

THE DOCTRINE OF VICTIMHOOD (*AL-MAZLŪMIYYA*) AMONG THE IMAMI SHIITES: HOW IT ORIGINATED AND IS PERPETUATED

Prof. Khalid Sindawi, Al Qasimi Academy

Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe and explicate the doctrine of victimhood (*al-mazlūmiyya*) in the thought of the Imami (Twelver) Shiites. By *al-mazlūmiyya*, the Shiites make reference to their belief that the family of the Prophet suffered injustice (*ẓulm*) at the hands of their opponents (the Sunnis), that this injustice has continued ever since the time of the Prophet, and that it will only come to an end with the appearance of the Awaited Mahdi (the Twelfth Imam). The article explores how the idea of victimhood took root among the Shiites and describes its varied dimensions. It traces the manner in which the Shiites have established the foundations for this idea through numerous narratives, and how they raise their children on a sense of victimhood in order to mobilize them, reinforce communal solidarity, and defend the beliefs associated with the Shiite imagination. To this end, the Shiites make use of a variety of means, including stories, poetry, proverbs, supplications, and visits to holy places, taking advantage of their numerous religious holidays to inculcate the doctrine of victimhood in successive generations, thus creating and sustaining an ongoing collective awareness.

Key words : Imami Shiites, al-Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī, Karbala, Fāṭima al-Zahrā’

Research objectives and questions

The article describes the doctrine of victimhood, the manner in which it took root among Shiites, and the most important ways in which Shiites have established this teaching in the hearts and minds of their followers. Historically, victimhood has been one of the most prominent and widespread features of Shiite discourse, and continues to be so to this day.

In what follows, I attempt to answer the following questions: What is the origin of the doctrine of victimhood among the Shiites, and how did it arise? Do the Shiites view themselves as oppressed, and does this oppression (victimhood) continue to this day? What are the principal

means by which Shiites raise their children on a sense of victimhood? Is there a specific theory which Shiites make use of in this process?

Importance of the research

The importance of the research lies, first, in the fact that it discusses an issue of significance in the Islamic experience. Second, to my knowledge, no serious, integrated academic study of this topic exists in either Arab or Western languages, and this despite the numerous Shiite sources that discuss *al-Mazlūmiyya*.

Research Methodology:

Given the nature of the study, I adopted both inductive and descriptive analytical approaches. In keeping with the inductive method, observations on the relevant writings, narratives and reports were gathered and classified, and conclusions were drawn in keeping with the study criteria. And in keeping with the descriptive analytical approach, the Shiite narratives and other texts narrating the principal events of relevance to *al-Mazlūmiyya* were analyzed to reveal their role in providing the foundation for this doctrine.

Previous studies

I drew in my research on three previous studies that provided a significant amount of reliable information and academic references which enabled me to formulate the overall theme and title of the present study, choose the appropriate research methods, and specify the objectives and questions to be addressed. These previous studies shed light on numerous aspects of the topic at hand and revealed the extent of intellectual convergence among researchers, while at the same time clarifying what the current research can add to the efforts of others by identifying still-existing gaps in our knowledge and unexplored dimensions of the topic.

The first study, published in 2009 by Zulfiqar al-Hamzi,¹ is entitled, “Victimhood (*al-mazlūmiyyah*) in Shiite Political Debate and Mechanisms for Reproducing it in the Digital Media.” This article deals with the polemical use of the theme of victimhood in political debate, and the ways in which its impact has been maximized through its public dissemination on Iraq’s most popular digital media platforms. The study undertakes its analysis on two levels: (1) the level of

¹ Zulfiqar al-Hamzi, “*al-Mazlūmiyya fī al-khiṭāb al-siyāsī al-shī‘ī wa āliyat iādātī intājihā fī al-‘ilām al-raqmī*,” in Mu‘ayyad Al Ṣūwīnt and Ḥamīd ‘Alā’, *Shī‘at al-‘Irāq bā‘d 2003: al-ru‘ā wa-l-masārāt* [Iraq's Shiites after 2003: visions and paths] (Baghdad: Dār wa Maktabat ‘Adnān, 2019).

conflict in discourse, and (2) the level of cultural politics, both of which help to identify the mechanisms for producing victimhood in digital political discourse. This study demonstrates the role of various online platforms in increasing polarization, while showing that victimhood is a central theme in the political debate produced and circulated on digital media platforms.

