

Life after Death

Shi'i Martyrdom Narratives on Instagram

Abstract

Martyrdom holds an important position in Shi'i Islam, deeply embedded in the historical and theological fabric of the faith. This concept is epitomised by the killing of the Prophet's grandson Husayn – his martyrdom transcends its historical occurrence to serve as a profound symbol of ultimate sacrifice for truth, justice, and resistance against oppression. It resonates throughout Shi'i theology, shaping the community's identity and religious practices. Historical narratives are continuously reinterpreted and retransmitted, influencing contemporary beliefs and practices, including those in digital spaces. When a significant Shi'i figure dies or is martyred, Instagram becomes a key platform for expression, as it is flooded with images of the individual alongside historical figures from early Shi'i Islamic history – primarily Shi'i Imams. This research explores how social media, particularly Instagram, serves as a medium for the reinterpretation of historical narratives. Through the analysis of such posts, the study examines the innovative use of sacred figures and the dynamic connections between past and present events, revealing how digital platforms reimagine and propagate Shi'i martyrdom narratives in the contemporary era.

Keywords

Digital Religion, Martyrdom, Death, Shi'i Islam, Islamic History, Early Islam, Iran, Azerbaijan

Biography

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Introduction

Martyrdom holds a profound significance in Islamic theology, where martyrs are considered not dead but instead alive in the presence of God, enjoying a high and honoured status. Martyrdom is conceived as the ultimate act of sacrifice, through which the believer transcends the limits of worldly existence in pursuit of divine justice and truth. The Qur'anic portrayal of martyrs emphasises their eternal life and proximity to divine mercy, with the belief that they are granted direct entry into paradise. This concept finds greater elaboration in Shi'i thought, where martyrdom is not only revered but also central to religious narratives, especially as framed by Imam Ḥusayn's sacrifice at Karbala.¹ Martyrdom narratives have historically served as a means of inspiration, identity formation, and communal solidarity within Shi'i communities.²

In the contemporary era, with the proliferation of digital and social media platforms, these martyrdom narratives are undergoing significant reinterpretation and dissemination. Instagram, in particular, has emerged as a potent space for Shi'i Muslims to engage with, reimagine, and share these narratives. In this article I argue that Instagram has become a critical field for Shi'i Muslims to reinterpret the notions of martyrdom and death, and these reinterpretations are especially pronounced in the visual representations of martyrs³ and their depiction along with key Shi'i theological figures, such as the Infallible Imams.⁴

- 1 The martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī, grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, at the Battle of Karbalā' in 680 CE is regarded as the paradigmatic tragedy in Shi'i Islam. Standing against the Umayyad caliph Yazid, whom he denounced as a tyrant, Ḥusayn was killed together with his male family members and companions, while the women and children of his household were taken captive. His death, which occurred on 'Āshūrā', the tenth day of Muḥarram, came to symbolise the perpetual struggle against oppression and injustice. Each year, this event is ritually re-lived through mourning ceremonies, passion plays, and processions, culminating forty days later on Arba'īn, marked by one of the world's largest annual pilgrimages, to Karbalā', where Ḥusayn's shrine is located. See Aghaie 2004.
- 2 Halm 1997; Fischer 2003; Aghaie 2004; Tahiev 2025b.
- 3 While this article refers to specific political or military figures as *martyrs*, this usage reflects the terminology and symbolic framework employed within the official discourse of the studied contexts, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran and Azerbaijan. It does not imply endorsement of this characterisation by the author.
- 4 In Shi'ism, the Infallible Imams are a line of divinely appointed leaders, beginning with Imam 'Alī and continuing through his descendants, who are believed to possess

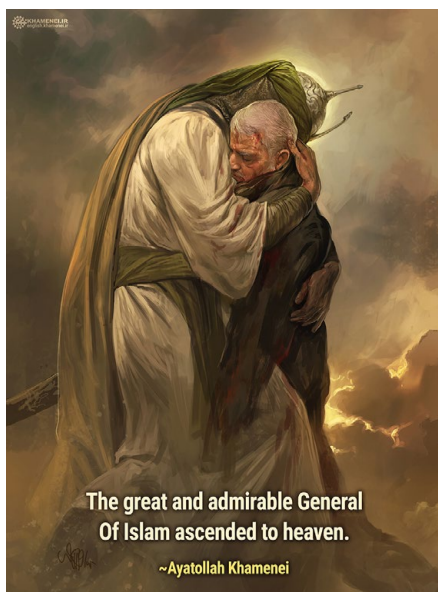


Fig. 1: Image of Qasem Soleimani being embraced by Imam Husayn, published on the official website of Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 4 January 2020, <https://t1p.de/luqii> [accessed 23 January 2025].

