



“Defenders of Shiite Sanctuaries” in Contemporary Shiite Political Thought: Iranian and Afghan Martyrs’ Wives’ Outlook on Fighting Terrorism*

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Abstract

Piety for Muslim women is an internal source of agency, which motivates their social presence and fulfills their political commitments. In spite of the prevalence of Orientalist views on Muslim women for centuries, a new space has opened under transnational feminism in recent years to re-consider their socio-political interpretations. The present paper discusses the situation of women in West Asia, where global terrorism has emerged with a recently developed counter-terrorism outlook among Muslim women. Defending the Shiite sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq against the Takfiris symbolically embodies this counter-terrorism ideology, for which hundreds of Muslims have sacrificed their lives. This study explores the ideas and ideals of Shiite Iranian and Afghan women who have lost their husbands in Syria or Iraq fighting against the ISIS. Deep semi-structured interviews depicted their definitions of “martyrdom” as a new and transnational identity. In addition, the analysis of their understanding of opportunities and challenges, within the family or at a social scale, revealed five major themes: a) transnational solidarity of the Islamic Ummah, b) the significance of jihadi culture to preserve the global peace, c) strong Shiite leadership/Wilayat-al-Faqih, d) motherhood a simultaneous opportunities and challenges, and e) intersectionality of motherly challenges for Afghan women.

Keywords: Agency, Counter-Terrorism, Defenders of Haram, Global Terrorism, Muslim Women, Piety

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1. Introduction

Women and their heavy sufferings in conflicts is a significant question that has internationally been taken into consideration in recent decades. Women are not usually the war-makers, but they are the subject of violence, abuse and mistreatment in conflicts with long-term, though many times invisible, physical and psychological consequences.

The expansion of terrorism in West Asia has damaged thousands of women for decades, but the conflict in Syria, “the largest and most important conflict in the 21st century” (Frantzman, 2018), has become a key battleground with escalating involvement of foreign powers, militia combatants and proxy groups with still ambiguous and complex gendered aspects.

Discussing women’s status in the Syrian conflict, the majority of news and available material focus on the civilian casualties, human rights violations, miseries for war widows and the refugee afflictions with horrible facts and figures. The transnational reality of conflict indicates that women, as victims of this war, are be restricted to Syrian women or those who live in its soil.

The present paper, thus, seeks to portray an almost ignored voice of Muslim Shiite women, whose husbands are killed, “martyred”, in Syria and Iraq as the “defenders of Shiite sanctuaries”. “Sanctuaries Defenders”, “*Mudafe’in Harem*” in Persian, is the recent term, whose entrance into the Shiite political literature indicates a practical shift in defining a transnational ground of jihad, concurrently as extensive as the whole West Asia and North Africa against terrorist groups, and the glorified martyrdom beyond the conventional modern nation-state borders.

The potential unit of analysis for the present study could simply include the wives of martyrs, who were members of Iran’s official

military advisers and forces in Syria, combatants with Lebanese Hezbollah orientation, and non-Iranian regiments who are closely tied to Iran, such as Afghan’s Fatemiyoun and Pakistanis’ Zeinabiyoun and Iraqis’ Heydariyoun. However, to make it more feasible, and due to the place of their residence, the Iranian and Afghan war widows who live in Tehran and its suburbs were selected to take part in interviews. This study, then, analyzed the content of the interviews by extracting major themes to indicate the participants’ ideals of jihad in a transnational scale, as well as their family and social opportunities and challenges in their self-narratives.

2. Review of Literature

Iran and its resistance coalition in the region is condemned by Western critics as the "Leadership of the Terror Front" at the regional and supra-regional levels(Soufan, 2017). It is disdained for mobilizing volunteer forces at proxy wars(Silinsky, 2021), intensifying "violence" in the region, and hindering the establishment of stability and peace(Azizi, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Western analysts cannot deny or neglect the exemplary power and skill of the resistance forces, who, according to Steve O’Hern, in his book *Iran's Revolutionary Guard: the Threat that Grows while America Sleeps* (2012, pp. 72-73), manages a wide range of activities, including providing intelligence coverage, implementing Iran's foreign policy in countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, and regulating Iran's relations with parties in specific regions, such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Taliban.

