Tabari: The Caliphate of Yazid b. Mu'awiya ,96 (I.K.A. Howard ed. & trans., 1990), as quoted by Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History,* 329–30.

9- *Dynamit des Geistes: Martyrium, Islam und Nihilism*us (Gottingen, Germany: Wallstein Verlag, 2002), 12. German Translated by Moghadam, in "Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shia Conception of Jihad," 130.

10- Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 58.

11- 'Ali Shari'ati, "A Discussion of Shahid," in *Jihad and Shahadat*, eds. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 1986), 230–243., 239.

12- Freamon, *Martyrdom, Suicide, and the Islamic Law of War: A Short Legal History*, 333.

13- Moghadam, *Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shia Conception of Jihad*, 131.

14- Abedi et al, *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, 19. Moghadam, *Mayhem,*

Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shia Conception of Jihad, 125–143, 132.

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]