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Why were they fighting? Why were they dying? The Sacred Defence in Contemporary Young Adult Persian Literature

Abstract

The author of this paper focuses on Persian young adult literature devoted to the Iraq-Iran War, called in Iran *Defa'-e Moqaddas* (the Sacred Defence). The basis of this paper are six works: one long story and five graphic novels. Based on them, the author analyses what motivations characterize the presented characters, which is the main goal of this paper. It presents values that are worth defending for the presented characters and for which they are ready to sacrifice their lives. He distinguishes three sources of soldiers' readiness to fight – religiousness, patriotism and personal issues. As based on the characters' motivation, the author presents the relations between contemporary published texts, the reality of wartime and government's activities. He examines how they fit into the discourse about the war, which prevails in modern-time Iran and what makes them different. Author also tries to relate them to Iran's history and Persian culture with the aim to frame analysed texts and motivations in larger context.

Keywords: *Defa'-e Moqaddas*, Iraq-Iran War, patriotism, Persian war literature, *shahadat*

Introduction

The Iran-Iraq War, called in Iran *Defa'-e moqaddas* (The Sacred Defence), was a brutal and devastating armed conflict that left hundreds of thousands dead and maimed. As a result of this long war, significant socio-cultural and political changes have taken



place in Iran.¹ Same is true about Iranian art, especially literature. Modern warfare of the Sacred Defence inspired many literary motives and is even considered a childbed of the contemporary Persian war novel.² As early as in 1990s there were some scientific analyses of this literary phenomenon, nevertheless it was rather beyond the interest of scholars, notably from Western scientific institutions.³ Literature researchers tended to consider Sacred Defence literature to be devoid of literary values and perceived only as one of the Islamic Republic of Iran war propaganda outlets.⁴ In 2012 Jennifer Chandler even described it as ‘one of the least studied areas of Middle Eastern literature.’⁵ As a result, for a long time the literature was ignored and considered not worth deeper analysis. This peculiar situation changed in the last 10–15 years. Scholars such as Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, Saeedeh Shahnahpur, Laetitia Nanquette, Amir Moosavi and many others have been working diligently to shed more light to the Persian war literature, describing it as a whole or analysing certain titles. However, they tend to focus mostly on selected works and motifs, such as famous, popular novels, women’s literature or books presenting war in an unusual way.⁶ State sponsored, propagandist books tend to be left in the shadow. Interestingly, since the early days most protagonists of the war novels were adolescent boys. This was due to the fact that, Islamic Republic and especially *Sazeman-e Basij-e Mostaz’afin* – Organisation for Mobilization of the Oppressed, considered them as the main source of Iranian manpower and literature’s goal was to lure them to the frontlines.⁷ Moreover, juveniles are even today still one of the main targets of Sacred Defence texts producers. As L. Nanquette points out “Islamic propaganda is particularly active toward children, who read some [Sacred Defense] texts as part of their curriculum as late as high school, and participate in state-sponsored visits to the battlefields. Part of their historical and religious training is devoted to endorsing the official discourse of sacrifice and martyrdom and to learning about the war with Iraq”.⁸ Thus young adult literature

¹ Jerzy Biziewski, *Irak-Iran 80–88*, Warszawa 1993, p. 16; Homa Katouzian, *The Persians. Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran*, London–New Haven 2009, p. 344.

² Saeedeh Shahnahpur, ‘Persian Novels of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)’, in: *Routledge Handbook of Post Classical and Contemporary Persian Literature*, ed. Kamran Talattof, London–New York 2023, p. 358.

³ Mainly in the monumental book *Sad sal dastan-nevisi-ye Iran* by Hasan Mirabedini, see: Hasan Mirabedini, *Sad sal dastan-nevisi-ye Iran*, t. III, Tehran 1997/1998, pp. 889–930; also in: Roxane Haag-Higuchi, ‘The Theme of War in Esmā’il Fasih’s *Zemestān-e šast-o-do*’, in: *Proceedings of the 2nd European Conference of Iranian Studies*, eds. Bert G. Fragner et al., Rome 1995, pp. 255–262.

⁴ As stated by Kamran Talattof “Perhaps because of the propagandist nature of their work, or the oversimplicity of their memoir writing, Islamic authors’ renditions of those themes, however, did not lead to any works of great literary value”, Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran. A History of Modern Persian Literature*, Syracuse–New York 2000, p. 115.

⁵ Jennifer Chandler, *No Man’s Land: Representations of Masculinities in Iran-Iraq War Fiction*, Manchester 2012, p. 12.

⁶ See: Laetitia Nanquette, ‘An Iranian Woman’s Memoir on the Iran-Iraq War: The Production and Reception of Da’, *Iranian Studies* 46/6 (2013), pp. 943–957. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2013.810077>; Amir Moosavi, ‘How to Write Death: Resignifying Martyrdom in Two Novels of the Iran-Iraq War’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 35 (2015), pp. 9–31;

⁷ Saeedeh Shahnahpur, ‘Persian Novels of the Iran-Iraq War’, p. 360.

⁸ Laetitia Nanquette, ‘Iranian Woman’s Memoir on the Iran-Iraq War’, p. 946.

is an important part of Sacred Defence literature whose task is to promote the values desired by the Iranian regime. However, these texts have not been seriously studied. Hence the author's decision to analyse selected Persian young adult literature works related to the Iran-Iraq War. To make this study brief the author has decided to focus during the research on the question of the values and motivation of literary protagonists. This topic has not been analysed in contemporary Iranian studies so far, and the author of this article intends to fill this gap. Its purpose is to answer the question of why and what exactly portrayed Iranian soldiers were fighting for, and for what values they were willing to sacrifice their lives.

Six texts constitute a basis for the analysis. These include a long story *Shahabha-ye hasht saleh* ("Eight-Years Meteors") and five graphic novels from the series *Majmu'e-ye dastanha-ye tasviri-ye Defa'-e moqaddas* ("A Collection of Pictorial Tales of the Sacred Defence"). In the book *Shahabha-ye hasht saleh* teen Shahab, a son of a war veteran, is the main character and the first-person narrator.⁹ His father's friends tell him stories of the fallen soldiers they knew. These stories take up a large part of the book, and it can be said that the main plot is only a tool to consistently present stories of the subsequent soldiers. The book is divided into four stories and their heroes are: Mohammad Hosein Fahmide, Marhamat Balazade, Behnam Mohammadi and Sa'id Tuqani. Each of them died in the war, and as they were sent to the front as minors, they were not even twenty at the time of their death. At the same time, each of them is modelled on a historical figure with the same name.¹⁰ The book is a good example of state-supported literature. It was produced by governmental publishing house and in August 2019 it was first presented in the city of Yazd at a primary school for girls, with the participation of local officials.¹¹ The other texts are graphic novels. Three of the titles cover specific military operations and actions and are less focused on character development. *Bar bal-e sarnevesht* ("On the Wing of Fate") and *Atr-e shahadat* ("The Scent of *Shahadat*") stand out against this background. These novels tell the story of a particular soldiers set at an undefined point in the war. All the books were published in the past decade. As a result, they are undoubtedly classified as contemporary literature, as indicated in the title. The author tried to choose texts that differ slightly from the classical young adult ones, so the graphic novels were selected. The present work is definitely not exhaustive. The author assumes, however, that by means of this article will be able to present youth literature related to war and also answer the title questions "Why were they fighting? Why were they dying?" and it refers both to the real Iranian soldiers fighting the war and the protagonists who represent them.

