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Roundtable

# The Museum of the Islamic Revolution and Holy Defence in Tehran

**Verso running head** : Paola Rivetti

**Recto running head** : *International Journal of Middle East Studies*

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This paper examines the use of space and time at the Museum of the Islamic Revolution and Holy Defence (MIRHD) in Tehran, dedicated to the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88). Its goal is to disentangle the ways the notion of resistance—crucial to the nationalist narrative that underpins the museum as an ideological artifact—isare manifested through the organization of space and time within the museum, and how this idea of resistance is altered by visitors and social interactions that occur outside and within the museum. Temporality is important in the museum, because it displaces stories and data from a specific period of Iran's revolutionary history into the current time, assigning to the war a specific political function in the present era. Space is equally important, and the paper will consider the message it carries both inside and outside the museum.

The museum proposes “resistance” as a fixed articulation of state ideology. This article proposes, however, that it is refashioned by visitors as an “intimate struggle” through their striving for self-constructionimprovement. This argument is made by connecting the narrative of the museum to visitors’ (mostly young Hezbollah affiliates) perception of it and to their social lives. More specifically, I argue that by memorializing and romanticizing popular mobilization and resistance during the war, the museum unintentionally assists the shift of resistance from a public or collective action that the state controls to an intimate act, one which connects individuals and the state through an individual-centered bond. Exploring this kind of intimate resistance is crucial to understanding the formation of revolutionary subjectivity in the present time as a creative process, not rigidly dependent on politics or religion but instead existing as a conversation between the past and the future self of citizens, which is at the same time dependent on and autonomous from the state.

## The Museum

In their modern form, museums are an invention of the European Enlightenment. Their goal is to transmit local, national, and universal values that create a shared memory and identity. As such, museums have been crucial to the formation of nation–states and their routinization.<sup>1</sup> Tehran's MIRHD is no different. According to the official description of the project, the MIRHD seeks to educate “present and future generations on their military heritage, preserves historical artefacts and will help to ensure that the memory and the meaning of eight years of Iran–Iraq war and defence will never be forgotten.”<sup>2</sup> I agree with Shahla Talebi, who argues that it is within the very logic of the Enlightenment that the Iranian state deploys the language of the sacred to strengthen its own power

through the celebration of state martyrs.<sup>3</sup> The official narrative of the war has been centered around the defense of Islam, the revolution, and the nation, based on the examples of the martyrdom of the third Shi'i Imam, Hossein. Hossein's striving for self-sacrifice has been at the core of state-approved cultural representations of the war, from cinema to art, literature, and museums. The official narrative frames the war as a defense led by selfless heroes and martyrs, a war waged against Islamic Iran by the international community. In such circumstances, martyrs are elevated to examples of sacrifice and righteousness for the living. Ultimately, the intention of the Iranian state is to deploy resistance as an ideology articulated by the lives of martyrs.<sup>4</sup>

The museum complex is composed of separate buildings: the main building, the Khorramshahr mosque, and the panorama pavilion (dedicated to the resistance of Khorramshahr).<sup>5</sup> In 2005 the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in cooperation with Tehran Municipality launched the first public call for architectural plans for the museum. The main building opened in 2016, but the museum is still under construction. In 2019, the supervisor of the panorama pavilion told me that the building was going through a phase of expansion to add examples of "anti-imperialist resistance from other countries, such as Syria and Yemen."<sup>6</sup>

