

ROUNDTABLE

Hojaji's Gaze: Civilizational Aspirations and the Reclamation of Space in Contemporary Iran

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In the aftermath of the contested 2009 presidential election, the Islamic Republic of Iran pursued an unprecedented Islamization project set on producing citizens who would abide by and encourage a hegemonic and singular understanding of Islam.¹ Islamization of women's rights and civic culture had been regime objectives for nation-building since 1979. It was only after the 2009 presidential election crisis that some in the state's coercive centers of power reinvested in a citizenship regime rooted in Islamization of the arts and civil rights.²

In this essay I argue that Iran's current cultural Islamization efforts center on forging ideological certainty among citizens with what Norbert Elias conceptualizes to be civilization as disciplinization.³ However, I illustrate that civilization-making in Iran is grounded in the regime's manipulation of citizens' emotions and that this process engenders unexpected outcomes due to the inherent ambiguity of social engineering. As my previous research has shown, Islamization of civic culture was originally intended to undermine the reformist faction and pluralistic interpretations of Islam, but these projects have challenged top-down frameworks and are continually reworked by individuals and polities that support the Islamic Republic.⁴

I build my argument regarding the centrality of emotions to the Islamic Republic's civilization-making by analyzing two different visual representations of Mohsen Hojaji's last moments before being decapitated by the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. The photo of Hojaji, a twenty-seven-year-old Iranian military officer who reached the status of a martyr in 2017, shows him being taken to his place of execution (Fig. 1). The Islamic State did not take this photo; rather, an unknown Iranian journalist copied the image from a video distributed by the IS. This still image was later used by numerous newspapers and media in Iran. The Islamic State is not my focus here, nor do I address the remaking of international hierarchies as the photo circulated first from the Islamic State's website to Iran and then to all major news agencies covering the topic. However, the image of Hojaji was part of a film most likely utilized by the Islamic State to demonstrate its capacity to capture a diverse population, especially agents of the Islamic Republic who have played a dominant role in combating IS. Despite Hojaji's palpable sense of fear in this photograph, his effort to remain resolute cannot be overlooked, and I consider it worthy of further thought. At the same time, Hojaji's gaze displays an uneasiness and vulnerability that challenges the Islamic Republic of Iran's attempt to use his image to depict a martyr's ideological certainty.

The Islamic Republic's cultural elites must have noted the fear in Hojaji's face, for they sought to downplay it by publicizing instead an adaptation of the photo that shifted his gaze. Hassan Rouholamin is a gifted painter who is recognized as properly pious by some in Iran's political and religious establishment. He took on the task of painting the image of Hojaji's capture in an effort to memorialize the martyr's intervention in Syria and out of personal admiration for his commitment. Based on

¹Shirin Saeidi, "Iran's Hezbollah and Citizenship Politics: The Surprises of Religious Legislation in a Hybrid Regime," in *The Middle East in Transition: The Centrality of Citizenship*, ed. Nils A. Butenschøn and Roel Meijer (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2018), 223–48.

²Ibid.

³Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994).

⁴Shirin Saeidi, "Becoming Hezbollah: Religion and the Unintended Consequences of Propaganda in Post-2009 Iran," *POMEPS Studies* 28 (2017): 20–25; Saeidi, "Iran's Hezbollah."



Figure 1. Still image of Mohsen Hojaji prior to execution (from *Al-Monitor*, 14 August 2017; url: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/iran-mohsen-hojajji-irgc-beheading-isis-syria-iraq.html, accessed 19 August, 2019).

my extensive conversations with his close circle of colleagues, Rouholamin's objective was not to participate in the post-2009 Islamization project. Nevertheless, his painting is a replication of an image that also has been widely publicized. The coexistence of these two pieces of art aligns Rouholamin's depiction of Hojaji's capture with the state project of regulating religious interpretation (Fig. 2).