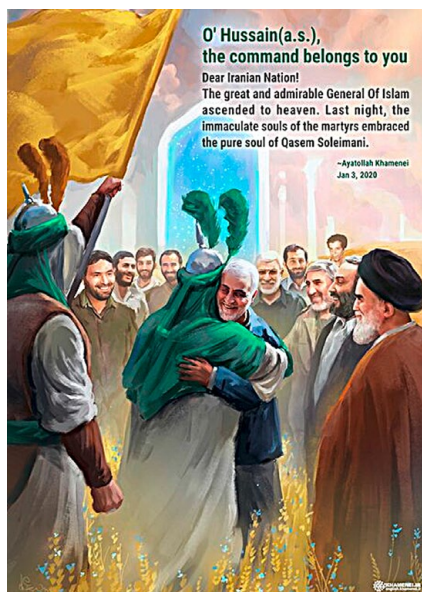


Fig. 2: Image of Qasem Soleimani being welcomed into the eternal circle of martyrs and leaders, including Ayatollah Khomeini, published on the official website of Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 5 January 2020, <https://t1p.de/h9zcx> [accessed 23 January 2025].

One striking example of this trend is provided by the viral images published by Ayatollah Khamenei's official website following the death of Qasem Soleimani (1957–2020). In these images (see figs. 1 and 2), Soleimani is depicted being embraced by Imam Husayn (626–680) and welcomed into the eternal circle of martyrs and leaders associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran, including Ayatollah Khomeini. This visual narrative, rich in symbolism, was widely circulated and resonated deeply within the Shi'i digital community, illustrating the growing significance of visual media in reshaping theological concepts. Such imagery further politicises sacred narratives by depicting contemporary political or military figures alongside revered holy figures from Shi'i sacred history.

In this study I examine such visual and narrative shifts by analysing Instagram posts that highlight contemporary martyrs and their connection to

perfect knowledge, moral purity, and spiritual authority, serving as the rightful successors of the Prophet Muhammad. See Halm 1997.

the Shi'i doctrine of martyrdom. Through these posts, the notion of martyrs ascending into the eternal world is visually enriched by incorporating depictions of other martyrs and the Infallible Imams. By investigating such cases through examples from Iran and Azerbaijan, this article explores how Shi'i martyrdom narratives are being dynamically reinterpreted in the digital age and located in contemporary political, religious, and social contexts.

Digital Shi'ism and the Visual Politics of Martyrdom

In recent years, Shi'ism's presence in the digital sphere has expanded significantly, reflecting broader trends in online religious engagement. This digital transformation has provided Shi'i Muslims with new platforms to articulate their faith, engage in theological discourse, and build global communities.⁵

Shi'i Islam's presence on Instagram reflects the broader trend of using social media platforms to explore and express religious identity in contemporary contexts. Scholarly research on Shi'ism on Instagram has focused primarily on religious scholars' online presence, pilgrimage practices, and the role of Instagram in the reproduction of religious culture among Shi'i Muslims, particularly youth.⁶ The commemoration of martyrdom, particularly during the month of Muḥarram, plays a crucial role in the religious life of Shi'i Muslims. Mourning rituals, including recitations, processions, and reenactments of the Karbalā' tragedy, not only honour the sacrifices made by Ḥusayn and his followers, but also reinforce the values of justice, patience, and resistance against tyranny. These practices foster a collective memory that binds the Shi'i community across time and space. Due to its scale, this area of study has attracted considerable scholarly attention within the field of Digital Shi'ism.⁷

Farah Hasan argues that the visual content produced by Muslims on Instagram constitutes a broad yet distinct field.⁸ Given the centrality of martyrdom narratives in Shi'i theology, I find such Shi'i-produced content as a distinct expression within this broader field. Alireza Taherifard, in his study of the online visual culture of the revolutionary youth in Iran, asserts