The first meaningful entrance of Iranians into the battle of Syria in 2015 brought a high controversy in respect to the foreign fighters’ presence within the Syrian soil, the regional balance of

power, the opening of new fronts between the conventional cold war rivals, and more significantly an extraterritorial and transnational response from the Shiite population widespread in West Asian countries against the global threat of terrorism.

The alliance between Iran and Syria has endured for four decades despite the "underlying incompatibilities in their respective interests and aspirations and in the political ideologies underpinning the structure of their respective governments and societies" (Hunter, 1993). The Iranian-Syrian nexus, thus, is usually explored in geopolitical facts and shared threat perceptions, rather than cultural attitudes and conducts: their strategic partnership against Saddam Hussein, their substantial opposition against Israel, and their shared concerns over the United States' hostile approach and intensive penetration to the region (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019).

Iran's continuous and comprehensive support of the Syrian government has different implications for various parties engaged in the Syrian war: Iran is being blamed for his "intervention" in Syria as it has made an "uprising ... morphed into a vicious civil war" (Tabatabai, 2019), giving "sufficient confidence" to a "dictator" like Bashar al- Asad in his military capability, and emboldening him against the international pressure not to "feel the need to make concessions" (Sherlock, 2014). Iran's presence in Syria has also been explained as a provocation of the military confrontation against Israel (Anderson, 2019), while the other camp of critics believe that Iran seeks to consolidate his competitive position among other regional and international stakeholders in the Syrian conflict. For the latter, Iran is provided with vital strategic depth and the opportunity to project his power in Syria in order to enhance his deterrence policy against Israel (Mohseni & Ahmadian, 2018).

Despite these allegations and blames, Iran has his own arguments and justifications for keeping the Syrian government in power and being deeply concerned about the composition of a post-Assad government:

First, to abide by a "strategic relationship": Preserving the longstanding alliance with Syria as part of the "axis of resistance" is taken into consideration as the first and foremost motivation for Iran’s actions in Syria. The supreme leader of Iran explicitly identified this point in his meeting with Bashar al-Asad:

Iran and Syria are the strategic depth of each other and the identity and power of the resistance movement depend on this continuous and strategic relationship... The Islamic Republic of Iran considers the assistance of the Syrian government and nation to be helping the movement of the resistance and is proud of it wholeheartedly (Khamenei, 2019a).

Second, to act in response to an old ally’s request: Iranian authorities have always emphasized that unlike illegitimate regional and international interventions in Syria, Iran’s presence is legitimate due to the approval of the Syrian government. The involvement of Iran as a foreign state in the Syrian internal armed conflict at the request of the government of Syria is well permitted under the international law. What Western sources try to call Iran’s “intervention” is a rejected assumption, as Syrians’ request of assistance is not precluded under the unlawful acts such as international intervention by force in another state (Ghasemi, 1397 [2019 A.D.]).

Third, to defend Iran’s national security: The rise of a variety of "Wahhabi-inspired", Saudi-and-US-funded terrorist groups in Syria, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, whose “focus on the West and Iran as their primary enemy" (Palazzo, 2019) is definite, has made

the preventive self-defense a critical, but essential, part of Iran's regional policies. To extend the security umbrella beyond the borders has become a strategic rationale for Iranians, who well understand that if Syria falls, they have to fight terrorist networks and transnational criminal organizations within their borders (Marandi, cited by Kermalli, 2017).

Fourth, to preserve the balance of power: Recalling Nixon-Kissinger's proposition that "the road to peace still depends on a balance of power" (Niquet, 2006), Iran tries to establish an equilibrium with other regional and international actors. Drawing the red lines, being determined to immediate retaliation, raising the cost for those who may assume attacking Iran, etc. are tactics for Iranians to reinforce the balance of power and deterrence in West Asia's chaotic status.

In addition to the underlying reasons regarding Iran's intervention in the Syrian war, the complexity and the number of its multi-national forces has been problematic for the US and his coalition. Abbas Milani, head of Stanford University's Iran Studies Program, acknowledges Quds Forces as a "handpicked elite of an already elite ideological army"(Shane, 2007). Their number is also a case of exploration for military experts, who estimate it from 3 to 50 thousand or according to an American security officer 10 to 15 thousand people(O'hern, 2012, p. 72), and in any case, playing complex roles for this number is a proof of their strength and skill.