The second study, published in 2019 by ‘Azīza al-Ashwal, is entitled, “Doctrinal Education on Victimhood Among Shiites: Its Roots and Tools.”² In this study, al-Ashwal describes the various dimensions of the idea of victimhood, and shows how Shiites lay the foundation for this notion through numerous narratives. The author notes the Shiites’ keen concern to raise their children on a sense of victimhood by various means and via various occasions. By adapting stories about events in the lives of their imams, they reinforce children’s sense of victimhood through constant repetition, and by encouraging them to take their twelve ill-treated imams as role models.

The third study, published in 2002 by Īmān ‘Imrān, bears the title, “The Philosophy of Victimization in Twelver Shiite Thought.”³ Focusing on al-Mazlūmiyya from a philosophical point of view, ‘Imrān notes that this philosophy was brought into existence by the Shiite imagination through the exploitation of historical events, and that it led to the formation of child-rearing behaviors through which Shiites have sought to spread and perpetuate their creed. Adopting a philosophical-analytical method, the author identifies the intellectual and cultural structure of Shiite philosophy in general, and that of al-Mazlūmiyya in particular.

Comments on previous studies

The aforementioned studies focus on the polemical use of the topic of victimhood in political debate and its public dissemination through the media. They show how Shiites lay the foundation for, and reinforce, the sense of victimhood through numerous narratives, and their keenness to raise their children on this sense. They also discuss *al-Mazlūmiyya* as a philosophy, noting its creation by the Shiite imagination through the use of tragic events in the Shiites’ history.

² ‘Azīza ‘Alī al-Ashwal, “*al-Tarbiya al-‘aqdiyya ‘alā al-mazlūmiyya ‘ind al-shī‘a: ta‘shīh wa wasā’iluhā*,” *Majallat al-‘ulūm al-islāmiyya* [Journal of Islamic Sciences], vol. 2, no. 7, 2019, 1-15.

³ Īmān Muḥammad ‘Imrān, “*Falsafat al-mazlūmiyya fī al-fikr al-shī‘ī al-ithnay ‘asha‘ī*,” *Majallat kulliyat al-dirāsāt al-islāmiyya wa-l-‘arabiyya li-l-banāt bi Damnūr* [Journal of the College of Islamic and Arabic Studies for Girls in Damanhour], no. 5, Part 6, 2020, 80-126.

As for the current study, it differs from its predecessors in that it is the only one, to my knowledge, that treats the subject in the manner I propose. Specifically, I begin by defining the term *al-mazlūmiyya* from a linguistic and terminological point of view. I then go on to discuss the Shiite texts which deal with victimhood, and the numerous means by which Shiites manufacture victimhood, as it were. And lastly, I conclude by pointing to the need for more serious academic research on this little-studied but important topic.

Al-zulm: meaning and usage

Numerous meanings have been listed by linguists for the term *al-zulm*. Al-Khalīl (d. 175 AH/791 CE), for example, lists polytheism, deficiency or lack, misplacing something, and depriving others of their rights, among others.⁴ He states, “*Al-zulm* is for you to take away someone else’s right. It is also polytheism. As God Almighty declares, ‘*Inna al-shirka la zulmun ‘azīm* (Indeed, polytheism is a great injustice)’ (*Sūrat Luqmān* 31:13).”⁵

Ibn Durayd (d. 321 AH/933 CE) wrote, “The essential meaning of *al-zulm* is to place something other than where it belongs. Consequently, every abuse or act of tyranny has been called *zulm* (an injustice). If one says *zalamtu al-ard*, literally, “I did injustice to the land,” it means, “I dug in the wrong place.”⁶