⁹ The word *shahab* means 'meteor', 'comet', but it is also a masculine name.

¹⁰ The heroes are often mentioned in internet sources, see Ali Nuralipur, 'Marhamat Balazade, shahid 11', *Tasnim*, 31 October 2016, Viewed 20 October 2022, www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/08/10/682090; 'Bozorg mard-e kuchek', Viewed 21 June 2023, www.dana.ir; 'Pahlavan-e Kuchulu-ye jebheha', *Iranian Students' News Agency*, 18 November 2015, Viewed 22 October 2022, www.isna.ir/xbKdVP.

¹¹ Kazem Sobhanzadeh, 'Ketab 'Shahabha-ye hasht saleh' dar Yazd runamai shod', *The Islamic Republic News Agency*, 23 September 2019, Viewed 22 October 2025, www.irna.ir/xjvDYN.

The Iran-Iraq War and *Defa'-e moqaddas* in contemporary Iran

At dawn on September 22, 1980, Iraqi planes flew towards Iranian bases and oil fields, starting the most tragic conflict in modern Iranian history.¹² *Casus belli* for Iraq was an unresolved dispute over the Shatt al-Arab river pool (Persian *Arvand Rud*), located north of the Persian Gulf bend, between the two countries.¹³ It soon turned out that the assumptions of the Iraqi offensive were impossible to achieve.¹⁴ As early as October 2, 1980, Iraqi troops went on the defensive and began digging trenches.¹⁵ Thus began the first stage of the war, when the goal of the Iranian troops was to liberate their own lands and throw the enemy outside the country. The first Iranian counter-offensive took place on January 5, 1981. The Iranians began to retake their own lands, but at a high cost. The situation in the country was difficult. Due to the disorganization of the army after the revolution, other military organizations began to develop. First of all, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – units established on March 5, 1979, as the armed wing of the revolution, acting both as police and military units of all types of armed forces and the *Basij* – an organization established during the war that was essentially a volunteer militia. While fighting in the counter-offensives, members of both organizations showed extraordinary dedication. They carried out attacks in human waves, which brought huge losses. In 1982, Iran managed to regain most of its territory. Iranian command decided to move the war to Iraq with the intention of extending the Islamic Revolution to that country. Iraqi positions were well strengthened, and as a result, there were several subsequent Iranian offensives in the following years of the war. Finally, after nearly eight years, in July 1988, the Iranian government reluctantly agreed on a truce, which entered into force on August 20.¹⁶ In 1990, the official agreement to end of hostilities was signed. After eight years of war, the terms of *status quo ante bellum* were agreed upon. neither of the two countries gained anything from the war.

Consequences

The war was a total disaster for the fighting countries, and its consequences were terrifying. The hostilities took a bloody toll. According to various data, over half a million Iranians and nearly two hundred thousand Iraqis to over a million Iranians and seven hundred thousand Iraqis died during the war.¹⁷ Material losses were equally high, Pierre

¹² Homa Katouzian, *Persians*, p. 344.

¹³ Wojciech Bukowski, *Iran-Irak: islam, wojna i polityka*, Warszawa 1981, pp. 15–16.

¹⁴ Thierry Coville, *Najnowsza historia Iranu. Republika Islamska*, (trans.) Katarzyna Pachniak, Warszawa 2009, p. 187.

¹⁵ Wojciech Bukowski, *Iran-Irak*, p. 111.

¹⁶ Homa Katouzian, *Persians*, p. 349.

¹⁷ Anna Krasnowolska, 'Rewolucja 1978–1979 i Islamska Republika Iranu', in: *Historia Iranu*, ed. Anna Krasnowolska, Wrocław 2010, p. 899; Jerzy Biziewski, *Irak-Iran 80–88*, p. 49; Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, London 2015, p. 567.

Razoux reports that the conflict cost Iraq 452 and Iran 645 billion USD.¹⁸ Due to the devastating effects of the conflict, it is natural that the theme of war is still alive in the present day Iran and that it has a direct impact on the country's reality. War-time terminology is still used in Iranian daily life.¹⁹ The Sacred Defence paradigm is also pervasive in Iranian politics, both international and factional.²⁰ At the same time, this tragic event created among the Iranians a very deep need to commemorate the fallen and the difficult times. Society and the government are engines that drives the discussion about the war and build up its significance in the present-day Iran. It is often the residents who take the initiative to erect a monument in the public space or to commemorate the Iran-Iraq war and those who gave their lives for their country.

Persian literature related to the war

The first literary works on this subject were written very early, in the first years of the war. First short stories, such as collection *Do cheshm-e bi-su* ("Two Blind Eyes") by Mohsen Makhmalbaf or *Shesh tablu* ("Six Paintings") by Abdollahi Shamsi were published within the first year of conflict.²¹ Many of those early texts were commissioned by the government and produced by amateur writers, often soldiers or affiliated with Iranian military.²² Those authors focused more on conveying their emotions and mustering Iranian youth to the frontlines. Thus, they are rather repetitive and even Iranian authors such as H. Mirabedini treat them as lacking artistic value.²³ Situation changed when professional writers joined the literary warfront.²⁴ In 1982, a novel *Zamin-e Sukhte* ("Scorched Earth") by Ahmad Mahmud was published. According to Saeedeh Shahnapur, this work is considered to be the first war novel written in Persian.²⁵ Three years later, in 1985, the famous novel by Ismail Fasih was published – *Zemestan-e 62* ("The Winter of 62").²⁶ This novel was particular, as it focused not on the life of simple adolescent soldiers, but rather Iranian upper class behind the frontlines and their notion of

¹⁸ Pierre Razoux, *Iran-Iraq War*, p. 573.

¹⁹ Farideh Farhi, 'The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation', in: *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, eds. Lawrence G. Potter and Garry G. Sick, [place and year of issue unknown], pp. 106, 115–116.

²⁰ Wright Smith, "'Our Defense is a Holy Defense!' – The Iran-Iraq War and its Legacy in Contemporary Iranian Factional Politics", *Journal of Georgetown University-Qatar Middle Eastern Studies Student Association* 3 (2015), pp. 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.5339/messa.2015.3>.

²¹ Hasan Mirabedini, *Sad sal dastan-nevisi-ye Iran*, p. 989.

²² Saeedeh Shahnapur, 'Persian Novels of the Iran-Iraq War', p. 359.

²³ Hasan Mirabedini, *Sad sal dastan-nevisi-ye Iran*, pp. 890–897.

²⁴ Saeedeh Shahnapur, 'Persian Novels of the Iran-Iraq War', pp. 359–360.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 360; Saeedeh Shahnapur, 'Reflection of War Rhetoric in the Persian War Novel *Zimistān-i 62* (*The Winter of 1983*)', *International Journal of Persian Literature* 1 (2016), p. 121. <https://doi.org/10.5325/intejperslite.1.1.0120>.