This article does not claim to address what Hojaji was thinking at the time or to shed light on the Iranian people's reception of his demise. Instead, I draw attention to the historical contingencies surrounding Hojaji's gaze to emphasize his deep roots in Shi'i Islam and its discourse of martyrdom. I address the Islamic Republic's broader political and religious objectives to imagine how such a gaze disrupts both the Islamic Republic and the Islamic State's appropriations of it. The reinterpretation of Hojaji's gaze is connected to my larger research agenda of exploring how the Islamic Republic attempts to categorize and dictate identities as part of the postrevolutionary state's sophisticated citizenship regimes, which evolve with each new government.⁵ My comparison of the photo and the painting is informed by years of fieldwork and academic scholarship about Iran's pro-regime movement (2007–14), citizenship, and the Islamic Republic's post-2009 cultural Islamization project.⁶ It also is connected to my interest in how cultural artifacts can yield insight into the role of emotions in politics and serve as an alternative source for research when limitations arise with other methods.⁷ My analytical approach also reveals the methodological possibilities of academically rooted imaginative speculations in contexts where field access is limited and interlocutors disappear or are missing and when unexpected deaths occur.⁸

This comparison foregrounds the civilization-making character of the Islamic Republic's Islamization projects and the political risks that come with emotional manipulation as a way to discipline citizens. I argue that the photo of Hojaji is dynamic and encourages what I define as revolutionary citizenship grounded in acceptance of leaving worldly tasks incomplete. My conceptualization of Hojaji's gaze reads with the Shi'i emphasis on psychological readiness for letting go of worldly desires for the pursuit of justice and the importance of mental preparation for martyrdom.⁹ Scholarship on the lived experiences

⁵Shirin Saeidi, "The Islamic Republic and Citizenship in Post-1979 Iran," in *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Zahra Babar, Roel Meijer, and James Sater (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁶Shirin Saeidi, "Creating the Islamic Republic of Iran: Wives and Daughters of Martyrs, and Acts of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies* 14, no. 2 (2010): 113–26; Saeidi, "Iran's Hezbollah."

⁷Shirin Saeidi and Amirhossein Vafa, "After Isolation: Mirrors between Parallel Worlds and New Conceptual Spaces of Activism in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 3 (2019): 417–43; Roland Bleiker, "AJPS Forum on Exploring the (Multiple) Futures of World Politics through Popular Culture," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 4 (2019): 505–7.

⁸Shahla Talebi, "Ethnography of Witnessing and Ethnography as Witnessing: Topographies of Two Court Hearings," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 42, no. 2 (2019): 226–43.

⁹Pedram Khosronejad, ed., *Iranian Sacred Defence Cinema: Religion, Martyrdom and National Identity* (Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston, 2012).



Figure 2. Adaptation by Hassan Rouholamin. Courtesy of Hassan Rouholamin.

of martyrs has illustrated that martyrdom is not about the desire to die.¹⁰ The martyr is an individual like anyone else, but with development of a broader vision.¹¹ Martyrdom becomes a spiritual and psychological struggle to negotiate with fear for the greater good of society and for one's own ultimate fate.¹² I suggest that Hojaji's effort to negotiate his fear is a decolonial innovation for reclaiming national and regional space, as it entails a pose that defies the jurisdiction of political elites of both the Islamic Republic and the Islamic State.

Rouholamin's painting, on the other hand, disrupts the photo's efficacy in illustrating a revolutionary subjectivity, as it adds commentary to the photo by surrounding Hojaji's gaze with sacred Shi'i imagery. Rouholamin "finishes" the photo by setting Hojaji's gaze toward Imam Hossein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad killed by the second Umayyad Caliph, Yazid, in 680 at the battle of Karbala. Hojaji also is looking toward Imam Hossein's sister, Hazrat-e Zeinab, who survived the battle to narrate its events and criticize Yazid's treatment of the prophet's family. Hazrat-e Zeinab's burial site is in southern Damascus, which Hojaji was defending from the Islamic State. Rouholamin's adaptation aligns with the Islamic Republic's endeavor to manipulate art for civilization-making and encourages a form of citizenship grounded in exceptionalism by showcasing martyrdom as a steady and calm experience bounded by certainty. Rouholamin's adaptation encourages citizens to opt for calculated materialistic outcomes that nevertheless bring solace and disrupt vulnerability.

Revolutionary Citizenship: Incompleteness as a Decolonial Innovation

According to the records of Mohsen Hojaji's life, Islam rested at the core of his subjectivities. Hojaji was born in 1991 and raised in a pious family in Najafabad, Iran, in the province of Isfahan. His father served in the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88). From a young age he was active in volunteer work and Islamic cultural activism. As a teenager, he participated in *Rahiyān-e Nur* (Seekers of light), collective trips to the war zones in southern Iran to commemorate fallen fighters. Since the early 2000s, the government has institutionalized these tours, which propagate the culture and value of martyrdom, and pious youth like Hojaji regularly participate, as do others.¹³ During Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997–2005), the office of the supreme leader centralized these trips due to concerns about the liberalization of

¹⁰Saeidi, "Creating the Islamic Republic."