The museum complex is located in Abbas **A**abad, a hilly area in northern Tehran with a rich history of urban planning and architecture. Before the revolution, the area was designed to host embassies and high-level governmental institutions, along with a large square dedicated to the Shah.<sup>7</sup> Today, it hosts "cultural institutions" (the museum, the Book Garden, and the National Library, among others) and a park in its northern section, whereas the southern part is occupied by ministries, banks, and the municipality. Since the 1960s, Abbas **A**abad has been regarded as an area **dedicated to** the representation of the state, and it was no coincidence that the MIRHD was built here. As the first museum dedicated to the war, it is of crucial importance to the state and its self-representation.<sup>8</sup> The very choice of dedicating a museum to the holy defense speaks to the narrow focus adopted by the authorities, who decided to subsume the war (a complex, messy, nonlinear phenomenon) under a rubric of "holy defense" (*defa'-e moghaddas*), entailing a more limited scope and gravity.<sup>9</sup> The war started shortly after the revolution. Rather than acting as an instrument for the new regime to strengthen its grip on society, the war provided the opportunity for a highly divided society to mobilize and counter the repression of the newborn regime with guerrilla warfare and other tactics allowed by the exceptional circumstances.<sup>10</sup> The "state effect" was indeed more limited than is usually assumed by scholars, and the war remains a highly divisive and contested memory and legacy for a plurality of subjects: from frontline nurses to volunteers and city inhabitants. This is why the museum is so important to the regime: it stabilizes a "sanitized" version of this contested history and reduces the plurality of historical narratives to one: the state-approved history.

The main building of the museum is composed of several halls, each dedicated to a number of years falling between the mid-1970s and 1989. The first halls are dedicated to the revolution and the war, both of which hinge upon the personality and charisma of the Ayatollah Khomeini. For example, his early opposition to the Shah during the 1960s is presented as the beginning of the revolution, and no mention is made of other political forces. The turbulence that accompanied the establishment of the Islamic Republic—revolts in Kurdistan and other peripheral areas and the violent ideological clashes between liberal, leftist, and Islamist revolutionary forces—also is erased. History is presented as a smooth, positive, and linear process that led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic and, later, its victory against Iraq.

Other halls are dedicated to life conditions at the front (displaying martyrs' belongings and reproduced trenches), the soldiers' technological inventions, weapons, and detailed descriptions of all military operations. The devastating effects of the war on cities and industrial areas are shown through simulations of the Abadan refinery attack in 1980, beheaded palms, and the ruins of the bombed city.

There is a bombardment simulation room, too, where almost life-size scenes of everyday life in a village are screened in front of the visitor. Images of children playing and riding bikes, people strolling on the main street, women carrying shopping bags, and motorcycles passing by precede the arrival of war airplanes. As panic gradually spreads (children are called back in by their terrified mothers, old people run away as fast they can, people scream), the planes fly closer and closer to the roofs of the houses. The bombs eventually hit the village. The sound is extremely effective at conveying a sense of mounting danger and fear. The scene ends as the rumble of the planes decreases and the sight of the devastated village and dead bodies in the street is revealed.

Another hall is dedicated to martyrdom as a religious concept. A walkable bridge symbolizes the passage from material life to spirituality. While the visitor crosses the bridge, faces of martyrs are projected on the walls and move toward the ceiling, symbolizing their ascent to holy skies (Fig. 1). Visitors can then access two rooms hosting reproductions of the holy shrines of the Imam Hossein and Hazrat 'Abbas in Karbala.