5 Kalinock 2006, 6.

6 Jafari/Yavar/Hashemi 2020; Rahimi 2022, 228; Tahiev 2025a, 4.

7 Rahimi/Amin 2020; Sparey 2022.

8 Hasan 2022, 10.

that the online culture of Shi'i Iranians remains an underexplored research area due to the limited scope of published studies on internet platforms and religiosity in Iran.⁹ This observation applies equally to studies of Shi'ism on Instagram in general.¹⁰

Even less attention has been given to how Shi'i history itself is visually (re)interpreted on Instagram, especially through the idiom of martyrdom. When a prominent Shi'i figure dies, Instagram becomes a key platform for expression, with images of the deceased accompanied by religious texts, prayers, and messages of mourning. A particularly intriguing trend is the recent phenomenon of depicting contemporary martyrs alongside historical figures from early Shi'i Islamic history, primarily Shi'i Imams.

To understand these Instagram practices, it is necessary to place them within the broader genealogy of religious symbolism in modern Shi'i politics. Scholars have shown how the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently mobilised Shi'i symbols for political purposes.¹¹ Even before 1979, opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy was framed through the language of Karbalā': protesters equated the Shah with Yazīd and themselves with Imam Ḥusayn's companions, casting revolt as a religious duty.¹² After the Revolution, this symbolic logic intensified.

During the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), what scholars have called the “Karbalā' paradigm”¹³ emerged: state institutions and religious leaders invoked the imagery of Ḥusayn's martyrdom to sacralise participation in war.¹⁴ Within this framework, soldiers were represented as Ḥusayn's companions, and dying in battle was discursively redefined as the highest form of martyrdom.¹⁵ Visual culture became a key medium for constructing and circulating this state-sanctioned narrative of sacrifice. Wartime posters frequently juxtaposed anonymous Iranian soldiers with the veiled figure of Imam Ḥusayn, inscribing their sacrifice into a Shi'i narrative of salvation. As Gruber argues, soldiers were “heralded as dramatic and selfless latter-day saints and neo-Husayns” and promised redemption in the afterlife through

9 Taherifard 2022, 6.

10 Tahiev 2025a, 4.

11 Aghaie 2004; Fischer 2003.

12 Nematollahi Mahani 2014, 174.

13 Saramifar 2021, 690.

14 Nematollahi Mahani 2014, 172.

15 Asadzade 2019; Rezamand 2011.

their sacrifice.¹⁶ This visual grammar of martyrdom positioned anonymous soldiers as contemporary extensions of Ḥusayn.

What is striking in the contemporary context, however, is a shift from the anonymous martyr to the named figure. Where war posters tended to depict generalised or faceless soldiers alongside Imam Ḥusayn, Instagram posts today often feature recognisable individuals. This personalisation signals a change in how some Shi'i communities digitally reinterpret their history: martyrdom is no longer a collective, anonymous category; it has become a visually curated narrative in which specific contemporary figures are woven into the sacred genealogy of Karbalā'.

Method

This article adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyse existing Instagram martyrdom narratives and their interpretation. The research data were sourced from relevant Instagram posts, with the primary objective of identifying such content. Given the vast array of images available on Instagram, hashtags were employed as a filtering tool. These hashtags, selected by users when posting content, link posts to others with the same tags, thereby facilitating the discovery of related material.¹⁷ My initial selection of hashtags was broad and was subsequently distilled down to use in posts that already featured narratives related to the martyrdom of significant Shi'i personalities. Many of these posts referenced general religious or denominational themes (e.g., #martyrs, #muslims, #shia, #imamhussain), specific contemporary figures (e.g., #qasemsoleimani, #hassannasralla, #brahimraisi, #poladhashimov), or their associated homelands and organisations (e.g., #iran, #hezbollah, #azerbaijan). Some hashtags appeared with varying spellings (e.g., #nasralla, #nasrallah) and in different languages, primarily Arabic and Farsi. Given the millions of posts associated with these hashtags, an automated search for depictions of martyrs alongside Imams was impractical. Consequently, after relevant posts had been identified manually, I adopted a qualitative approach, which was deemed the most effective method.