Similarly, Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711 AH/1311 CE) states that *al-zulm* is “to place something other than where it belongs.” He also defines it as “turning away from [one’s original] purpose.” God Almighty declares, “Polytheism is a great injustice.” How so? God Almighty is the Giver of Life, the Dealer of Death, the Sustainer, and the Provider of all Blessings, and He has no partner. Hence, if anyone associates partners with Him, they have committed the greatest of injustices because they have attributed blessings to an entity other than their Source. We also have the statement that, “God does no injustice [to anyone], even as much as an atom’s weight” (*Sūrat al-Nisā’* 4:40).⁷

⁴ Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *al-Ayn*, ed. Drs. Maḥdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Sāmurrā’ī, Series of Dictionaries and Indexes (Beirut: Dār wa Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1980), 8: 162-164.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8: 164.

⁶ Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan, *Jamharat al-Lughā* (Hyderabad: Maṭba‘at Majlis Dā’irat al-Ma‘ārif, 1345 AH/1926 CE), 3: 142.

⁷ Muḥammad ibn Makram Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1990), entry for *al-zulm*, 12: 373.

In researching the word *ẓulm*, Father Marmarjī al-Dūmanikī drew a comparison between similar Semitic terms, and found that the verb *ẓalama* in the sense of deviating from the path of moderation and rightness was derived from the biteral root, *ḏ-l-l*, while the verb *ẓalama* in the sense of concealing light comes from the biliteral root, *ẓ-l-l*.⁸

Based on lexicon entries, the word *al-ẓulm* can bear any of a number of different meanings, which we summarize as follows:

1. Putting something where it does not belong, including digging in the wrong spot in the ground.
2. Polytheism, or associating partners with God, as in, “*Inna al-shirka la ẓulmun ‘aẓīm* (Indeed, polytheism is a great injustice)” (*Sūrat Luqmān* 31:13).
3. Oppression and overstepping of bounds, as in the saying, “Whoever exceeds the limit or fails to do the minimum has engaged in misconduct and wronged himself (*wa ẓalama nafsahu*).”
4. Depriving someone of his or her rights, or not granting them their rights in full.
5. Preventing, as in *mā mana‘aka an taf‘ala kadhā?*, meaning, “What prevented you from doing such-and-such?”⁹

The term *al-mazlūmiyyah* as used by Shiites

Among the Shiites, the term *al-mazlūmiyya* refers to the psychological, physical and social harm that has been suffered by virtuous people at the hands of the wicked, from the injustices inflicted on the family of the Prophet by their enemies, the Companions, to those suffered by the Shiites over the centuries, to those being endured by this sect’s adherents to this very day. According to Shiite belief, the injustice being inflicted on them will only end with the advent of the Mahdi, who will establish their rights, crush their enemies, and even exhume the graves of the Companions and crucify their remains.¹⁰

⁸ Augustus Marmarji al-Dūmanikī, *al-Murjamīyya al-‘arabiyya ‘alā ḏaw’ al-thunā ‘iyya wa-l-alsiniyya al-sāmiyya* [Arabic lexicography in light of biliteralism and Semitic linguistics (Jerusalem: French Fathers Press 1937), Entry for *ẓ-l-m*, 196.

⁹ Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Asās al-balāghah* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub 1923), 2:93.

¹⁰ ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Āzimī, “*al-Mazlūmiyya: al-rakīza al-asāsiyya allāhī yaqūm ‘alayhā dīn al-shī‘a al-ithnay ‘ashariyya* [Victimhood: the mainstay of the Twelver Shiite Creed],” <https://elaph.wordpress.com> (site accessed 30 April, 2023).

The Shiites use the term *al-mazlūmiyya* to refer to the ordeals they have endured throughout the world at the hands of rulers and opponents who have fought against their beliefs and rituals. They see themselves as having been victimized and stripped of their rights since the dawn of Islam. Everyone who became a follower of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his household suffered condemnation and contempt, and was doomed to isolation and exclusion. Despite their tragic history replete from beginning to end with bitter tribulations, they bear up proudly under their sufferings, restraining their anger, yet their foes remain obdurate in spurning the values of brotherhood, dialogue and peaceful coexistence.¹¹

The Shiites have laboured to turn instances of victimization, particularly the killing of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī in 61 AH/680 CE in the Battle of Karbala, to their advantage, making use of them to implement political projects by limiting the right to worldly authority in Islam to the family of the Prophet, and using the notion of victimization as a means of gaining new supporters and followers.