²⁶ On the novel, see 'Ali Ferdowsi, 'Zemestān-e 62' in: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, on-line edition, 2009, Viewed March 2023, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zemestan-e-62>; Saeedeh Shahnapur, 'Reflection of War Rhetoric'; Saeedeh Shahnapur, *Writing war in contemporary Iran: the case of Esmā'il Fasih's Zemestān-e 62*, New York 2019.

patriotism. However, despite the work of authors like Fasih, most of the literature created during the war repeated the contents that were in line with the government's message. Above all, the Muslim-Shiite nature of the Iranian defence was emphasized.²⁷ It also focused on the concept of martyrdom. The literature was dominated by images related to death, which guaranteed to become a shahid on the battlefield – a martyr who dies for his faith.²⁸

After the war, a large part of the Sacred Defence literature is still written in cooperation or under supervision of the government. Writings on war are endorsed by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, himself.²⁹ This literature, created for the needs of the state, still promotes the same values as during the war. To unify and promote government ideology, it uses a range of genres. Interestingly, the most promoted genre by the government is memoirs (*khaterat*). Additionally, most of the literature is produced by government institutes such as *Daftar-e Adabiat-e va Honar-e Moqavemat* (Bureau for the Literature and Art of Resistance) or *Sazeman-e Tablighat-e Eslami* (Organization of Islamic Propaganda).³⁰ It leads some scholars to see Persian war literature as unified.³¹ Nonetheless, At the same time, more and more diverse literature is gradually being produced, distancing itself from politics and focusing on war experiences. Often its authors are veterans.³² An example is the work of Ahmad Deqhan, that despite being commissioned by the officials, focuses on experience of service in *Basij*, showing them in an expressive way and trying to avoid political themes. There is also gradually more women's literature about the war being produced and also books touching on long lasting effects of the conflict.³³ Bearing in mind how difficult the war was for Iranians, and how much they respect it, it should come as no surprise that the literature related to the war is very popular in Iran. Thousands of books have been printed so far and the most popular, as mentioned above *Zamin-e sukhte*, saw a number of reprints.³⁴ An example of the demand for this type of literature is the book *Da: Khaterat-e Seyyedeh Zahra Hoseini, beh Ehtemam-e Seyyedeh A'zam Hoseini* ("Da: Memoirs of Seyyedeh Zahra Hoseini, as Recorded by Seyyedeh A'zam Hoseini") which is a record of the memoirs of Zahra Hosseini. Citing the publishers, the IRNA news agency reports that the book was reprinted one hundred and forty times over the

²⁷ Saeedeh Shahnaipur, 'Reflection of War Rhetoric', pp. 120–122.

²⁸ Amir Moosavi, 'How to Write Death', p. 14.

²⁹ 'Iraq-Iran war literature: Great Pool of Sacred Defence stories', *The Islamic Republic News Agency*, 28 September 2019, Viewed 22 October 2025, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83494182/Iraq-Iran-war-literature-Great-pool-of-Sacred-Defense-stories>.

³⁰ Jennifer Chandler, *No Man's Land*, p. 21.

³¹ Laetitia Nanquette, 'Iranian Woman's Memoir on the Iran-Iraq War', p. 945.

³² Jennifer Chandler, *No Man's Land*, p. 14; Amir Moosavi, 'How to Write Death', p. 12.

³³ Amir Moosavi, 'Mourning mothers and wars that never end: reading Nasim Marashi's *Haras* (Pruning) in the shadow of the Iran-Iraq war', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 51:2 (2024), pp. 249–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2024.2342174>; Laetitia Nanquette, 'Iranian Woman's Memoir on the Iran-Iraq War'; Saeedeh Shahnaipur, 'Persian Novels of the Iran-Iraq War', pp. 365–367.

³⁴ Jennifer Chandler, *No Man's Land*, p. 36; Farideh Farhi, 'Antinomies of Iran's War Generation', p. 117.

course of three years, becoming ‘the biggest bestseller in the shortest period of time in the history of Iranian publishing’.³⁵

The war had a significant impact on the present-day Iran. It helped to consolidate the political system, the authorities of which constantly use the war-time rhetoric for political purposes. Political decisions are also often justified or rooted in the war events. At the same time, Iranian society is very emotional about the times of war. The war literature grows out of this atmosphere. The literature was initially aimed at encouraging people to fight, but then at promoting Shiite ideals linked to the government’s vision of reality. At the same time, however, it often shows the horror and cruelty of war. Above all, however, it should be remembered that it is a product of the Sacred Defence discourse atmosphere in the present-day Iran. This awareness should be the basis for more detailed research on the Iranian war literature.

Religious motivations

The term *Defa’-e moqaddas* – the Sacred Defence, carries an element of the sacred itself. The main axis of the Iranian government’s narrative was an appeal to religiosity and the depiction of war as a defence of Islam and religious struggle. These activities had a particularly strong influence on young volunteers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e*) and the *Basij*.³⁶ Fighting for the religious cause is also a very common theme in contemporary Persian war literature. It appears repeatedly in the analysed texts.

Defence of religion

One of the most characteristic and complete motivations the reader learns from the words said by the soldier himself is that of Mohammad Hosein Fahmide. The words are said in *Shahabha-ye hasht saleh* book. This protagonist is a representation of the real, famous *Basiji*. Mohammad Hossein Fahmide was a teenage boy who died in 1982 in the battle for the liberation of Khorramshahr. He threw himself under an enemy tank tied with grenades, which stopped the enemy’s attack. It’s not surprising, that he is portrayed in Zares’ book, because in present-day Iran, he is treated as the ideal of a young soldier. He appears on billboards, in school textbooks, and memorabilia about him occupy a prominent place in the Martyrs’ Museum in Tehran.³⁷ In the book, the

³⁵ ‘Iraq-Iran war literature’.

³⁶ Wojciech Bukowski, *Iran-Irak*, p. 54; Jennifer Chandler, *No Man’s Land*, pp. 97, 174; Homa Katouzian, *Persians*, p. 343.

³⁷ Christiane J. Gruber, ‘The Martyrs’ Museum in Tehran: Visualizing Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran’, *The Journal of Visual Anthropology* 25/1–2 (2012), p. 76. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203720288-9>; Sylwia Surdykowska, *Idea szahadatu w kulturze Iranu*, Warszawa 2006, p. 168.

reader learns his story told by his old comrade-in-arms. He recalls how Mohammad Fahmide, after fleeing his home, said:

*Man bayad beravam be jebhe. Emam dastur dade va man bara-ye yari-ye Emam va komak be din-e Khoda be jebhe miravam. An qadr mijangam ta doshman ra shekast daham ya in ke khodam be shahadat beresam.*³⁸

I have to go to the front. The Imam gave the order, and I go to the front to help the Imam and the religion of God. I will fight until I defeat the enemy or I will achieve *shahadat*.³⁹

The core of his motivation seems to be the “help for the God’s religion”. Mohammad Hosein Fahmide is a classic example of a hero who equates Iran’s struggle with the interests of the religion that is directly related to God, and therefore the only right and true one. For him, undoubtedly, the driving force is the necessity to defend the religion. For other character this necessity takes the shape of the sacred struggle of jihad. This is the case for Behnam Mohammadi, who seems to be motivated to fight exactly to safeguard Islam on this path. Reader learns it from words uttered by his comrade-in-arms, explaining Behnam’s motives for fighting:

*Az haman ebtedayi noujavani be hamrah-e baradarash be ta’mirgah-e Sepah rafte bud ta kar yad begirad. Behnam engar ah haman kudaki-ye khod ra baraye jahad amade karde bud.*⁴⁰

From the very beginning of his teenage years, he and his brother set out to the *Sepah* workshop to learn the trade. Behnam gave the impression that he had been preparing for jihad from the very beginning of his childhood.

The term jihad can, refer to the “greater jihad” which means any kind of effort made to develop faith or achieve religious perfection.⁴¹ However, during Iran-Iraq war this term was incorporated into Islamic Republic’s propagandist language. Thus, in the context of young adult sacred defence literature it should be rather connected to the armed, religious

³⁸ *Shahadat* – in this context, a martyr’s death for the faith. More about martyrdom see below. Mahbube Zare and Touba Zare, *Shahabha-ye hasht sale*, Teheran 2019, p. 23.