**Figure 1.** Bridge of martyrdom. Photo by the author.



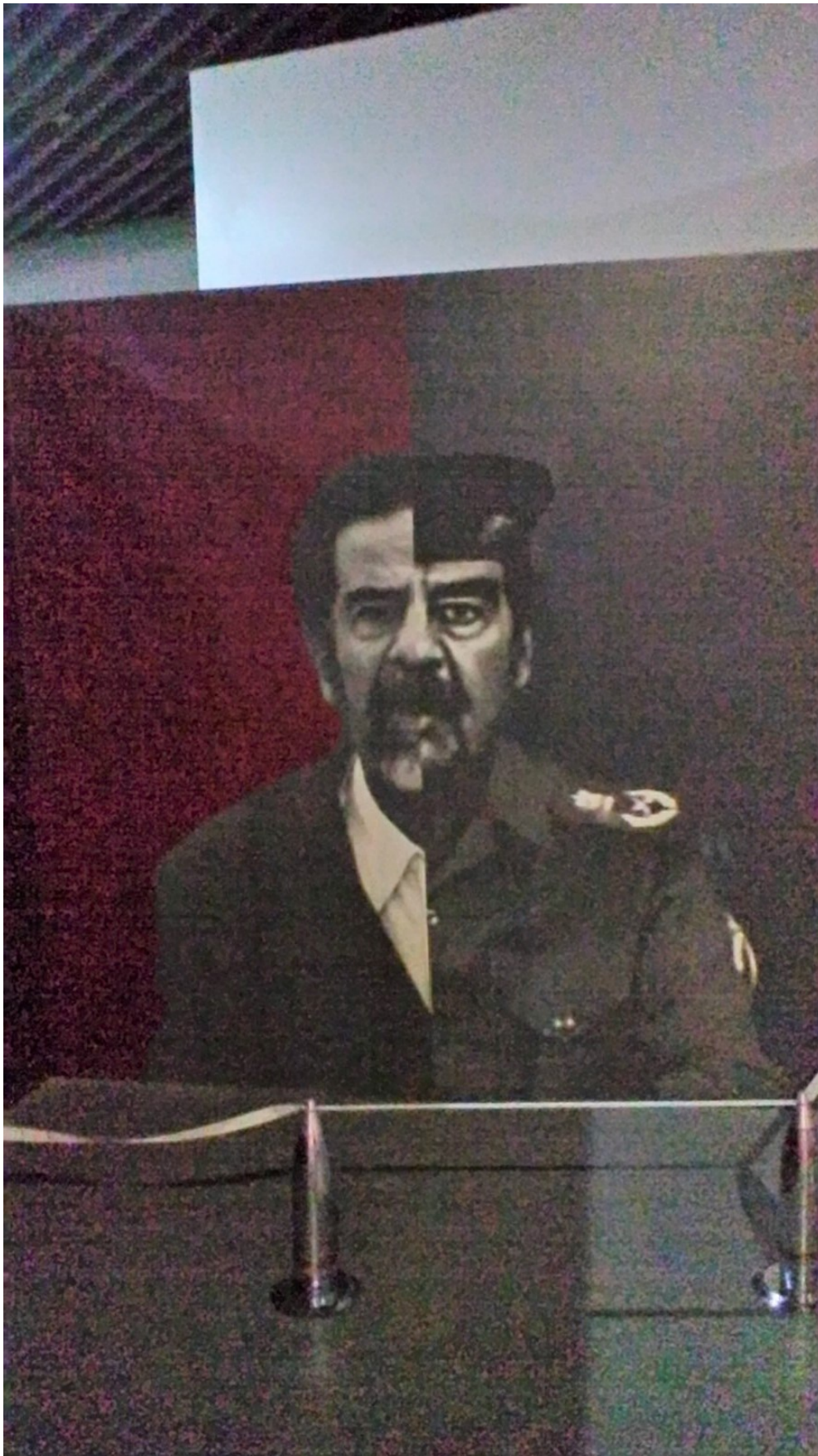
## Time and Space

The war began with Iraq's attack on Iran on 22 September 1980 and ended eight years later on 20 August 1988. The official death toll according to the Foundation for Martyrs and Veterans<sup>11</sup> stands at 217,489, and some Iranian military institutions claim that over 50,000 bodies of volunteer soldiers remain in the former battlefields of the two countries.<sup>12</sup> How are space and time used in the museum to make these figures relevant to visitors?

The museum collapses two different temporalities—the 1980s and the present era—suggesting that resistance and defense are still

required for the survival of both Iran and Islam. Strategies may have changed, but the enemies remain the same. In the museum, during narration of the history of the revolution and the military history of the war, constant references are made to the role of the international community in sustaining Iraq to the detriment of Iran. A picture contrasts the images of a captive Saddam Hussein, prisoner of US forces in 2003, with one of him as a dictator (Fig. 2). It functions as a potent reminder (especially salient after US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal) that the international community should not be trusted and that international organizations are dominated by the agendas of world powers.