In condition of the accuracy of the looseness of such arguments, which is out of the scopes of the current discussion, the fact is that hundreds of people dispatched from Iran's side, have been wounded and killed combatting the ISIS and other terrorist militants. There are, to this date, no estimates on the latest number of Iranian casualties in Syria. The only reliable source, referring to

the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, indicates that 2100 were killed from January 2013 to March 2017, with no distinction between the Iranian and non-Iranian regiments (Shahidi, 1395 [2017 A.D.]).

Being killed in these battles is well recognized by the Iranian society as a holy embodiment of “martyrdom”. Martyrdom is a significant component of the Shiite political culture, since for fourteen centuries, the commemoration of the martyrdom of the third Shiite Imam, Sayyid al-Shohada, the Greatest Martyr Ever, and his family in Karbala (680 AD) has become a regular and popular practice among Shiite Muslims. Imam Hussein (PBUP), as the grandson of the Prophet (PBUP) symbolizes the human dignity, honor and Reason for Shiite and his example of sacrifice for truth still maintains the highest motivation for the resistance front against the imperial powers and their allies’ intention of supremacy in the region.

The emergence of the organized terrorism in Syria and Iraq has transformed the concept of martyrdom. It has never been a nationalistic notion, but, with the terrorists targeting Prophet’s companions and family members’ shrines that venerated for centuries by pilgrims, the holy defense and martyrdom have become a truly transnational notion. In fact, a “psychological war” along with a “cultural war” began in the region (Romey, 2015), which inspired recruits particularly among Shiites at a transnational scale to defend not only the physical places of the shrines, but also, their spiritual heritage of combatting terror and oppression. "Haram defenders", then, entered the Shiite terminology as volunteers who departed to Syria and Iraq and sacrificed their lives beyond borders, far from their home and families, to resist the expansion of terrorism in the region and stop the deviant ideologies that globally defame Islam.

Moving toward the path of God, haram defenders are believed to owe their wives' support and kindness. Addressing the martyrs' families, Iran's supreme leader pointed out that these young women watched their husbands leave home and their children, and accompanied and supported their husbands with serenity and pleasure to conduct their divine duty. Not only, they did not prevent their husbands from leaving, but they also helped and encouraged. He finally acknowledged such brave and patient women as the "fruits of the Islamic Revolution": "These women are trained in no circumstance except a revolutionary, Islamic and faithful one" (Khamenei, 2019b).

The role of martyrs' wives in supporting their husbands by patience and tranquility has turned them into heroines who were portrayed as resisting figures taking all challenges trivial with minimum care of family and socio-economic hardship after their husbands passed away. The present research, then, is an attempt to retrieve their humane reality: their idealist being, along with matter-of-fact challenges, detached from media portrayals, which pictures them in the West as compliances of their husbands' beliefs as Muslim fans of terror, or in Iran, as infallible superwomen.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Framing Muslim women as undeveloped and backward, as well as victims of Muslim males' violence and sexual mistreatment has become an established Orientalist trope depicted by a variety of non/Muslim scholars (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

What Minoo Moallem (2005, p. 20) complains about is the "Western trope of Muslim woman," whose diverse population is conceptualized in a uniformed category of "the ultimate victim of a timeless patriarchy defined by the barbarism of the Islamic religion,

which is in need of civilizing”. In other words, a monolithic entity of “Muslimwoman”(Cooke, 2008) has been created based on a generalized idea of subordination, whose alleged innate inferiority is contextualized in the Third World division. Women in the Third World category, according to Chandra Mohanty(1991, p. 207) do not deserve a close attention, considering the “complex interaction between class, culture, religion and other ideological institutions and frameworks”.

The wives of the Mudafe’in Haram, accordingly, can be taken into consideration as a typical case of such marginalized women, who have no voice in the Western sources since they have no independent identity from the so-called “terrorist” husbands. The problem, however, is that they have even been maintained almost mute in the Muslim world, as their self-expression and power of decision-making is controlled by their “social location” and “epistemic location”, in Pickren and Rutherford’s words(2010, p. 112), in terms of high ideological expectations and idealization of their existence as superwomen.