³⁹ The term imam here denotes the leader of a religious community, a title which was granted to Khomeini after the revolution.

⁴⁰ Mahbube Zare and Touba Zare, *Shahabha-ye hasht sale*, p. 82.

⁴¹ See: Janusz Danecki, *Podstawowe wiadomości o islamie*, Warszawa 2011, p. 247; Sylwia Surdykowska, *Idea szahadatu*, p. 46.

struggle on the battlefield. Therefore, Behnam's motivation seems to be linked to this holy fight and are connected to the old propagandist motif of war as jihad.⁴²

In other novels also nameless characters are portrayed as rightful defenders of *God's religion*, taking part in sacred struggle. This is the case with a picture novel *Hamle be H-3. Majmu'e-ye dastanha-ye tasviri-ye Defa'-e moqaddas* (Attack on H-3. A Collection of Pictorial Stories of the Sacred Defense), which describes the attack of Iranian pilots on the Iraqi air force base "al-Walid" on April 4, 1981. In this short novel reader can learn about the character's motivations from the statements of the omniscient narrator. In the opening pages of the novel, the narrator points to a dichotomy between Iraqi and Iranian pilots:

*Dar salha-ye aghaz-e jang, artesh-e Araqi az hemayatha-ye mali va taslihati-ye bipayan-e gharb barkhordar bud, dar hali ke dar su-ye digar in jang-e tahmili va nabarabar, niru-ye havai-ye Iran be lotf-e Khodavand va iman-e khalabanan-e zebardast va deliresht mottaki bud.*⁴³

In the early years of the war, the Iraqi military benefited from unlimited financial and military support provided by the West. While on the other side of this imposed and unequal war, the Iranian Air Force relied on the grace of God and the faith of the able and brave pilots.

Thus, the narrator suggests that what motivated the Iranian airmen to fight, even against a better equipped enemy, was their faith. This feeling is reinforced by the ending of the graphic novel. It shows a lone Iranian pilot getting off his plane, and then the *Quran* open to the translation of the second surah – *Al-Baqarah*, specifically, a fragment of the ayah 249:

*Basa goruhi-ye andak ke bar goruhi-ye besyar be azn-e Khoda piruz shodand va Khodavand ba shekiban ast.*⁴⁴

How many times has a small force vanquished a mighty army by the Will of Allah! And Allah is always with the steadfast.⁴⁵

⁴² Mentioning of jihad in young adult literature is noteworthy, because of religious debate on the essence of jihad that is currently taking place in Iran. Sylwia Surdykowska writes that, according to Shiite scholars, the decision to undertake jihad could only be made by an imam, a descendant of Prophet Muhammad, from the Alid dynasty, who, according to Shiites, has the charisma to lead all Muslims. However, as the Shiites of the Twelve Imams Shiism, the most widespread branch in contemporary Iran, believe, the twelfth imam, Mahdi, is currently in hiding to reveal himself at the end of time. For this reason, there are disputes among Shiite clerics as to whether contemporary wars can be called jihad; Sylwia Surdykowska, *Idea szahadatu*, pp. 82–84.

⁴³ Meysam Barza and Hasan Vadud., *Hamle be H-3. Majmu'e-ye dastanha-ye tasviri-ye defa'-e moqaddas*, Mashhad 2015/2016, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁴⁵ *The Clear Quran*, translation by Mustafa Khattab, Viewed 9 April 2025, quran.com/2.

Such an element transfers the whole action of the Iranian pilots to a religious dimension. On the other hand, in combination with the lone pilot, it seems to suggest that he also believes in the parallelism between the situation in the Quran and his own, thus seeing the religious dimension of his own struggle, which in is his motivation for action. Interestingly Arabic language is also used to depict members of other branch of Iran's military forces as religious men fighting for their faith. Same motif used for sailors can be spotted in another of the graphic novels – *Jang-e nafikeshha*. This novel tells the story, of sailors from *Sepah* and *Alvand*-class frigate *Sabalan* struggle to protect Iranian oil tankers. In the book dialogues are limited, but in the few between Iranians, seamen's faith is suggested by the usage of Arabic religious phrases. During the beginning of the operation one of them can be seen saying *tavakkolat 'ala Allah*, which can be translated as 'I put my trust in God.'⁴⁶ Similarly another soldier is celebrating confirmed hit on the enemy warship by shouting *Allahu akbar! Khoda ra shekr* 'God is greatest, thank God.'⁴⁷ *Jang-e nafikeshha* shares another similarity with *Hamle be H-3*. In this novel the narrator also actively describes Iranian soldiers as the protectors of faith, describing them as *razmandegan-e Eslam* – The fighters of Islam.⁴⁸

Behind the fate of the fallen at Karbala – *shahadat*

A particular element that, in analysed texts seem to additionally motivate individual soldiers is the desire to imitate important figures from the history of Shi'ism and achieve the same fate as them – *shahadat*. The most complete example is Marhamat Balazade, a young *Basij* member. In the book *Shahabha-ye hasht saleh* a story is told how, without having been allowed to go to the front, the protagonist meets Ayatollah Khamenei, who was then the president. Marhamat asks him for an order to allow him to fight.⁴⁹ He justifies his decision as follows:

*Hazrat-e Qasem sizdah saleh bud ke Imam Hosein be u ejaze dad be meydan-e jang beravad. Man ham sizdah salam ast vali farmandeh-e sepah-e Ardabil ejaze nemidahad be jebhe beravam.*⁵⁰

Hazrat-e Qasem was thirteen years old when Imam Hosein gave him permission to go to the battlefield. I am also thirteen, but the commander of the Ardabil *sepah* does not give me a permission to go to the front.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Hasan Mofawaz and Hasan Vadud, *Jang-e nafikeshha. Majmu'e-ye dastanha-ye taswiri-ye defa'-e moqaddas*, Mashhad 2015/2016, p. 15.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 22.

⁴⁹ Mahbube Zare and Touba Zare, *Shahabha-ye hasht saleh*, p. 40.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, pp. 53–54.

⁵¹ *Hazrat* – honorary title given in front of the surname, used primarily in a religious context.

The character mentioned here is Qasem, son of the second Shi'a imam Hasan. In the Shiite tradition, he is 'the ideal of youth, beauty and innocence.'⁵² Marhamat wants to be like him, that is, despite his young age, fight for the good of Shiism. Qasem took part in one of the most important events in the history of Shi'ism – the Battle of Karbala. The story of the third Shi'a Imam, Hosein and his companions, including Qasem the son of Hasan, ended tragically. In 680, the Battle of Karbala ended with the slaughter of the imam's supporters. The Shiites, however, believe that all those people achieved *shahadat*, became martyrs for the faith. This kind of sacrifice is seen as a guaranteed path to salvation. This concept began to be used before the revolution for political struggle. One of the propagators of the idea of shahadat in the contemporary political context was Ali Shari'ati.⁵³ In his writings, drawing on Shiite-Iranian traditions, he attributed extraordinary value to the idea of martyrdom and to those who decided on it – shahids. In one of his treatises he writes: 'A martyr (shahid) means "present", "observer", "witness" [...] "one on whom all eyes are turned", and finally – "an example", "a model", "worthy of imitation"'.⁵⁴ During the revolution and the subsequent war, *shahadat* became one of the axes of Iranian propaganda, a powerful tool for mobilizing the masses. The shahids were even more idealized than before, and their sacrifice was exalted. Propaganda largely used the figure of Imam Hosein, called the *Seyyed al-Shohada* (Lord of Martyrs), whose fate was presented as a model of sacrifice, and soldiers were encouraged to follow in his footsteps. Attaining *shahadat* was seen a source of pride and happiness. The purifying power of such a death was said to be so great that even the traditional rituals of washing the body of the deceased were unnecessary. This idea of saintliness surrounding the shahid and his body in particular is the main focus of the novel *Atr-e shahadat*. This book tells the story of a group of Iranian prisoners of war, kept in Iraqi camp. The main protagonist of the novel is a soldier named Mostafa. He tries to organise celebration on the anniversary of *dahe-ye fajr*.⁵⁵ Their gathering is brutally suppressed by Iraqi guards. One of them wounds Mostafa with a knife.⁵⁶ The wound gets infected and stench of rotting flesh becomes unbearable even to the closest of Mostafa's companions.⁵⁷ Everything changes with the moment of Mostafa's martyrdom. POWs start to smell a pleasant smell and as it is explained in the last scene of the novel:

⁵² Sylwia Surdykowska, *Idea szahadatu*, p. 54.

⁵³ Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977) – Shiite theologian and philosopher. His views combine the achievements of Western anti-colonial movements with Shiite-Iranian traditions. He advocated a return to the social thought of Islam and greater involvement of Shiism in political affairs. His views were criticized by both supporters of the Shah and traditional clergy. For more on Ali Shari'ati, see: Viewed 2 May 2026, <http://www.shariati.com>.

⁵⁴ Ali Shari'ati, 'Męczeństwo (Hosejn, spadkobierca Adama) (fragmenty)', in: *Irańskie drogi do nowoczesności. Projekty. Idee. Manifesty*, eds. Anna Krasnowolska, Renata Rusek-Kowalska and Marcin Rzepka, Cracow 2014, p. 209.

⁵⁵ Ten-day celebration of ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran in 1979, held in February.

⁵⁶ Hasan Ruholamin and Hasan Vadud, *Atr-e shahadat. Majmu'e-ye dastanha-ye taswiri-ye Defa'-e moqaddas*, Mashhad 2015/2016, pp. 14–18.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 18.

*Waqti soragh-e Mostafa raftim, shahid shode bud [...] ama dige az bu-ye badanash asari nabud. Dar avaz rayehe-ye delneshin tamam-e asayeshgah ru por karde bud, un qadr ke negahbanha fekr mikardan kesi az yek atr-e qavi estefade karde.*⁵⁸

When we went to Mostafa, he had been martyred [...] but there was no longer any trace of his bad smell. Instead, a pleasant scent filled the entire rest room, so much so that the guards thought someone had used a strong incense.

Even though Mostafa is not exactly shown as motivated by the possibility of becoming a martyr, his case clearly shows how *shahadat* is portrayed in sacred defence literature and how contemporary authors try to make martyrdom appealing to younger reader. Importantly for many other characters that appear in analysed contemporary pieces of literature, such a fate, to become a martyr, a shahid, is shown as a motivation to act. This motif is best depicted in a scene from a picture novel *Nabard-e Bostan* (The battle of Bostan). It shows the nameless soldier from *Sepah* in the pouring rain whispering in Arabic:

*Allahumma ırzaqunı šahādatan fı sabīlka.*⁵⁹

O God, give me martyrdom on Your way.

This is a quote from a medieval collection of hadith named *Muwatta Malik*.⁶⁰ For this unknown soldier, the possibility of becoming a shahid is undoubtedly an attractive prospect, and war is a way to achieve *shahadat*. For other characters, martyrdom is also an acceptable outcome of their actions. Mohammad Hosein Fahmide states that *shahadat* is an alternative to defeat of the enemy.⁶¹ Marhamat Balazade's motivations are also related to *shahadat*, because Qasem, son of Hasan, who is his model, ended his life in this way in the fields near Karbala.⁶²

Religious motivations and Persian culture

Iranian heroes going to war in the name of God is a staple product of the Islamic Republic propaganda and the sacred defence literature, that is clearly still present in the contemporary, young adult pieces. Interestingly it is possible to trace the roots of

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 19.

⁵⁹ Hasan Ruholamin and Hasan Vadud, *Nabard-e Bostan. Majmu'e-ye dastanha-ye taswiri-ye Defa'-e moqaddas*, Mashhad 2015/2016, p. 14.

⁶⁰ That is, stories about the life of the Prophet and his companions; 'Jihad', Viewed 18 November 2024, <https://sunnah.com/urn/509950>.

⁶¹ Mahbube Zare and Touba Zare, *Shahabha-ye hasht sale*, p. 23.

⁶² Ibidem, pp. 53–54.

this motif in much older times. The role of religion in the development of Persian culture was highly important.⁶³ For this reason, it appears many times in the sources of this cultural circle, influencing decision making. War for the faith appears even in one of the oldest Persian written sources, the Behistun Inscription. On it, King Darius I (522 BCE–486 BCE) describes how he killed the usurper Gaumata, seized the throne, and defeated the rebels. King Darius goes to war because a god named Ahuramazda, demands it. According to the Pahlavi *Ayadgar-i Zariran* and famous medieval epic *Shahname*, the first martyr for the faith was Zarir. He was the brother of a king who fell in a religious war, defending the reformed faith of Zoroaster prophet.⁶⁴ Maria Składankowa also notices an analogy between young *Basij* members and adepts of the Nizaris.⁶⁵ Nizaris, operating between the XI and XII century, were known in Europe as *Assassins*. They belonged to the Isma'ili Shia faction and carried out a series of acts of terror against the rule of the Sunni Caliph. In many cases, the *Assassins* were religiously indoctrinated youths who, after the assassination, most often died themselves.⁶⁶ Thus, both in Persian literature and the history of Iran, the predecessors of the soldiers of the Islamic Republic fighting for God and Shiism are present. One can therefore feel surprised, reading in Persian young adult literature about young boys or young men who are glad to give their lives on the way to achieve *shahadat*. However, it should be remembered that this motif does not reflect the war times reality and is also present in much older Persian sources, reaching beyond the spectrum of sacred defence literature's propagandist nature.

Patriotic motivations

In modern times, in the sphere of European culture, the concept of war is essentially linked to the concept of nation. For this reason, patriotism plays an important role in the decisions and attitudes of individuals taking part in the armed conflict.⁶⁷ Naturally, this situation is also reflected in war literature.⁶⁸ Things are different in Iranian state propaganda though. Both the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic of Iran in its inception were anti-nationalist and supranational in principle. They appealed to the idea of *ommat* – 'the Islamic community'. Despite the official reluctance of the authorities towards national issues, authors, from the early days of *sacred defence literature*, were

⁶³ Maria Składankowa, *Kultura perska*, Wrocław 1995, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, pp. 30–31.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, pp. 109–110.

⁶⁶ Sylwia Surdykowska, *Idea szahadatu*, pp. 65–66.

⁶⁷ Stefan Pastuszewski, 'Literatura a jugosłowiańska wojna hybrydowa na przykładzie twórczości Vladimira Jagličića z Krogujewca', in: *Wojna jako źródło inspiracji w kulturze i sztuce*, eds. Łukasz Jureńczyk, et al., Bydgoszcz 2017, p. 93.