The case-study method is particularly useful for examining aspects of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Instagram posts are

16 Gruber 2009, 685.

17 Hasan 2022, 10.

defined here as a form of visual imagery, and the article employs Terence Wright's three approaches to reading photographs: "looking *through*", "looking *at*", and "looking *behind*".¹⁸ "Looking *through*" the posts engages with their internal narratives, interpreting the symbolic, spiritual, or affective meanings embedded within the image itself. "Looking *at*" the posts emphasises their materiality and immediate visual impact, addressing the internal narrative in terms of composition, colour, and form. "Looking *behind*" the posts relates to their external narratives, situating the image within broader social, historical, and cultural contexts and examining the networked conditions that shape its production and reception. Together, these approaches reveal how digital visual objects carry layered meanings that combine self-representing qualities with interpretive frameworks provided by users and society.

Given the study's focus on spaces constructed through online images, an embodied-spatial approach was also employed.¹⁹ It allowed for a systematic exploration of how images, symbols, and visual elements in Instagram posts convey meaning, particularly regarding the martyr's "life after death". In this study, this approach includes analysing depictions of ritualised bodies, examining how Imams' and contemporary figures' bodily postures, gestures, and expressions in posts communicate specific messages or emotions; sacred spaces, focusing on the physical settings portrayed and their relationship to users' identities and conveyed messages; and sensory elements, investigating how posts evoke the physical and sensory dimensions of martyrdom traditions.

In line with ethical research practices, I have anonymised portions of my dataset that involve contentious figures such as members the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, given the potential risks of surveillance, harassment, or legal repercussions for users. I have additionally done so to avoid sharing material from organisations designated as banned or terrorist in certain jurisdictions. In the case of posts featuring Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, I have anonymised the posts but retained the images, given the importance of their visual content and the fact that some were widely reposted. Therefore, they remain non-identifiable even when the image is provided. For commemorative posts related to Azerbaijani military officials, I provide proper citations. A more detailed discussion of my methodological

18 Wright 1999, 38.

19 Taherifard 2022, 6.

approach to working with publicly available Instagram posts on Shi‘ism, and its attendant complications, is available elsewhere.²⁰

“Martyrs Never Die”

Martyrdom holds a central and revered position in Shi‘i Islam, deeply embedded in the historical and theological framework of the faith. Its prevalence within the family of the Prophet is summarised by David Cook, who writes: “Beyond the martyrdoms of ‘Alī and al-Ḥusayn, the history of the family of the Prophet Muḥammad is one of martyrdom.”²¹ This concept finds its most profound expression in the death of the Prophet’s grandson Ḥusayn, who is honoured with the title *Sayyid al-Shuhadā’* (Master of Martyrs). In Shi‘i theology, his martyrdom transcends the historical event and serves as a profound symbol of ultimate sacrifice for truth, justice, and resistance against oppression. Beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, this narrative was increasingly employed within Iranian political discourse to sacralise revolutionary struggle and state power.²² This shift is crucial for understanding how contemporary Shi‘i visual culture came to depict modern political figures alongside sacred ones, effectively merging theological symbolism with political legitimacy.

The concept of martyrdom in Shi‘i Islam transcends individual experience to become a collective phenomenon that unites the community through shared grief and remembrance. Tareq Ayoub explores this dynamic in light of grief. He asserts that rituals of mourning transform death from an individual occurrence into a communal phenomenon, emphasising that “death becomes a collective feat”. This shared experience of grief creates a “continuous presentness of dying” that links the temporal past with the affective present. Rituals of remembrance, particularly those observed during Muḥarram, illustrate this communal continuity, as they invoke collective emotions and sustain the Shi‘i identity.²³

Discussing Muḥarram processions in physical and digital spaces, Rhys Sparey highlights their role in unifying the personal and collective dimen-

20 Tahiev 2026.

21 Cook 2007, 59.

22 Aghaie 2004; Fischer 2003.

23 Ayoub 2023, 10.

sions of martyrdom. He describes the *matamdārān* (participants in mourning ceremonies) as performing “a politically charged religious emotionality” informed by their personal experience as Shi‘i Muslims. This emotionality allows them to empathise with Ḥusayn’s martyrdom while simultaneously demonstrating their commitment to God. Yet these practices defy simple categorisation, eluding dichotomies such as religious versus political, personal versus collective, and sacred versus secular.²⁴