The present paper, then, seeks to provide an alternative framework to let them speak out their standpoint as it is. To put it differently, it appreciates Sandra Harding’s “strong objectivity” or planning the research project in an “unexamined ... context of discovery”, where thought starts from the marginalized sides of women’s lives(Harding, 1986).

Methodologically, the paper is based on deep semi-structured interviews with the martyrs’ wives, five Iranian and five Afghan women, whose opinion and contributions brought a saturation of data. The saturation is reached when the “repetition of discovered information” and the collected data is found to be confirmed by new interviews. In such a case, no new themes seem to emerge and

the researcher determines this repetitive nature of data (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). The interviews have been transcribed and divided into sections based on their loaded concepts, emphasized notions, and given perspectives. The major themes ultimately have been categorized based on the common nodes of significance given by the interviewees, as indicated in the next section. The following table provides a brief view over the mentioned themes and their detailed motifs as follows:

Table 1. Major Themes and Sub-motifs Extracted from Mudafe'in Haram's Wives

Major Themes	Sub-Motifs
<p>Transnational Solidarity of the Islamic Ummah</p>	<p>Integration of Muslims beyond the Concept of Geography</p> <p>A God-ascribed Mission</p> <p>Cultural War against the Islamophobia</p> <p>Muslim Women's Agency following Historical Female Shiite Role Models</p>
<p>The Significance of Jihadi Culture to Preserve the Global peace</p>	<p>To bring peace and stability for Muslims</p> <p>To overcome the western powers' conspiracies, particularly those of the imperialist powers</p> <p>To strive for Global Peace</p>
<p>Strong Shiite Leadership/Wilayat al-Faqih</p>	<p>The Significant Position of Shiite Visionary Leader</p> <p>Shari'ah-based legitimacy and political-driven Mission of the Leader</p> <p>Distinct Qualifications of Wali al-Faqih compared to other contemporary politicians</p>

Major Themes	Sub-Motifs
<p style="text-align: center;">Motherhood a Simultaneous Opportunity and Challenge</p>	<p>Training Children with the Resistance Culture in a Contemporary Society where Capitalist Logics are Prioritized</p> <p>Internalizing the martyr fathers’ values in children</p> <p>Preserving the Individuality of Mothers</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Intersectionality of Motherly Challenges for Afghans</p>	<p>Double Challenges for National and Refugee Identities</p> <p>The Big Lie of Media Presentation of Husbands as Iran’s ‘Mercenaries’</p> <p>Misrepresentation of the Motivation Of Afghan Mudafe’ in Haram as ID Card and Money</p> <p>A double indication of patriotic feelings for Afghanistan and Iran</p>

Source: Author Findings

4. Wives of Mudafe’ in Haram’s Outlook on Counter-Terrorism Jihad

4. 1. Transnational Solidarity of the Islamic Ummah

The modern indicator of the nation-state and the self-defense for states have been prevalent factors for legitimizing wars since the mid-17th century. Entering the wars miles away from a country’s geographic borders has been justified in the name of defending the national security, preventing wars or sabotage inside borders, or defending against an imminent threat to its being (Hart, 1998).

Regarding the place their husbands were killed, Syria or Iraq, one of major questions consisted of the perception of their wives of

the geography of war they attended. The legitimacy of such a trans-border intervention and acceptability of being killed as a husband in a foreign country and for foreign people.

With no exceptions, all respondents referred to the motifs by which the notion of ‘Islamic Ummah’ can be identified. They acknowledged it as an extended Muslim population on all parts of the world, regardless of country borders. They indicated that the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among Muslims would shape the Ummah based on an ideological belief system, beyond geographical borders. Thus, Islamic Ummah embodies the grace of God as Muslims are assigned a mission by Him to play their historical roles in terms of supporting each other against common enemies.