Indeed, victimhood is the focal point around which the Shiites define their relationships, be they relationships among their own adherents, or between ruler and ruled, and the lens through which they view and interpret events around them. Thus, for example, they see the political exclusion and marginalization they suffer as an extension of the injustice that has been their lot for centuries, while they justify their illegitimate political activity as a means of overcoming this injustice and restoring the rights they have been denied.

Some believe that victimhood is merely a clever tactic, in that oppressors engage in their oppression on the pretext of defending the oppressed. The new oppressor may raise the slogan of victimhood, not to establish the rights of the oppressed against their oppressors, but rather, simply to take the place of previous oppressors, whereupon he engages in the same practices that were engaged in by his predecessors against the oppressed on whose behalf he claims to have risen up.¹²

¹¹ See

https://ar.wikishia.net/view/%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%B7%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9 (site accessed 30 April, 2023).

¹² See Muḥammad Jumayh, “*al-Mazlūmiyya al-zālima* [Victimhood that Victimizes],” *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 6 October 2021, at alquds.co.uk.

The ongoing entrenchment of the notion of victimhood leads to two intersecting negative feelings. The first is a sense of grievance, which fuels the desire for revenge, and the second is a sense of superiority, which fuels the desire for control. When these two sentiments take root, this is the perfect recipe for the destruction of both Self and the Other, since the Self can perceive nothing but its victimhood and its superiority.¹³

Textual support for the victimhood of the household of the Prophet and their supporters

There are numerous Shiite texts that speak of victimhood. An illustrative example is the lengthy *ḥadīth* cited by al-Majlisī in his book *Bihār al-Anwār* on the authority of Ibn Abī al-Hadīd,¹⁴ according to which Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Bāqir,¹⁵ peace be upon him, said to one of his companions:

[Let me tell you about] the oppression we suffered at the hands of the Quraysh and the common cause they made against us, and what was experienced by our followers and the people who loved us. Before his spirit was taken, the Messenger of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) stated that we were the worthiest of all people to govern others. As a result, the leaders of Quraysh joined forces against us to usurp our right to the caliphate, arguing with the Anṣār regarding our right and our entitlement. Then Quraysh then passed it [the caliphate] on from one person to the next, disavowing their pledge of allegiance to us and waging war on us. The person of concern [that is, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib] continued to rise against great odds until he was killed.

Allegiance was then pledged to his son al-Ḥasan and promises were made to him, but he was betrayed and he surrendered [his claim to the caliphate]. The

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ His full name was Abū ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ibn Abī al-Ḥusayn Hibat Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd al-Madā‘inī al-Mu‘tazilī (1190-1230 CE). See Martijn Theodoor Houtsma, "Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1st Edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), vol. 2, 736.

¹⁵ The fifth of the Imami Shiites' twelve imams, he died in 733 CE. See E. Kohlberg, "Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960–2005), vol. 7, 397-400.

people of Iraq revolted against him, whereupon he was stabbed with a dagger in his side, his army was plundered, and [even] the anklets of the mothers of his children were stolen. He was then reconciled with Mu‘āwiya, who spared his life and the lives of his household, and their numbers were precious few.