The oxymoronic nature of martyrdom celebrations is reflected in the idea that “martyrs never die”. This paradox is amplified by the politicisation of Shi‘i Islam in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the notion “Every day is Ashura, every place is Karbala”²⁵ began to take on political connotations. The narrative became a powerful tool for various groups, framing contemporary struggles as extensions of Karbala’s ethos. In today’s digital age, the martyrdom narratives have found new expressions. When a significant Shi‘i figure dies, online platforms are inundated with images of the deceased adorned with religious symbolism, prayers for their soul, and visual representations of their likeness alongside historical figures from early Shi‘i history, primarily the Imams. This visual and textual blending underscores the continuity of the martyrdom narrative.

Martyrs “meeting” the Imam

In this section, I will examine Instagram posts featuring contemporary figures alongside Holy Imams and how such imagery encapsulates the profound theological meaning of martyrdom, specifically the notion of “life after death”.

Qasem Soleimani

The image captures an emotional and symbolic moment in which two figures embrace: Imam Ḥusayn and Qasem Soleimani, the former commander

24 Sparey 2022, 292.

25 This phrase reflects the ongoing and universal struggle between justice and oppression, as embodied by Imam Ḥusayn at Karbala. It emphasises that Ashura, the day of Husayn’s martyrdom, and Karbala, the site of his sacrifice, are not confined to a specific time or place, and that the values of resistance, sacrifice, and standing for truth are timeless. Such interpretation and usage of this phrase can be seen in many of Ayatollah Khomeini’s statements. See Khomeini n.d.

of Iran's Quds Force, who was killed in Iraq by a U.S. drone strike on 3 January 2020. The visual elements of the image, including dramatic lighting, traditional attire, and the expressions of the figures, convey a profound sense of spiritual connection and mourning. Soleimani's death was a significant event that heightened tensions between Iran and the United States. Following his assassination, Iranian media widely portrayed him as a martyr. The official website of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei published the illustration showing Soleimani being embraced by a figure symbolising Imam Ḥusayn (see fig. 1). The same image was subsequently disseminated widely across social media platforms and reshared by numerous accounts on Instagram.

The internal narrative of Soleimani's embrace with Imam Ḥusayn communicates divine acceptance through colour, gesture, and luminosity. From an embodied-spatial perspective, the upward gaze and gestures of embrace position the viewer as a participant in the act of witnessing martyrdom, collapsing physical and digital sacred space. Looking *through* the image, we perceive a vision of the martyr's eternal life; looking *at* it, the interplay of light and shadow dramatises transcendence; and looking *behind* it, the image participates in the visual culture of Iranian revolutionary martyrdom. Externally, it resonates with Iran's revolutionary semiotics of martyrdom, where state media construct visual continuity between the Karbalā' archetype and modern political sacrifice.

Beyond this image, the official website of Khamenei, numerous social media users, messaging platforms, and the Iranian newspaper Resalat circulated another widely popular image, in which Soleimani is depicted being welcomed into Heaven by both Imam Ḥusayn and Ayatollah Khomeini (see fig. 2).²⁶

The depiction of Qasem Soleimani being embraced by Imam Ḥusayn was among the first of the widely circulated representations on social media of the revered Shi'i Islamic figure alongside a contemporary political leader and was, arguably, the most successful. The symbolism of Imam Ḥusayn embracing Soleimani reflects a narrative of martyrdom, sacrifice, and divine acceptance. Imam Ḥusayn, representing resistance against oppression and the ultimate sacrifice for justice, is thus actively politicised and placed at the core of the concept of resistance, aligned with the way Soleimani was portrayed by Iranian and other popular Shi'i media following his death.

26 Anon 2020.

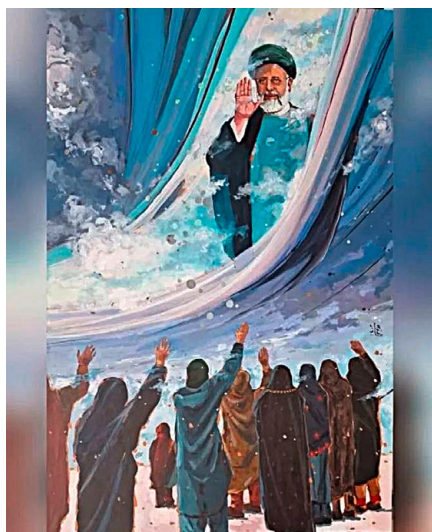


Fig. 3: Instagram post (anonymised) with Raisi [accessed 21 January 2025].