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Younes Saramifar, "The South Side of Heaven: A Journey along the Iranian Collective Memory in Iran–Iraq War Memorial Sites," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 14, no. 1 (2019): 125–41.

Iranian society.¹⁴ There was a concerted effort to organize memory projects to propagate the culture of revolutionary Islam, sacrifice, and resistance, and these tours were part of this larger vision of a post-reform Iran. Hojaji also worked with the Shahid Kazemi cultural center in his hometown, where he studied and distributed books by Iran's religious philosophers. In a documentary addressing Hojaji's life, *Moajazeyeh Enghelab* (The Miracle of the Revolution, 2018), his wife, Zahra Abbasi, says she met him in this cultural center during Sacred Defense Week, the annual commemoration of the Iran–Iraq war. She believes that the martyrs of the war brought them together that day. Hojaji began his path to martyrdom as a cultural activist whose mastery of revolutionary Shi'ism guided his transition to membership in the Revolutionary Guard Corps.

As a member of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, Hojaji was deployed on multiple occasions to combat the Islamic State's spread in Syria. One of his unit's tasks was to protect the burial site of Hazrat-e Zeinab, the sister of Imam Hossein and granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad, in the southern suburbs of Damascus. Hojaji's cultural background and dedication to the spread of the ideals and culture of Shi'ism loomed over his status as a member of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, making him a particularly important martyr for those involved in Islamization culture projects. In *Moajazeyeh Enghelab*, Hojaji's mother recalls that during his last trip to Syria he asked for her blessing so he could reach the status of a martyr. Hojaji asked his superiors to send him to Syria, and went on his first tour in 2015. Based on his own wishes, he participated in one more tour, where he reached the status of a martyr, which he had long prayed for and described as his desire. His family remembers him as someone who stayed up late to do supplemental night prayers.

In the photo taken from the film distributed by the Islamic State prior to Hojaji's execution, we see the desert background in al-Tanf in southeast Syria. The vast area of unoccupied land behind Hojaji augments the sense of insecurity and uncertainty that engulfs his body. His hands are cuffed or tied by a member of the Islamic State who stands guard behind him with a look of bewilderment that lacks the confidence we are used to seeing in the faces of jihadists, such as Jihadi John.¹⁵ His capturer's face contrasts with Hojaji's look forward, which demonstrates fear but also firmness. The red sunset, tents, and clouds of black smoke are a chaotic backdrop that refocuses attention to Hojaji's face: his dry pale lips, partially open mouth, and pulsing neck veins all suggest fast-paced breathing. However, a physical reaction to the brutal death that awaits him is overshadowed by Hojaji's demureness, expressed with a gaze that struggles not to blend into the scary space that his body occupies.

It is indeed his focused eyes and piercing glance that emerge from this spectacular visual image. Hojaji's eyes communicate the message of "re-existence," a reclaiming of "life in conditions of dignity" and, I would argue, also indignity.¹⁶ This struggle toward resoluteness is in line with all that he leaves behind as incomplete, of which, by his other physical reactions that suggest stress, he seems to be aware. His gaze must be analyzed alongside his lifestyle grounded in cultural Islamization that was at times mediated by the state but obviously not dominated by it. From my perspective, Hojaji has transcended resistance to move into "re-existence" to become an active participant in the making of the photo and re-signify life through the cracks of a bleak reality.¹⁷ Hojaji's gaze unsettles the state's parallel objective of ideological certainty with Islamization projects by a depiction of vulnerability through fear. Indeed, Hojaji's gaze challenges the gaze of both states. He is not showing the terror his captors must have hoped to convey, and he lacks the certainty the Islamic Republic sought to highlight by extracting a photograph of the moment.

Production of Model Citizenship

The painting of Hojaji depicts a darker sky than the original photo and only a partial view of the desert. The disappearance of the desert diminishes the space of war. It is not far-fetched that the painter would

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Jihadi John (Mohammed Emwazi) appeared in a number of videos between 2014 and 2015 beheading people taken captive by the Islamic State. He was reportedly killed in a US and British drone strike in Raqqa on 12 November 2015.

¹⁶Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.