**Figure 2.** Saddam Hussein, as seen in the Museum of the Islamic Revolution and Holy Defence. Photo by the author.



The role of the international media and its anti-Iran narrative during the war also is denounced, with a section dedicated to the BBC, CNN, and other foreign networks. Although the war is over, and Iran succeeded in defending itself, threats to national stability through “soft pressure” have not gone away: this is the message conveyed, which in the post-2009 era functions as a reminder that the “soft war” through media and culture to win the “hearts and minds” of Iranians is ongoing.

The personal belongings of the war martyrs and those of the “nuclear martyrs” link past and present. The four nuclear martyrs were scientists assassinated in 2010–12, allegedly by Israeli intelligence, because of their involvement in the development of the nuclear program. They are considered victims of terrorism and give substance to the idea that threats against the nation and the Islamic Revolution have been consistent throughout history. To strengthen this message, the possessions of the nuclear martyrs and the war martyrs are laid out in similar fashion. In particular, the same objects are displayed, including shoes, pictures of family members, clothes, reading material, and the *tasbeih* (rosary), erasing the twenty years that separate their martyrdoms.

The buildings composing the museum complex share common architectural characteristics and internally remind the visitor of an army tent. This not only symbolizes the war; the tents also create a common space that people must share, fostering the “illusion of equality, elimination of differences, like soldiers fighting next to each other at the front.”<sup>13</sup> Although each building has two or three floors, unitary space is maintained through the use of gentle inclines that connect the levels and avoid ceilings. This broad, open space is confined by a bending ceiling at the top that, like a tent, gradually slants toward the floor.

Each building is of considerable dimensions and includes large empty spaces. According to the architects, “mega-architecture” is typical of an autocratic state aiming to channel greatness.<sup>14</sup> The museum's park is no different. There, military items of considerable dimensions (ballistic missiles, tanks, and war ships) are on display but inhabit an empty, green area. There is a deliberate use of emptiness to emphasize the presence of military items, while overwhelming visitors with architectural and design arrangements.

## Visitors

The martyrs' presence throughout the museum is tightly connected to the state and the enforcement of its political and ideological boundaries. Although the appearance of the martyrs among the living seeks to establish this connection, this may not be the actual effect on visitors.

During my visits in 2016, 2017, and 2019, I observed that visitors to the museum consisted primarily of groups of Hezbollah university students. Scholarship on the ideological evolution of Iran's Hezbollah highlights that affiliates are far from being uncritical executors of the orders of their superiors. Although Hezbollah undoubtedly plays a crucial role in perpetrating the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic as we know it today, its members debate and question official state ideology, introducing elements of political critique, pluralism, and innovation.<sup>15</sup> I found elements of this in my interactions with young female and male Hezbollah students visiting the museum. One male visitor (Visitor 1) commented that the revolution was supported by the whole population, including different types of people, like his uncle, who was a soldier and defended national independence but was not a supporter of Khomeini.<sup>16</sup> His comments did not align with the rhetoric promoted by the museum: that Iranians mobilized in the war to defend Islamic Iran, as embodied by Khomeini.<sup>17</sup> This anecdote suggests that a multiplicity of narratives and ways to relate to the memory of the war have survived in spite of the state's efforts to erase them. A female visitor (Visitor 2) noticed the absence of women in the museum. She ridiculed the audio guide, which affirmed that the most important contribution women gave to the war was through their prayers and the sacrifice of “donating” their sons and husbands to a higher cause. She knew that women played an important role at the front, thanks to her familiarity with war literature. Although war literature is mostly male-centered, there are novels published by women that focus on their participation in the conflict, such as the famous novel *Da* by Zahra Hosseini. She also noticed that the museum displays pictures of women carrying AK-47s at the front along with men, thus contradicting its own narrative. These comments suggest a critical ability to read the museum, and also that visitors establish a connection between the narrative proposed by the museum and their own knowledge and life experiences outside of it.