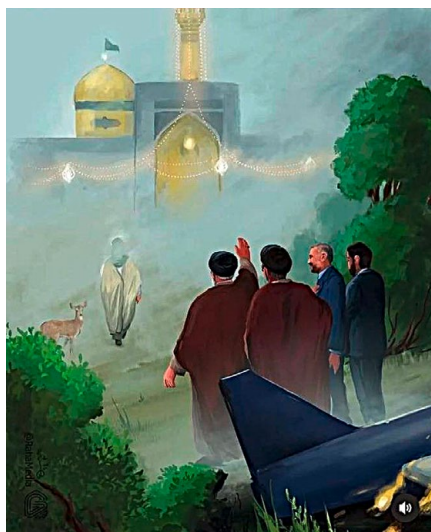


Fig. 4: Instagram Post (anonymised) with Imam Reza and Raisi [accessed 21 January 2025].

Ebrahim Raisi

On 19 May 2024, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and six other individuals were killed when their helicopter crashed near the village of Uzi in East Azerbaijan province. The crash occurred under adverse weather conditions, which were identified as the primary cause of the accident. Investigations found no evidence of foul play or sabotage, and foreign officials and Iranian state television reported that the crash resulted from challenging climatic and atmospheric conditions.²⁷

Despite the circumstances of his death, Raisi was widely honoured as a martyr within Iranian state narratives and public discourse. His death was framed as a sacrifice in service of the nation, with many official tributes portraying him as a figure who had ascended to a higher spiritual status, aligning with the state's tradition of venerating fallen leaders as martyrs. An example of this portrayal can be seen in an Instagram post (see fig. 3) featuring a mural or painting depicting a group of people, primarily women in traditional attire, raising their hands in reverence towards an image of Raisi

²⁷ Anon 2024.

emerging from the clouds. He is shown waving, symbolising his departure and transition to the afterlife. The celestial background, with flowing fabric-like elements, suggests a spiritual ascension, which accords with themes of martyrdom and divine acceptance.

By looking *through* the Raisi mural, we can access the imagined heavenly transition; looking *at* it draws attention to the upward motion and celestial tonality. Symbolically, the image reinforces Raisi's portrayal as a revered figure who has ascended to a higher realm. This artistic tribute reflects themes of collective mourning, admiration, and belief in the eternal legacy of leaders within Iran's religious-political framework. The caption of the Instagram post includes hashtags in Farsi and Arabic such as #شهید_رئسی (#martyr_raisi) and #خادم_الرضا (#servant_of_reza). The latter hashtag is particularly noteworthy as it refers to Imam 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā (Imam Reza, 766–818)²⁸ and establishes connections between Raisi and this revered Imam, even to the extent of suggesting that Imam Reza welcomed Raisi after his death.

Another Instagram post (see fig. 4) features a group of men standing near the wreckage of a helicopter and gazing towards the illuminated shrine of Imam Reza. The shrine, located in Mashhad, Iran, is a significant pilgrimage site in Shi'i Islam. A figure dressed in white, representing Imam Reza, is seen walking from the shrine towards Raisi, Amir-Abdollahian, and others who perished in the crash, seemingly welcoming them. Imam Reza's face, as with artistic depictions of Imam Ḥusayn, is not revealed; instead, it is covered with a shadow. However, it is clear that the figure represents Imam Reza, as he is depicted alongside a gazelle, a well-known symbol associated with the Imam's miracles and compassion in Islamic tradition. This association has earned Imam Reza the title *Ḍāmin-i Āhū* (The Guarantor of the Gazelle) in regions such as Iran and the Indian subcontinent.

In both depictions the spatial arrangement of the crowd beneath Raisi's image and the Imam figure emerging from the clouds construct a vertical hierarchy of sanctity, translating theological ascent into visual form.