¹⁷Ibid.

look at the photo without thinking about war: imagining oneself as a war hero without participating in combat is a common theme among contemporary pro-regime youth in Iran.¹⁸ Years of consuming war memoirs, stories, and television programs have worked to disconnect warrior heroes from armed conflict.¹⁹

The depoliticization and delocalization of the backdrop positions Hojaji in the abstract category of a martyr who has reached his status resisting oppression. This discourse makes popular reflection on Iran's role in Syria less significant to the audience. In the painting, we can see the member of the Islamic State who is holding Hojaji hostage, and beside him are two figures representing Yazid's soldiers. In *ta'ziyeh*, the theatrical performances of Karbala that are still staged in Iran, Yazid's soldiers wear red clothes and Imam Hossein's soldiers wear green. Rouholamin's inclusion of Yazid's soldiers suggests an equivalency with the Islamic State. In the painting, Hojaji gazes toward a headless figure representing Imam Hossein, who is greeting him with open arms. Given that Imam Hossein also was decapitated, this imagery suggests that Hojaji continues in Imam Hossein's path—a discourse of a martyr's triumph over oppression through individual perseverance and a refashioning of the self.

Next to Imam Hossein stands Hazrat-e Zeinab, his sister, wearing a black chador. With this gesture, Rouholamin indicates that Hazrat-e Zeinab was greeting Hojaji because he was in Syria to protect her burial site. We do not see Hazrat-e Zeinab's face, and it is noteworthy that her style of dress resembles that of pious women in Iran today. Rouholamin's painting completes the photo by establishing a viewpoint for Hojaji but also creates a generic future and an equally universal ethical past. We are led to assume that Hojaji was a moral person who is being rewarded with martyrdom. Audiences may struggle to imagine a movement across national boundaries, given the missing background, although the religious Shi'i imagery may point them toward Syria or Iraq. The painting calls for depoliticized activism, without mobility even, but grounded in a grandiose imagining of one's position in relation to others. Importantly, the citizen depicted in the painting, who insists on ideological clarity and certainty before the act of self-sacrifice, creates a new set of problems for a regime founded on ad-hoc activism by the committed pious.

Perhaps Hojaji did indeed see both the Master of Martyrs (Sayyed al-Shohada), Imam Hossein, and Hazrat-e Zeinab, without whom the events of Karbala would not have been publicized. He does appear to be looking beyond his material surroundings to a space that exceeds the camera's frame. The painting supports the Islamic Republic's Islamization of the arts by centering on the noble status of a martyr. The artist attempts to illustrate the morality of Iran's continued role in the Syrian conflict by depicting the enemy as Yazid's army. Iranian viewers would make the connection between Yazid's army and the Islamic State because they are long used to such imagery; the Islamic Republic also represented Saddam Hussein as Yazid during the Iran–Iraq war. However, it is significant that this adaptation aims to “finish” the image to trigger ideological certainties in the viewers. By bringing in Shi'i imagery, Rouholamin disrupts something else that is essential to Hojaji's piety: his gaze and the particular performance of loss and fear it enacts and insists upon through fluctuation. The “record” that Rouholamin creates of what Hojaji saw conceals the tension between his bodily reaction and the spiritual preparation that the photograph of his capture displayed.²⁰

The photo and the painting evoke different emotions. In the painting, sacred Shi'i figures eclipse Hojaji's commitment to political Islam and its roots in Shi'ism. Indeed, Hojaji had participated in pro-regime cultural activism that stressed the importance of psychological readiness for leaving this world incomplete in exchange for salvation in the next world. Fear of imminent execution is notable in the photo and challenges the Islamic Republic's effort to convey ideological certainty. The photo communicates tensions as Hojaji's physical fluctuations suggest he is aware that his life is being interrupted but is surrendering to his fate in the darkest of moments. The painting, by contrast, goes to great lengths to replace Hojaji's complex gaze with the Islamic Republic's visual language for salvation and damnation—to suppress the emotional tensions and contradictions that his gaze exposes. Hojaji's acknowledgment

¹⁸Saeidi, “Iran's Hezbollah.”

¹⁹Zahra Abbasi and Shirin Saeidi, “The Fantastic Politics of Martyrdom: Legacies of War and Celestial Spaces of Women's Empowerment in Contemporary Iran,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (2020). DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2020.1729834.

²⁰John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 187.

that aspects of his life will be left undone, evidenced by his arresting, fearful gaze in the photo, is a decolonial innovation that allows us to imagine him reclaiming national and regional space by unraveling the authority of both the Islamic Republic and the Islamic State to tell his story.

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