I also visited the museum with two guides, on two separate occasions. One male guide (Guide 1), after a short tour of the main building, brought me to visit the park, where he told me about the hardship he and his family were enduring because of financial difficulties and restrictions to personal freedoms. He mentioned that he wanted to emigrate to Canada. The conversation I had with this young man is connected with the one I had with another guide, a female (Guide 2). She said that she loved working in the museum, where the martyrs inspired her to be a more optimistic person. I was surprised by the reference to optimism and I asked her to tell me more about that. She said that she has so much to be happy about because her life presents no difficulty when compared to the lives of the martyrs. Guides 1 and 2 described two different reinterpretations of official narratives about the war: the presence of martyrs among the living and their example of resistance did not inspire Guide 1, and to Guide 2 they led to joy and gratefulness rather than a commitment to resistance. I understand Guide 2's reaction as an instance of a “politics of joy,” which operates within the ideological framework of the state without resisting or denying it but rewrites its very ideological canon. Values and concerns are reformulated that may lay the foundation for an alternative perspective on state ideology.<sup>18</sup>

During conversations with visitors and guides, the topic of self-construction/improvement arose in relation to the martyrs' example. For Visitor 1, martyrs were like older brothers who showed the right path to younger siblings. Resistance was about making good and wise choices for himself and his family and giving positive examples to those around. Guide 2 also argued that the martyrs' lives

were an example to her to resist evil and prefer optimism. The presence of martyrs, as these conversations suggest, is intertwined with a process of personal **construction** **improvement**. The commodification of martyrs' images and legacies plays a role in this. Keychains, necklaces, bracelets, postcards, and cell phone covers often display the image of martyrs, and this kind of merchandise is easy to find in most libraries and shops in cities. When descending to the museum shop with a female Hezbollah visitor (Visitor 3) and strolling through the shelves displaying this merchandise, I observed, by the time and attention she dedicated to **it** **them**, how fundamental such objects were to her. I was reminded of my younger self, and the emotional transport I felt for merchandise displaying images of the heroes of my youth, such as Che Guevara. With these memories in mind, I asked Visitor 3 how she imagined her future. She said that she would like to work with children, to teach them strength and resilience, the values we had learned about in the museum. She added that to do this she needed to become a strong woman whose actions were guided by righteous values and that her priority plan for the future was to become this kind of person. Inspired by the example of martyrs, the young visitors I spoke to were engaged in a difficult journey of personal growth that did not necessarily entail a collective dimension, but rather a personal one. Although notions related to Islam as a collective identity were introduced in these conversations, the motivations of the visitors were personal and individualized. The centrality of the self in Hezbollah culture and among war martyrs also has been observed by Abbasi and Saeidi, in spite of state narratives framing their sacrifice in terms of a collective enterprise.<sup>19</sup>

## The Social Life of Museums

This paper calls for enlarging the analytical focus on museums as static artifacts to **consideration of** museums as elements in a world of social interactions—the “social life” of museums. It argues that visitors are not static and uncritical recipients of the state ideology on display in museums; instead, they actively shape and reinterpret the message museums transmit. More specifically, the article suggests that the mass mobilization during the Iran–Iraq war, rather than being perceived as a collective effort for resistance under the control of the state, is now seen as an individualized process of self-**construction** **improvement** by (although not exclusively) pro-regime activists.<sup>20</sup> What are the possible consequences of such a shift? As Talebi argued, the imposition of state ideology has unexpected consequences in the way it is reinterpreted by the intended recipients. However, although Talebi focuses on resistance as an apt interpretative frame, I argue that this may not be accurate and that more nuanced forms of reinterpretation exist and lay the foundation for alternative political imaginaries, even among regime supporters. In conclusion, this creative process of self-construction underpins an independent process of subjectivation through which individuals negotiate their positions vis-à-vis official scripts and authorities.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Macleod, ed., *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 2005). ✗

<sup>2</sup> “Holy Defense Garden–Museum,” *Contemporary Architecture of Iran*, 2 July 2019, <http://www.caioi.ir/en/projects/item/759-holy-defense-garden-museum.html>. ✗