Fatemeh, whose husband was among the first volunteers martyred in Syria from The Quds Forces, believes that nation-state is a modern notion and the current borders were defined in the Western discourse after the two World Wars. For her, countries can work as entities when it comes to planning budgets, exports, imports and the like or even play a role in shaping people’s identities. “Islamic Ummah”, then, is a serious concept and represents a more important part of Muslims’ identity, i.e. it does not matter where a Muslim lives or with what nationality or ethnicity he/she is recognized, it is being Muslim that matters most. She explained that if people are oppressed and their rights are violated, or if harms are being done to people, particularly to women and children somewhere in the world, such as in Syria, it is not chivalrous for Muslims to keep silent and just wait and act based on national borders. Being Muslim even makes the responsibility heavier to protect them and aid them stand for their rights of self-determination.

Seyede Beigum, coming from an Afghan background, who is mothering three children and who lost her husband in Syria, shared the same idea, discussing that the ISIS was not an enemy for any specific people from specific nationalities. Rather, it was an enemy for all Muslims, as it has carried out terrorist operations in various countries and has now entered Afghanistan. Her husband and his comrades had predicted that this would happen: that if the ISIS were not contained in Syria and Iraq, they would conduct hostile operations against the people and murder people in different places including in Afghanistan, which is their motherland. She therefore believed that even though her husband was killed in Syria, he and his comrades can be considered the martyrs of the World of Islam. Afghanistan was one of the regions they worried about as they predicted that the ISIS would move over there if it were not held back, as later their experience proved right, and despite numerous efforts to contain the ISIS, their remaining members created chaos in Afghanistan.

The second major motif of defending Ummah against the global terrorism was resistance against Western propaganda and their anti-Islam rhetoric. Five out of ten respondents argued that the battle in which their husbands took part was not a neutral military ground. It was fully ideological. Setareh, an Afghan mother of five children, whose husband was martyred in Syria and had a record of fighting in Afghanistan against the USSR, believed that although her husband did not receive conventional higher education, but he had a strong vision. Her husband was believed to have a great understanding of power relations in the region and of how these power relations shifted by the changing policies in particular in case of Arab states. Thus, he volunteered to fight, despite being older than most of his comrades, since he believed that it was a

moral obligation to fight against the ISIS, who was conducting hostile terrorist operations in the name of Islam. He was determined for resistance against them since the ISIS is the byproduct of the West's intervention in the region under the guise of Muslim masks. The ISIS, accordingly would be spreading lies under the banner of Islam, promoting Islamophobia across the world, and offering a false image of Islam based on a Wahhabi interpretation. He then, believed that the ISIS had to be defeated by Muslims and not by the US and his allies, who have been actually its creators. Setareh, as well as Zarafshan, another Afghan woman, then, confirmed their husbands' positions that the world would see that real Muslims would eliminate the ISIS and understand that real Islam is very different from that preached by the ISIS. They, thus, felt responsible towards the identity of the Islamic Ummah, particularly the civilians and women and children, whose rights were being infringed, as they were subject to torture and oppression.

Another important motif observed in the interviews was an outlook on the historical role of Muslim women throughout Islam's history, with special regards for female Shiite role models. For instance, Lady Fatima was remembered and analogized for her role in defending her husband as the right and truthful. She delivered speeches and took high political risks, going door to door to invite people to follow his husband. This was the role the interviewees also considered for themselves to step into social and political arenas. Another analogy was made with reference to Lady Zainab, as for instance Rezvaneh, mother of two children, whose husband was martyred in Iraq; she pointed out to Lady Zeinab as an important role model for Afghan women, whose hardships are remembered and commemorated in mourning ceremonies held in

their homes. Supporting Imams, as Umm al-Banin and Robab did¹, was mentioned by a significant number of interviewees, as historic guides for devoting themselves and their dear ones to the jihad, and taking part in the jihad in a different manner. Giving up their welfare, their peace and their rights as young women for a loftier, more sacred goal, they were defending their position in a confident manner.

4. 2. The Significance of the Culture of Jihad to Preserve the Global Peace

The consensus over the significance of the Islamic Ummah was illustrated by the interviewees’ emphasis on their husbands’ will to sacrifice their lives for the same logic of protecting it. They accordingly believed that it was worth sacrificing their lives to bring peace and stability for Muslims and protect women and children, and their honor.