The presence of the shrine implies a spiritual journey, symbolising Raisi and his companions being welcomed into the afterlife under the protection of Imam Reza. The misty atmosphere adds an ethereal and otherworldly

28 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā, the eighth Imam in Twelver Shi'ism, is a central figure in Shi'i theology and devotional practice. His shrine, located in Mashhad, Iran, has become one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the Shi'i world. See Britannica Editors n. d.

tone, reinforcing themes of divine acceptance and martyrdom. The caption, which includes phrases such as *Labbaik Ya Imam-e-Raza* (Here I am, O Imam Reza), reflects a sense of devotion and submission, emphasising the belief that Raisi's passing was a transition to a higher spiritual state. The artistic composition blends political and religious symbolism, portraying Raisi not just as a leader but also as a figure who achieved spiritual elevation through his service and sacrifice. Ebrahim Raisi's connection to Imam Reza is both religiously and politically significant. Raisi held key positions within Iran's religious institutions, most notably as the head of Astan Quds Razavi, the organisation responsible for managing the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad.²⁹ This role placed him at the centre of the religious and economic activities surrounding the Imam's legacy, which holds immense importance for Shi'i Muslims. Raisi's leadership of this institution solidified his association with Imam Reza, which in turn reinforced his standing within the clerical establishment and shaped his political career. Ebrahim Raisi was buried at the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad.³⁰

Polad Hashimov (1975–2020)

While the individuals already discussed here and the topic of Iranian state discourse are well-known and have been researched, the case of Azerbaijani Shi'ism has not yet received such attention, particularly in academic research. Yet this case is significant because it illuminates how Iranian religious-political symbolism is received and recontextualised beyond Iran's borders, revealing the transnational dimensions of Shi'i visual culture and the diverse ways in which sacred imagery acquires political meaning. In the earlier cases, the martyr figures were Iranian and their Shi'i identity was strongly highlighted. The situation in Azerbaijan is different, with appeals to Shi'i identity relatively rare, especially from the state's perspective. Before exploring this contrast in detail, let us examine an Instagram post related to this case.

The post (see fig. 5) depicts a figure in white, symbolising Imam Ḥusayn, embracing General Polad Hashimov and thus proposes a profound spiritual connection between historical and contemporary figures of martyrdom. With Imam Ḥusayn widely revered as the Master of Martyrs, this depiction

29 Zeidan 2025.

30 Gritten 2024.

The illustration conveys that these modern-day heroes have achieved the highest spiritual honour by following the path of Ḥusayn, embodying values of bravery, loyalty, and unwavering faith. It symbolises their entry into a place of divine acceptance and eternal rest, while the solemn expressions of the soldiers reflect the deep emotional connection to their cause. The text in Azerbaijani on the image, “General *şəhidimiz cənnətdə!*”, translates as “Our martyr general is in paradise.” The accompanying caption on the post, “Canab General Ruhun *şad olsun, məqamın ucadır, Allah daha da uca etsin*”, translated as “Dear General, may your soul rest in peace, your rank is high, may God raise it even higher”, captures the admiration and reverence for the fallen hero. By aligning General Hashimov’s sacrifice with that of Imam Ḥusayn, the illustration elevates the former’s status from mere national hero to spiritual and moral exemplar. This artistic tribute honours the memory of the martyrs of the Azerbaijani–Armenian conflict and connects their sacrifice to a broader, centuries-old narrative of struggle for justice and righteousness.

Azerbaijan is officially a secular country, yet it has a complex relationship with religion, culture, and national identity. While the Azerbaijani government promotes secularism and maintains a separation between religion and state, religious and cultural traditions still play a significant role in the lives of many citizens.³¹ Fallen soldiers are always referred to as *şəhidlər* (martyrs). The use of imagery featuring Imam Ḥusayn in this context reflects the deep cultural and historical ties Azerbaijan has with Shi‘i Islam. The majority of Azerbaijan’s population is nominally Shi‘i Muslim³², and figures like Imam Ḥusayn hold profound symbolic value, especially during times of war and conflict, as they provide a powerful narrative of perseverance, honour, and ultimate sacrifice for one’s homeland.³³ While everyday public life in Azerbaijan is largely secular, religious and cultural heritage remains important, especially during significant events. Thus, religious imagery is used strategically to invoke emotions of patriotism, solidarity, and collective memory, particularly in times of conflict or national remembrance. The depiction of General Polad Hashimov and other martyrs with Imam Ḥusayn exemplifies how historical and religious symbolism is used to elevate national heroes and link their sacrifices to a greater moral and spiritual cause.