<sup>3</sup> Shahla Talebi, “From the Light of the Eyes to the Eyes of the Power: State and Dissident Martyrs in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” *Visual Anthropology* 25 (2012): 120–47. ✗

<sup>4</sup> Younes Saramifar, “Seeking Light in the Empire of Memory: War Commemorations on Iran's Rahiyan-e Nur,” *Ajam Media Collective*, 23 September 2019, <https://ajammc.com/2019/09/23/empire-of-memory-rahiyan-e-nur>. ✗

<sup>5</sup> Khorramshahr is a city in southern Iran that was attacked by the Iraqi army at the beginning of the war in 1980. The battle is a symbol of resistance against the Iraqi armed forces. Volunteers came to the city from different areas of the country to fight. The resistance lasted for a month before succumbing to the Iraqi military. Khorramshahr was recaptured by the Iranians two years later. ✗

<sup>6</sup> Author interview with **the pavilion supervisor**, September 2019, Tehran. ✗

<sup>7</sup> Shima Mohajeri, “Louis Kahn's Silent Space of Critique in Tehran, 1973–74,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 74 (2015): 485–504. ✗

<sup>8</sup> A number of smaller martyrs' museums exist in Iran, scattered around the country and independent of each other. This was the first time that a museum (established with the sponsorship of powerful institutions and under their supervision) proposed a consistent and coherent history of the revolution and the holy defense. Although I cannot explore it here, an important issue for future research to address is the reason its establishment took three decades. I thank Alex Baturo for pointing this out to me. ✗

<sup>9</sup> The temporal and political discrepancy between the war and the holy defense was emphasized by many of my interlocutors, architects and urban planners whom I interviewed in Tehran in September 2019. ✗

<sup>10</sup> Kaveh Ehsani, “War and Resentment: Critical Reflections on the Legacies of the Iran–Iraq War,” *Middle East Critique* 26 (2017): 5–24. ✗

<sup>11</sup> The foundation was established by Khomeini in 1980 and is funded by the parliament through the national budget law. The foundation is however independent of all elected bodies of the Islamic Republic (the parliament and the presidency of the republic, for instance) and is directly supervised by the supreme leader. It has branches all over the country and provides services ranging from economic support to the distribution of meals to those martyrs' families and veterans who need it. ✗

<sup>12</sup> Pedram Khosronejad, “Introduction: Unburied Memories,” in *Unburied Memories: The Politics of Bodies of Sacred Defense Martyrs in Iran*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (London: Routledge, 2013), 11–31. ✗

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with one of the architects, September 2019, Tehran. ✘

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with multiple architects, who expressed this opinion [Q2] ✘

<sup>15</sup> Shirin Saeidi, "Iran's Hezbollah and Citizenship Politics: The Surprises of Religious Legislation in a Hybrid Regime," in *The Middle East in Transition: The Centrality of Citizenship*, ed. Nils A. Butenschøn and Roel Meijer (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2018), 223–48. ✘

<sup>16</sup> All encounters with visitors and guides took place in the spring of 2019 or in September 2019. ✘

<sup>17</sup> Narges Bajoghli, "The Outcasts: The Start of 'New Entertainment' in Pro-Regime Filmmaking in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Middle East Critique* 26 (2017): 61–77. ✘

<sup>18</sup> Akhil Gupta, "Governing Population: The Integrated Child Development Services Program in India," in *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*, eds. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat Finn (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 65–96. ✘

<sup>19</sup> Zahra Abbasi and Shirin Saeidi, "Where Do Broken Hearts Go? Martyrs of the Iran–Iraq War and Gendered Contestations over Healing in Contemporary Iran" (working paper, shared with the author, 2019 [Q3]). Abbasi and Saeidi have closely analyzed the contents of the last wills of war martyrs, emphasizing that martyrdom was a highly individualized process through which martyrs healed a variety of personal emotional wounds. Martyrdom, hence, became a personal way to seek reparation and self-construction improvement. ✘

<sup>20</sup> This suggestion entails a degree of speculation and calls for further research. ✘

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