Then twenty thousand of the people of Iraq pledged allegiance to al-Ḥusayn, peace be upon him, but then betrayed him and revolted against him. Despite their pledge of allegiance to him, they killed him. Then we, the household of the Prophet, continued to be humiliated and wronged, excluded and degraded, deprived, killed and feared, unable to ensure our own safety or the safety of our supporters, and the ungrateful liars found in their lie and their ingratitude a means of seeking favour with their guardians, including wicked judges and governors in every town. They plied them with fabricated stories about us, claiming that we had said and done what we had not said or done in order to stir up people’s hatred against us. This phenomenon reached its peak during the time of Mu‘āwiya, following the death of al-Ḥusayn, peace be upon him. Our followers were killed in every town, their hands and feet cut off based on mere suspicions, and whoever was known to love us and be devoted to us was imprisoned, his wealth plundered, or his house demolished. This tribulation continued to grow worse until the time of ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, the murderer of al-Ḥusayn, peace be upon him. Then al-Ḥajjāj came and killed them mercilessly, taking them away on the flimsiest suspicion or accusation, so that a man would rather be called a heretic or an infidel than a follower of ‘Alī. As a consequence, a man who was spoken well of, and who might be god-fearing and honest, would begin narrating *ḥadīths* that attributed marvellous virtues to those who had governed in the past when in fact, such claims lacked any basis in reality, thinking that they were true given how often these accounts had been related by people who were not known to be untruthful or impious.¹⁶

¹⁶ Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār al-jāmi‘a li durar akhbār al-a‘imma al-aṭḥār* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1983), 44: 68-69.

This is the theme the Shiites have continued to harp on since the time their sect emerged, portraying the Sunnis as having tyrannized and oppressed the family of the Prophet and their followers throughout history.

The following are the most prominent of the victimizations¹⁷ mentioned by the Shiites:

a. The injustice done to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Shiites hold that at Saqīfat Banī Sā‘ida¹⁸ after the death of the Prophet, ‘Alī was denied his right to the caliphate, and that the Sunnis concealed and distorted the hadiths that praise his merits.

b. The injustice done to Fāṭima al-Zahrā’, daughter of the Prophet. After the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, a dispute arose between his daughter Fāṭima and the caliph Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq over the land of Fadak. Fatima considered this land her rightful inheritance, whereas Abū Bakr held that prophets do not bequeath inheritances. After the Battle of Khaybar in the year 7 AH/628 CE, the Prophet had sent a delegation to Fadak, calling on its Jewish inhabitants to convert to Islam. They refused to do so; however, they agreed that half of the land of Fadak would belong to the Prophet. This land thus belonged exclusively to the Prophet because the Muslims had not seized it through combat. The Prophet would spend the proceeds from this land on the poor of Banū Hāshim, other poor Muslims, and wayfarers.¹⁹ The Prophet then gifted Fadak to his daughter

¹⁷ Shiite sources mention numerous instances of victimization to which they have been subjected down the centuries. A full listing would not be possible here; however, they include the Battle of the Camel (656 CE), the Battle of Ṣiffīn (657 CE), and the Battle of Nahrawān (659 CE); the killing of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661 CE) at the hands of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muljam al-Murādī (d. 881 CE); the murder of al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī (670 CE) by poisoning at the hands of Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān (d. 680 CE); the cutting off of aid from the Muslim Treasury to the family of the Prophet; the killings of ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (713 CE), Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Bāqir (733 CE), ‘Alī al-Hādī (868 CE), and al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī (874 CE); the overthrow of the Fatimid state by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (d. 1193 CE); the Ottomans’ declaration of the Shiites as infidels, and other grievances.

¹⁸ For details on Saqīfat Banī Sā‘ida, see Wilferd Madelung, *The succession to Muhammad: A study of the early caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 28, 32-33.

¹⁹ Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Jābir al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1956), 41.

Fatima.²⁰ Following the gathering at Saqīfat Banī Sā‘ida, Abū Bakr announced that Fadak would not belong to anyone. Fātima came to him to object and a dispute occurred between them, as we learn from historical sources that Fātima al-Zahrā’ demanded that the ownership of Fadak be restored to her. To this, Abū Bakr replied that the Prophet had once said, “We will not bequeath what we leave behind to anyone. Rather, it will be for charity.”²¹ Following this, firewood was brought and piled at the door to Fātima’s house, and it was set on fire. When she sought to prevent the arsonists from carrying out their intention, she was injured and suffered a miscarriage. The Shiites believe that Fātima al-Zahrā’ died angry with Abū Bakr and ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.