31 Goyushov 2008; Williamson Fa 2025.

32 Tahiev 2021, 15.

33 Williamson Fa 2025, 93; Tahiev 2024, 125–126.

Conclusions

The Qur'anic notion that “those who were slain in Allah’s way” are not truly dead underscores the belief that martyrdom grants eternal life and divine reward. This concept has travelled from traditional narratives into the digital sphere, particularly Instagram, where images construct a visual theology that transcends physical death by depicting martyrs as spiritually alive, reunited with sacred figures, illuminated by divine light, or welcomed into paradise. Examining the presentation of Shi'i Iranians on Instagram, Narges Valibeigi highlights the platform’s dual role as both sacralised medium and space for social connection among believers.³⁴ Building on this awareness, I propose that Instagram facilitates a complex interplay of de-sacralisation and sacralisation, particularly when contemporary figures are depicted alongside sacred personalities. By placing modern individuals in proximity to revered Imams, these visual narratives both sacralise the contemporary figures by associating them with the Imams’ sanctity and subtly shift the Imams into a more immediate, socially mediated context. Traditional markers of holiness are transformed into forms that are more relatable and more readily consumed in digital spaces. While such representations maintain devotional significance, they move the sacred from its fixed historical and ritual context into a digitally curated public sphere. In this process, narratives of martyrdom are repurposed to support contemporary ideological frameworks and provide comfort during periods of grief.

This study demonstrates how Instagram serves as a potent platform for the reinterpretation and dissemination of Shi'i martyrdom narratives. By juxtaposing contemporary figures with sacred personalities from early Islamic history, Instagram users construct a visual discourse that transcends temporal boundaries, reinforcing collective identity and solidarity. At the same time, the accessibility and reach of these images contribute to the fluidity of religious expression in the digital sphere, challenging traditional modes of representation and reception. These findings underscore the evolving nature of Shi'i visual culture in the digital age, where the interplay of sacralisation and de-sacralisation continues to shape contemporary religious experiences and expressions.

Many of these Instagram depictions of contemporary figures alongside sacred personalities were likely produced or circulated by political, religious,

34 Valibeigi 2018.

or other organised actors, though this is not always the case. Similarly, just as the paintings reproduced in Iran–Iraq War posters were often created by independent artists rather than state institutions,³⁵ many of these digital images also originated with individual creators acting outside formal organisational agendas.

The analysed images are predominantly directed at a Shi'i audience, as they reference Imam personalities who hold profound significance within Shi'ism. These representations remain largely esoteric to non-Shi'i viewers, who may not recognise the figures depicted. The Imams themselves are not portrayed directly, as the *nūr* (radiant light) appears as their faces. Instead, their presence is suggested through elements such as background, iconography, and accompanying captions, which all make clear references to specific Imams, reinforcing their spiritual and cultural relevance within the Shi'i community. Notably, bodily postures play a crucial role in these visual representations, with Imam Ḥusayn often depicted embracing the martyrs, symbolising acceptance and spiritual connection, while Imam Reza is shown welcoming martyrs into the eternal realm. Also, the depictions are often accompanied by evocative textual elements, including hashtags, religious slogans, poetry, and personal reflections, all of which work to evoke emotional and spiritual resonance among viewers.

A recurring motif in these Instagram posts is the depiction of Imam Ḥusayn, reflecting his centrality within Shi'i martyrdom narratives and highlighting his title Master of Martyrs. His symbolic embrace of contemporary martyrs serves to establish a spiritual continuity between historical and present-day sacrifices. Furthermore, the images incorporate calligraphy, religious symbolism, and objects closely associated with the martyrs, such as the remains of a helicopter to signify Ebrahim Raisi's fatal crash or visual references to Imam Reza's shrine, an institution Raisi governed for many years.

In these representations, the Imams, who according to Shi'i belief attained eternal peace, do not merely console the new martyrs but actively welcome them into a new spiritual space. They convey the message that martyrdom renders death irrelevant, for it is a mere physical transition rather than an end. The study's findings highlight how Instagram users harness this narrative framework to reinforce the notion of "life after death".

35 Gruber 2009, 687.

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