⁶⁸ Maria Janion, 'Wojna i forma', in: *Literatura wobec wojny i okupacji*, eds. Michał Głowiński and Janusz Sławiński, Wrocław 1976, p. 194.

portraying patriotic undertones.⁶⁹ Propagandist literature of recent years, devoted to the Iran-Iraq war, also presents patriotism as one of the ideals that push people to fight.

Fight and die for the motherland

Ahmad, the *Nabard-e Bostan* protagonist can be an example, for his love for homeland is presented in an expressive and suggestive way. In the last pages of the novel, soldiers enjoy their victory and liberation of Bostan. Ahmad disappears from sight of his comrades-in-arms for a moment. He re-appears after a while and hoists a large Iranian flag on a mast among the ruins of destroyed houses, thereby signalling the symbolic return of Bostan to Iranian rule.⁷⁰ At the same time, it shows that for him the fight to recapture the territory of his own country is important and that it was his goal during the last days of the fight against the Arab invaders.

Another hero, ready not only to fight, but also to die for his homeland is Abbas Haji Babai, the main character of the graphic novel *Bar bal-e sarnevesht*. Wounded and unconscious, he is transported to hospital, however, he escapes from it and goes to the front to find his missing brother Masud.⁷¹ Before he finds his brother, his unit is attacked by Iraqi forces. Abbas attacks enemy tanks. However, while saving his companions, he is mortally wounded.⁷² Then Masud finds him. Dying in his brother's arms, Abbas explains why he attacked the enemy instead of withdrawing and searching for his brother. He says:

*Man umade budam donbal-e to, amma delam gereftar-e in zamin va bachehash shod.*⁷³

I followed you, but I fell in love with this land and its children.

This means that during the fight, his patriotism grew significantly. Abbas Haji Babaji is a very characteristic character, because his actions completely lack the religious motivations so emphasized in others. For this reason, as well as because he made the ultimate sacrifice for the good of Iran, he is extremely similar to the hero of one of the most famous Persian war novels – *Zamestan-e 62* (“The Winter of 62”). This hero, named Mansur Farjam, becomes increasingly interested in the concept of martyrdom as the plot of the book develops. However, as J. Chandler points out, he completely rejects the government narratives that affiliate them with Shiism and treats them as a typically Iranian phenomenon. He does not

⁶⁹ For example, in *Zamestan-e 62* Esmail Fasih tries to reappropriate martyrdom as more of a Iranian, rather than Islamic and political phenomena, see Jennifer Chandler, *No Man's Land*, pp. 89–92.

⁷⁰ Hasan Ruholamin and Hasan Wadud, *Nabard-e Bostan*, pp. 35–36.

⁷¹ Farhad Moffvaz and Hasan Wadud, *Bar bal-e sarnevesht. Majmu'e-ye dastanha-ye tasviri-ye Defa'-e moqaddas*, Mashhad 2015/2016, pp. 9–16.

⁷² Ibidem, pp. 24–28.

⁷³ Ibidem.

fight in the name of Islam, but ‘to succumb to his ancient, Iranian spirituality.’⁷⁴ In the end, he dies, but does not become a shahid, a “Muslim” martyr, but an “Iranian” one. In principle, the same can be said about Abbas Haji Babaji, who died not for Imam Hosein or to cross the gates of paradise, but for his own homeland and directly – his fellow Iranians.

In the initial phase of the war, Iraq’s failure was largely due to the determined attitude and patriotism of the Iranian residents of the border areas. In the sources analysed, this resistance is personified in the figure of Bahnam Mohammadi. One of the veterans says the following about this young resident of Khorramshahr:

*Midanestam az raftan-e mardom narahat ast. U tasmim-e khodosh ra gerefte bud. Mikhost be har qeymati shode dar shahr bmanad va ba doshman bejangad.*⁷⁵

I understood that he was unhappy with the departure of the people [leaving the city at the news of the enemy troops]. He made his decision. He wanted to stay in the city at all costs and fight the enemy.

Attached to his city, he pursued this goal by repeatedly outsmarting the enemy.⁷⁶ In the end, he dies on the streets of his beloved city.⁷⁷ In Bahnam’s case, it was local patriotism, love for his city, that made him take up arms. His character and the clear emphasis on his motivation to fight may be a tribute paid by the authors to the heroic defenders of Khorramshahr, as well as, despite ethnic diversity, the residents of Khuzestan, where he lived, who were loyal to Iran.

It’s also worth noting that in one instance patriotism is portrayed as value that is told in school and from there influence youth’s decision-making. A case worth analysing is the memory of one of the veterans about Marhamat Balazade. Previously, this figure was mentioned in the context of religious motives. However, these were not the only reasons why he could go to war. The veteran, called Uncle Sadegh, describing him said:

*Az ruzi ke pa ba madrese abbasi-ye Angut gozasht, hame hush o hawasash ra jam’e farda-ye mardom va sarzaminesh kard.*⁷⁸

From the day he entered the Abbasi Primary School in Angut, he focused all his attention on the future of the people and his homeland.

The next part describes how he got involved in revolutionary activities for this reason.⁷⁹ This passage is interesting, because – while suggesting that school should teach patriotism

⁷⁴ Jennifer Chandler, *No Man’s Land*, pp. 91–94.

⁷⁵ Mahbube Zare and Touba Zare, *Shahabha-ye hasht sale*, p. 76.

⁷⁶ Ibidem, pp. 77–82.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 84.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 50.

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

– also portrays well reality of 1970s' Iran. At that time, Iranian society was particularly nationalistic. It was largely linked to the ruler and served to consolidate power.⁸⁰ At the same time, the Shah took great care of the development of education.⁸¹ This resulted in a significant part of the youth growing up at that time being imbued with the spirit of nationalism.⁸² Situation did not even changed after Islamists took power.

Patriotism – a reflection of the times of war or a product of the present times?

Officially, after the revolution, the government of Iran explicitly condemned nationalism and any closer feelings towards the state that are not in line with the Muslim state-building thought.⁸³ Still, cornered in the first phase of the war, Iran also used this form of rhetoric to call on its citizens to fight.⁸⁴ Also, many Iranians did not perceive the war as a metaphysical clash between the forces of good and evil, but as a simple attack of one country on another.⁸⁵ Young Ahmad described his motivations to fight 'I'm not very religious so I don't know much about the subject [of martyrdom]. It's true that martyrdom is important to Shiites – we all learn about the Imams and how they died – but I didn't go to war to die for Islam. I went to defend Iran and I think most of my friends went for the same reason.'⁸⁶ Even religious soldiers were patriotic based on the will to defend their *vatan-e eslami* – "Muslim homeland".⁸⁷

Patriotism therefore played an essential role in the life of Iranian soldiers and was a force that gave them their zeal to fight. Even so, war literature remains largely dominated by the religious vision of the conflict. In this case, however, patriotic themes appear in the analysed works. In a graphic novel *Bar bal-e sarnevesht* it can be said that patriotism eclipse the religious motivation to fight, because Abbas Haji Babai dies for his homeland, rather than religion. It is quite possible that the presence of such a strong patriotic motif is due to some significant changes that are taking place in Iran today. Patriotism and nationalism are gaining more and more ground there. Basically, the concept of "Iranianness" has been around since the beginning of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Morteza Motahari, one of the ideologists of the Islamic revolution, although he clearly

⁸⁰ Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, Cambridge 2012, p. 159.

⁸¹ Ibidem, p. 181.

⁸² Houchang Nahavandi, *Upadek i śmierć szacha Iranu*, (trans.) Zofia Józefowicz-Niedźwiecka, Warszawa 2008, p. 84.