Framing Syria and Iraq, Maryam, mother of two children who lost their father as a volunteer fighter in Iraq, suggested even beyond, that the mudafe’ in haram were to ruin the Western powers’ conspiracies, particularly those of the imperialist powers such as the US, which are the source of annihilation and extermination of Islamic countries. Maryam explained that her husband, as an MA graduate in geopolitics, had a good knowledge of this domain, as well as a long-term outlook on his mission. She said: “He and his comrades believed that now that jihad had become an obligation, a door had opened for greater blessings: they were in fact sacrificing

1. Two Shiite women role models whose male relatives, Abbas and Imam Hussein (PBUH), have been heroes in Kabala resisting against the oppressive king of the time.

their lives for a greater goal of global peace, as no human being would be safe of global terrorism even in Europe or East Asia”.

“Striving for Global peace” was recognized by five respondents such as Zahra, whose husband was martyred in Syria and is now parenting three children. Zahra explained the significance of standing against global terrorism, whose sorts of cruel oppressions and atrocities, like raping women, murdering and orphaning children, displacing people forcefully in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen is endless. Zahra also traced it in European countries where bombing, intimidating and killing people occurred in recent years by Al Qaeda and the ISIS. She, thus, supported the Afghan, Lebanese, and Pakistani colleagues, in particular Shiites, idea of jihad against the cruel invasions and oppressive practices of imperialist powers, and believed that these Mudafe’in never tolerated such coercive dominations.

4. 3. Strong Shiite Leadership/ Wilayat al- Faqih

The theme of the necessity of a strong leadership in combatting the global terrorism is a rather prevalent one among almost all martyrs’ wives. They were admiring “the position of the Leader” in the Shiite culture as an almost-innocent person, similar to Imams, and representativeness by the Wali al-Faqih, or the Supreme Leader, whose obedience is a religious obligation. As Rezvaneh signified: “the contemporary world, with its complicated politics has increased the significance of abiding by a visionary leader with an accurate understanding of power structures, opportunities of international collaborations, and simultaneous imperialist investments on making troubles or dividing for ruling Muslims”.

The respondents were frequently displaying their devotion to the

Supreme Leader with similar “Shariat-based legitimacy and political-driven attitudes.” Marzieh, a PhD student of political science, who lost her husband in Syria at the beginning of Iran’s entrance into the war, suggested that:

The verdict of the Wali al-faqih equals the verdict of Imam Mahdi’s in our time. I am honored to sacrifice my husband as well as my own life for the greatness of Islam, as I train my three sons to think in this way and be prepared for future fronts against the enemies in particular Israel and US-led battles.

The same idea is revealed by Narges, a young woman who gave birth to her son after her husband’s martyrdom in Iraq: “Currently, they consider Wilayat al-Faqih as a role assigned by God, by which integrity is achieved in the World of Islam, so that Muslims from across the globe have a hub and a common way to find the Truth”.

“Distinguish between the Wali al-Faqih and his quality of leadership with other contemporary politicians” was also meaningfully mentioned by most of respondents. They believed that he is different from others, such as other countries’ presidents or prime ministers, since they are furthering their own poisonous thoughts, their wealth accumulation and their business agenda as they are mostly stock holders of major corporations in the name of national interests, whereas Wali-al-Faqih takes a pure stance and fights for humanity. In this regard, Sara, an Afghan woman widowed five years ago in Iraq, who is raising three small children, believed that in different eras of history, Iranians have helped Afghans to achieve stability, just as they decided to fight in Syria or Iraq. This was because they felt responsible before women and children and civilians who were being sacrificed in such conflicts. In addition, deterring the ISIS was an international front they entered, not for materialistic profits but for their beliefs and values.

To them, the Wali al-Faqih himself is not a type of person who would make decisions based on such calculations or provisions. He issues fatwas (verdicts) based on the expediency of the Islamic Ummah and thus, she, as well as many other interviewees consider obeying his fatwas an obligation. Sara explicitly highlighted that: “The expediency of the Muslim Ummah lies in obeying Wali al-Faqih’s verdict and if everyone obeys it, the West cannot infringe Muslim countries’ interests or manipulate them—like what can be observed with Saudi Arabia and the UAE”.