⁸³ Shahir Shahidsaless, 'The Rise of Nationalist Fervour in Iran', *Middle East Eye*, 7 November 2016, Viewed 27 May 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/rise-nationalist-fervour-iran>; Ali A. Kazemi, 'Rise of 'New Nationalism' in Iran', Viewed 27 May 2023, <http://stradis.blogspot.com>.

⁸⁴ Wojciech Bukowski, *Iran-Irak*, p. 131; Homa Katouzian, *Persians*, p. 344; Anna Krasnowolska, 'Rewolucja', p. 896; Pierre Razoux, *Iran-Iraq War*, p. 121.

⁸⁵ Touraj Atabaki, 'Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity and Construction of New Histories in the Islamic Republic of Iran', in: *Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity, Rethinking Iranian Nationalism and Modernity*, eds. Kamran Scot Aghaie and Afshin Marashi, Austin 2015, p. 224.

⁸⁶ Pierre Razoux, *Iran-Iraq War*, p. 348.

⁸⁷ Thierry Coville, *Najnowsza historia Iranu*, p. 54.

criticized nationalism, at the same time emphasized the important role played by Persian culture in the formation of Islam.⁸⁸ The Iranian nature of the Islamic revolution was also repeatedly emphasized.⁸⁹ However, a significant return to the idea of nationalism is associated with the figure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran in 2005–2013. In order to legitimize his power and show the greatness of Iran, references to the Achaemenid dynasty appeared for the first time since the times of the Shah.⁹⁰ In 2016, dozens of Iranians gathered in Pasargadae around the tomb of Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty, to celebrate his birthday.⁹¹ The gathered people chanted nationalist slogans, according to Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, this event was a symbol of course change for the Iranian authorities.⁹² In the government's communication, Islamic motives began to coexist with typically national ones.⁹³ For example, in 2018, for the first time in many years, the military played the former anthem during the parade *Ey Iran* (Oh Iran).⁹⁴ In the light of these ideas, a *sepah* General, Qassem Salehimani, that was killed by the US military in January 2020, was portrayed both as a hero of the Iranian people and as a soldier of the Muslim fight against evil.⁹⁵

For many Iranians who risked their lives in the war with Iraq patriotism and love for their homeland were very important. In the analysed literature, patriotism as a motivation to fight is recognized and emphasized. Perhaps the reason for this is the same patriotic revival that causes the Iranians to gather in 2016 to commemorate the birthday of the founder of the Persian Empire, and which causes the government to portray one of its faithful servants not only as a devout Muslim and martyr, but also as a national hero. It seems that it is not the past that influences the literature that depicts it, but the present that influences the perception of the events of the past and shapes the narrative about it.

Personal motivations

Apart from the high, universal and cultural factors determining the involvement of individuals in the armed conflict, there are also the personal ones. The actions of soldiers can be influenced by, among others, internal aggression, concern for friends in danger, and even a quick reflection “is it worth it?”⁹⁶ All these can also be found in the contemporary Persian literature on the war against Iraq.

⁸⁸ Ali M. Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism*, pp. 203–204.

⁸⁹ Ibidem, pp. 220–226.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 259–260, 265, 278.

⁹¹ Shahir Shahidsaless, ‘Rise of Nationalist Fervour’.

⁹² Ibidem.

⁹³ Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, ‘As Islamism Fades Iran goes Nationalist’, *The New York Times*, 3 April 2019, Viewed 27 May 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/03/opinion/iran-trump-sanctions.html>.

⁹⁴ Robert Czulda, ‘The death of General Soleimani is a Blow to Iran [Comment]’, Viewed 27 May 2023, www.defence24.pl; ‘Iran Army Day parade ceremony 2018 full’, Viewed 27 May 2023, www.youtube.com.

⁹⁵ Robert Czulda, ‘Death of General Soleimani’.

⁹⁶ Leo Murray, *Psychologia wojny. Strach i odwaga na polu bitwy*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 26–30.

Fame

An interesting motivation to fight is the urge to become famous. The urge is focused on the benefit of the individual, not the country or religious community the fighting individuals are associated with. It is characteristic of Behnam Mohammadi from Khorramshahr. A veteran telling the Behnam's story says:

*Ettefaqan sal-e qabl az jang be madarash gofte bud ke mikhoam touri bosham ke dar ayande sarasar-e Iran mara be khubi yad kanad va yek qahreman-e melli bosham.*⁹⁷

Just a year before the war, he said to his mother that he wanted to be remembered in the future by all Iranian people and wanted to become a national hero.

The war turned out to be the perfect opportunity to execute his plans. Interestingly, the thirst for fame is a motive not mentioned by the researchers in works devoted to Persian war literature, and those who analyse the Iran-Iraq war itself do not mention it either. However, it should not be assumed that it is ignored or perceived as something negative. It is linked with the concept of *hamase* that basically means heroism, but it also means courage, bravery and steadfastness.⁹⁸ As noted by S. Surdykowska, this concept was deliberated by Morteza Motahhari. The clergyman enumerated several types of *hamase*, including, most importantly, *hamase-ye fardi* – the individual *hamase*.⁹⁹ It manifests itself in a situation where the individual focuses on his own needs, including the urge for fame. As a result, individuals can commit heroic deeds.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the desire for military fame is not viewed as something negative, on the contrary, it is considered a force that can motivate to action. This was undoubtedly the case with Behnam Mohammadi.

Brotherhood

Characteristic elements of soldiers' motivation, which are both very personal and universal at the same time, are a sense of brotherhood with comrades in arms, as well as concern for their health, often combined with a readiness to sacrifice one's life for them. In young adult Persian literature devoted to the war with Iraq, these elements have their place. The hero who was willing to sacrifice his life for his comrades is Abbas Haji Babaji from the graphic novel *Bar bal-e sarnevesht*. At the beginning of the novel, the reader learns that he personally unloaded an abandoned truck of ammunition, the explosion of which threatened the lives of his entrenched comrades.¹⁰¹ The Iraqis, upon noticing

⁹⁷ Mahbube Zare and Touba Zare, *Shahabha-ye hasht sale*, p. 83.

⁹⁸ Sylwia Surdykowska, *Idea szahadatu*, pp. 101–102; it could also mean literary genre of epic.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, p. 106.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁰¹ Farhad Moffvaz and Hasan Wadud, *Bar bal-e sarnevesht*, pp. 9–11.

what was happening, began to shoot at the truck. This caused some of the ammunition to explode, as a result of which Abbas has lost consciousness and has been wounded.¹⁰² However, because he managed to separate the boxes of ammunition, the explosion did not harm his colleagues from the unit. The hero's act required enormous courage. He left the relatively safe trenches, becoming an easy target for enemy soldiers, and then began to unload the boxes of ammunition, aware that any stray bullet could cause the charges to explode. Abbas' entire sacrifice has a specific goal – to ensure the safety of his comrades, for whom he sacrificed his own safety, and because of his bold actions, his health. Abbas Haji Babaji remains unconscious in the hospital for several days, but as soon as he regains consciousness, he escapes from the hospital to find his younger brother who was lost at the front.¹⁰³ In this case, it is literally a sense of brotherhood that is the reason Abbas returns to the war zone. He does so despite the doctor's advice to rest until his condition stabilizes, so once again he puts the good of the people with whom he shares a bond of brotherhood, in this case his own brother, above his own health and safety.¹⁰⁴ Abbas Haji Babaji thus appears as a figure who is not afraid to risk his life for his comrades in arms, regardless of whether we are talking about his own brother or comrades from a unit with whom he is not related by blood.