4. 4. Motherhood a Simultaneous Opportunity and Challenge

Resistance has a price to pay. Among the ten interviewees, eight have been mothers of two or more children. Being a single mother has its own challenges along with the “light of hope at your heart,” Maryam believed.

Mothers like Fatemeh, Zahra and Narges accentuated their challenging path in raising their children as virtuous people with ideologically revolutionary commitments, educational achievements, and normal life styles comparing their co-aged colleagues. In their views, women are attributed with different roles, such as wifeness or daughterhood, but losing one’s husband at war, her role as a mother becomes increasingly important. Even those Mudafe’in’s wives without children felt sympathy and compassion towards the children of others or wished to help them in raising their kids.

Motherly concerns due to the special condition of children was a frequent motif raised in the interviews. The interviewees’ major challenge came from assuming the reactions their children may receive in the society, which has moved towards a more

materialistic (capitalist) lifestyle, alienated from the religious, non-material, non-Western orientations. To convince the children of the values for which their fathers fought and gave their lives is a significant challenge for such mothers, according to the interviewees. These young mothers were well aware of the discursive challenges as Sarah, a young Afghan mother of two kids whose husband was martyred in Iraq, explained:

The modern world is constructed upon accumulating wealth, luxuries, living a comfortable life, sending your kids to prestigious schools and finding good jobs to make money. The majority is busy with adding to their properties and are obsessed with buying new clothes or house appliances. Hence, it is a very different, new experience to be willing to support your husband to fight a battle for the sake of God.

In her view, Afghan Shiite women have equally carried this spirit of fighting for the sake of God, or jihad, in their blood and they support their husbands and take care of their households while they’re away, as if the house is also a stronghold in that fight.

Another motif to which mothers repeatedly referred, was to internalize the martyr fathers’ values in children, such as standing by the revolutionary teachings, sacrificing for the promotion of Islam, and empowerment for future grounds of jihad. Maryam was narrating how she motivated her little sons for being courageous and become skilled in warrior techniques, while honoring of their martyr father, in order to take part in jihad as soldiers of the Imam of the Time. When sons play games that little boys usually like, such as fencing or police games, she hails them as champions and appreciates their preparedness for the defensive wars, as the West keeps waging wars against the World of Islam.

The other significant motif in this respect was preserving the

individuality of mothers against the “good mother myth”, that others formulate for them. Shirin, mother of 3, whose husband was martyred in Iraq, believed that martyrs’ wives are capable of taking a variety of social and political roles through making a balance between their rearing children and their social responsibilities. She suggested sending children to kindergartens/schools or having babysitters or relatives for a few hours, letting mothers pursue their education and professions. However, sacrificing for children was still a dominant voice among some mothers, such as Maryam, who believed that she would give up her job if necessary, so that, she emotionally provided for her children, not to leave them alone and intensifying the sorrow they felt for having lost their father.

4. 5. Intersectionality of Motherly Challenges for Afghans

Afghan wives of the Mudafe’in Haram share common opportunities and challenges with the Iranian ones, as already indicated. However, challenges for them and their children has become double in intersection with their national and refugee identity.

All Afghan interviewees have the experience of being reproached and humiliated, as their husbands are negatively judged to took part in the fight against the ISIS in order to obtain the Iranian citizenship or a credible residence ID card. Zarafshan illustrates such as a sense of alienation as:

Afghan Mudafe’in’s children are considered negatively by some colleagues, accusing their fathers of getting money or serving for ID cards, instead of being celebrated and applauded. The afflicting sense of being an orphan here is mixed with the experience of a different lifestyle from their peers who live with their fathers, are

better off financially, and have stories of their fathers every day. These are all things these children have lost.

All Afghan respondents agreed that facing such a challenge, they had to make extra efforts to provide a normal life for their children, bring up them confident enough to stand on their feet, and convince them of how great their fathers’ mission and sacrifice has been. The second motif, much relevant to the Afghan voice, was the pain they were feeling of the media presentation of their husbands as Iran’s ‘mercenaries’. “It is a big lie”, Sahar says,

Our husbands chose to combat terrorism while they were coming from various economic backgrounds. One was a businessman, rich enough to not have to lose his life for money, the other was a tailor, satisfied with his income and family life, the third was a construction worker and his job provided for his family through. Their families actually went through a tremendous pressure losing their men as well as their sources of income.

Afghan war widows were very critical against foreign TV and satellite channels which, they argued, have made countless programs to propagate their lies about what actually occurred. They still thought the Iranian and Muslim media is responsible in illustrating the field realities of the counter-terrorism. These women were admiring their husbands and their courageous beings, as they were not feeling any sort of fear of embarking on journeys through the toughest mountains and plains, and willfully made sacrifices when necessary.

Most of these women were second or third generations of Afghan refugees and they have never even been to Afghanistan, although, they love the country because that’s where their roots are. They have not met their relatives in Afghanistan and are only in touch with their relatives who also live in Iran. Afghan respondents

revealed a double indication of patriotic feelings for Afghanistan and Iran. All these women highlighted the significance of Iran and its national security for them, as it was substantial enough for their husbands to be killed for.

5. Conclusion

Piety and social virtue are two essential sources of identity formation for contemporary Muslim women. The promise of Muslim women's socio-political rights and commitments have received a variety of realizing forms and aspiring ideals since the rise of the political Islam late 1970s.

Political Islam has become the source of agency for Muslim women by shaking the hegemony and the restrictedness of the secular framing of the Muslim women's interpretations. In particular, West Asian women, who either stood locally marginalized for centuries, or, have been the objects of the Western gaze, grasped this turning point as an unprecedented opportunity for self-expression and self-betterment.

Regarding the local and national dynamics of this "politics of piety", the emergence of global terrorism brought a new wave of activism and agency in Muslim women embodied in their counter-terrorist movements. Anti-oppression and anti-imperialist motifs have been historically rooted in the Shiite culture as resistance against the European colonial policies and American imperialism, as may be seen in some of the current instances.

This study was an attempt to explore the Iranian and Afghan Shiite women who lost their husbands in anti-terror fronts fighting against the ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The semi-structured interviews indicated five major themes among the interviewees regarding their

perception of the self, their perception of the enemy, the realm and the extension of jihad, and their opportunities and challenges regarding their position as war widows.

The themes included: a) the transnational solidarity of the Islamic Ummah, b) the significance of jihadi culture to preserve the global peace, c) strong Shiite leadership/Wilayat al- Faqih, d) motherhood as a simultaneous opportunity and challenge, and e) intersectionality of motherly challenges for Afghan women

The themes and motifs extracted indicate that the field of fighting terrorism for protecting the human society and the dignity of Muslims is a transnational front in the view of the respondents. They admire their husbands for accurately understanding the current political situation and confronting the dangers of terrorists, whose atrocities and crimes could have been more catastrophic by infiltrating other Islamic countries, including Iran.

The representation of the Mudafe’in Haram by the Western elite and media sources is a perfect example of the Orientalist view of otherizing Muslims. It is well crystallized in the opposition of good and evil, civilization and barbarism, light and darkness, freedom and oppression, rationality and irrationality, security and danger, and peace and terror, when they portray the resistance front versus the Americans and their coalition in the region. Otherness in the same old logic serves to construct an integrated package, putting bin Laden, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and for instance General Soleimani together, which justifies West’s interventions, positions, ideologies, and actions. Furthermore, the wives of the Mudafe’in and their families are taken into consideration by the West as a mute Other, who are viewed as a victim of their male Muslim counterparts and void of any kind of agency.

The interviewees, however, gave their individuality, lifestyle and value map a discourse superiority, independent from that Oriental imagery, which deserves to be heard and considered as a global role model. Admitting and obeying the powerful leadership and the political vision of the Wali-e-Faqih is a sign of maturity for them. A global subsequent solidarity is believed to surface amongst the anti-imperialist front, which ends the extravagant appetite of the West and its allies in the region.

This study attempted to grasp some corners of a wide-range milieu of the Mudafe'in Haram's wives, their ideas, their philosophic and cultural orientations, their everyday life, as well as their challenges, opportunities, and innovative solutions for their exclusive problems. For further research, the differences among their populations, coming from a variety of national, ethnic, even religious backgrounds could surge significant discussions based on new voices of women in similar conditions, and could open spaces to those marginalized in the international women's studies literature.

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