Another hero who was ready to sacrifice his life for his comrades is Sa'id Tuqani, who belongs to *zurkhane*, a traditional men's sport association. A veteran telling his story says:

*Sa'id rafte bud ta be baradaran-e digar komak konad.*¹⁰⁵

Sa'id went [to the front] to help his brothers.

This would mean that the main reason behind the young man's decision to enlist is concern for his 'brothers' serving in the army. It is impossible to determine if he means his siblings, his brothers from *zurkhane* who serve on the front or some very close friends. Undoubtedly, however, it was the feeling of closeness to the "brothers" that had a fundamental influence on his decision to go to war. After some time, he has a chance to take a break from the fighting, because as a *pahlavan*, a member of *zurkhane*, he is invited to the competition. However, he refuses to accept this invitation because, as he states:

*Man nemiravam! Che arzeshti darad man medal be gardan biandazam va baradaranam dar jebhe tekke tekke shavand.*¹⁰⁶

I'm not going! What would be the value of having a medal around my neck when my brothers at the front are being torn to pieces.

¹⁰² Ibidem, pp. 11–12.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, pp. 14–17.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵ Mahbube Zare and Touba Zare, *Shahabha-ye hasht sale*, p. 100.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem.

Sa'id had the opportunity to rest from the battle hustle and bustle and constant danger, but he consciously refused, thinking of his close friends who fight at the front.

It is also worth noting, how comradeship and caring for others is presented as motivation to act within the space of prisoner-of-war camp. *Atr-e shahadat* tells the story how Mostafa can smuggle secretly a pencil into his barrack. He gives it to the Mirza Bagher, an elderly soldier, who is a *hafiz*,¹⁰⁷ so he can write some passages for other inmates.¹⁰⁸ As he works during the night he is quickly caught by the guards, who want to punish Mirza Bagher. The want to put elderly prisoner-of-war to the solitary confinement for five days without food. Then suddenly Mostafa intervenes speaking to Iraqi officers:

*Man nemizaram bebaridesh. In pirmard nemitune panj ruz gorosnegi ru davum biare.*¹⁰⁹

I want to let you take him away. This old man can't survive five days of hunger.

Iraqi guards get angry with Mostafa and throw him into the seclusion cell instead. With his brave action protagonist of *Atr-e shahadat* can save fellow comrade. He is shown as a hero who is ready to sacrifice himself to help other soldier, even in the dire circumstances of POW camp.

The unusually strong ties of brotherhood between struggling Iranians are reflected in reality and can be a motivation to fight the enemy as strong as patriotism or religion.¹¹⁰ As F. Farhi notes, many young Iranians saw war as an opportunity to lead an ideal spiritual life. One of its elements was the fraternal bond between the soldiers.¹¹¹ The mere desire for brotherhood would be a decisive factor to join the Iranian army.¹¹² It is also worth noting that literary works that depict a deeper psychological characteristic of the characters and their personal motivations are very popular in Iran.¹¹³ It is very likely, therefore, that the authors of the analysed books decided to present the personal motivations of the characters in order to make the message more attractive to the reader, while increasing the credibility of the depicted characters, which has undoubtedly been successful.

¹⁰⁷ A person who memorized the entire Quran.

¹⁰⁸ Hasan Ruholamin and Hasan Vadud, *Atr-e shahadat*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 10.

¹¹⁰ Jennifer Chandler, *No Man's Land*, pp. 174–175.

¹¹¹ Farideh Farhi, 'Antinomies of Iran's War Generation', p. 109.

¹¹² Amir Moosavi, 'How to Write Death', p. 12.

¹¹³ Jennifer Chandler, *No Man's Land*, pp. 184–185.

Conclusion

A. Moosavi describes *Nakhlha-ye bi sar* ("Headless Palms"), a novel published in 1982 by Qassemali Farasat.¹¹⁴ This book is a flagship example of early-war propaganda output. Its main character, Naser, overcomes his fear of death by thinking about the martyrdom of Imam Hosein. During breaks from combat, soldiers engage in sublime disputes about the religious nature of their struggle, Khorramshahr is presented as Karbala of modern times, and martyrdom is presented as the highest value. Lots of borrowings taken from *Nakhlha-ye bi sar* related to the motivations for fighting can be found in works analysed for the purposes of the present paper. In graphic novels *Hamle be H-3* and *Nabard-e Bostan* the religious aspect of fighting is very clearly presented. Especially in the second book the soldiers are presented as very religious, the clearest example of which is the depiction of a soldier praying for a martyr's death. Short story *Shahabha-ye hasht saleh* fully corresponds with the propaganda narrative. It shows that death on the battlefield is the way to achieve *shahadat*, which is an expression of pride and is worthwhile to strive for. A. Moosavi also points to the complete lack of the tragedy of war in propaganda saturated works.¹¹⁵ It is also noticeable in the analysed sources. Abbas Haji Babai dies serenely in his brother's arms, and the mortally wounded Behnam Mohammadi quietly sinks to the street of his beloved city. These scenes are nothing like the grotesque descriptions of the scattered human limbs from the classic war novel *Fire* by Henri Barbusse or the tragedy depicted in the novel *Safar Be Gera-ye 270 Darajeh* ("Journey to Heading 270 Degrees"), where main protagonist Naser hugs the corpse of his closest friend crushed by a tank tracks.¹¹⁶

However, the analysed texts, despite their propagandistic essence, are also very noticeably different from *Nakhlha-ye bi sar*. Apart from religion, they present patriotism as a source of soldiers' enthusiasm. Abbas Haji Babai literally sacrifices his life for his motherland. It can be concluded that the presentation of patriotic feelings as the soldiers' motivation is related to the current political atmosphere in Iran, where citizens are increasingly beginning to feel belonging to the ancient culture of their country, and the rulers are beginning to appeal to "Iranianness" in order to legitimize power. An undoubted departure from the propaganda narrative is also the presentation of the personal motivations of soldiers. The feeling of brotherhood can be linked to some extent with the feeling of being a part of religious community, but it is not directly presented as such. Behnam Mohammadi's urge for fame is also an uncharacteristic motivation. It seems reasonable to conclude that, as in the case of patriotic motifs, the more extensive "psychologization" of the characters and their personal motives is a product of the current trends and results from the expectations of the contemporary Iranian reader.

¹¹⁴ Amir Moosavi, 'How to Write Death', pp. 9–11.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem; Jennifer Chandler, *No Man's Land*, p. 182.

Persian young adult literature dedicated to the *Defa'-e moqaddas* is a specific creation – it has a reputation of being worthless but contains more nuances than it seems. Although it describes the past, it closely reflects the present in which it is created. Moreover, even its religious themes linked to the government's political narrative should not be perceived as something unusual in Iranian history. As Maria Składankowa points out 'Religion plays a decisive role in the development of Persian culture. Circumstances related to religion are the indicator of social sentiment.'¹¹⁷ The present work shows that the literature related to the Iran-Iraq war has its own special place in Persian culture, and the characters motivations depicted in these texts do indeed show why young Iranians fought and died in the 1980s. The glory and respect they received from the Iranian community, suggests that when their descendants – educated by this literature – recognize, that their ancient homeland and the Shia faith are once again under threat, they will be ready to sacrifice themselves to protect them as their ancestors did.

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¹¹⁷ Maria Składankowa, *Kultura perska*, p. 6.

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