c. The injustice suffered by al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. The Shiites accuse the Sunnis of having conspired against al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī and killed him and his family in Karbala in a heinous manner. Shiites focus heavily on this grievance, to which they assign the most importance of all. Its events are well known even among Sunnis given its connection to the revolutionary aspect on which Shiites place such emphasis. In this connection, Muḥammad al-Mudarrisī states,

Thus, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥusayn illuminated the path of oppressed believers against whom the trinity of hypocrisy, charlatanism, and cowardice has conspired throughout history, the path of the dispossessed against whom common cause has been made by power-crazed, sycophantic preachers awash in luxury who suck the blood of the poor.²²

²⁰ Muḥammad Ibn Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfī*, tr. Jawād Muṣṭafawī (Mashhad: Shiite Seminary, 1342 AH/1923 CE), 1:543; Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Nu‘mān al-Mufīd, *al-Muqni‘a* (Qom: Mu‘assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1410 AH/1989 CE), 289-290.

¹⁸ Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, ed. ‘Alī Shīrī (Beirut, Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1988), 2: 22.

²² Muḥammad Taqī al-Mudarrisi, *al-Imām al-ḥusayn: miṣbāḥ al-hudā wa safnat al-najāh* (Tehran: Dār al-Baṣā‘ir, 1414 AH/1993 CE), 11.

Ḥusayn Najātī, a Shiite scholar in Bahrain, writes, "Their followers continue to experience a pain and grief that will only be mitigated and brought to an end by the appearance of the master of time (the Mahdi), who will take revenge on al-Ḥusayn's behalf."²³

The manufacture of victimhood

The Shiites make use of several methods to educate their children in the culture of victimhood:

1. **Refraining from giving their children the names of opponents.** No Twelver Shiite household would include anyone by the name of Abū Bakr, 'Umar, Mu'āwiya, Ḥafṣa, or Yazīd.
2. **Cursing opponents whenever their names are mentioned.** Shiites are keen to curse Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ, Mu'āwiya and all other Umayyad caliphs, as well as many of the Companions who did not side with 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib in his dispute with Mu'āwiya. In fact, cursing has become a communal behaviour on which Shiite children are raised. They imitate this behaviour unconsciously at first. Then gradually it becomes conscious once they have been told the stories and learned of the historical events which the Shiites view as justification for such curses. Over time, children come to associate the curse with the story such that whenever the name of the person to be cursed is mentioned, they recall the event and relive the same sense of grievance and desire for revenge. Constant repetition of this pattern has the effect of forming and reinforcing this concept in the mind and heart until, little by little, it becomes a deeply engrained belief.
3. **The stories that are told to Shiite children**

Accounts of the lives of the Shiites' imams have been carefully woven to depict the injustices that were inflicted on them by their opponents, and they are repeated so frequently that they are memorized by everyone. They are told and retold to young people, either for entertainment or for educational purposes, to the point where they become part of the culture of the family, and indeed of the society as a whole. The narration of the various versions of these stories also inculcates the habit of preceding each historical figure's name with his or her honorific title. They

²³ 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Aḥmad al-Baddāh, *Ḥarakat al-tashayyur fī al-khalīj al-'arabī (1391-1431 AH/1971-2010 CE): dirāsa taḥlīliyya naqdiyya* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-'Arabī li-l-Dirāsāt al-Insāniyya, 2010), 129.

will say, for example, Mawlānā ‘Alī (our master ‘Alī), Sayyidunā al-Ḥusayn (our master al-Ḥusayn), Ummunā al-Zahrā’ (our mother al-Zahrā’), and so on. By nurturing reverence for these historical figures, the addition of such titles and descriptions encourages children to identify with their imams to the point where they feel that an injustice has befallen them personally. Indeed, if the stories are accompanied by emotional outbursts of weeping, wailing and breast-beating, they leave the recipient feeling wronged and oppressed, with the desire for revenge and self-defence.

The story is thus an important means of educating children.²⁴ However, its educational role and its emotional and psychological impact are not limited to young children, but go beyond this to include adults and the elderly, particularly if it is presented in a suspenseful manner that captures listeners’ attention and draws them in, causing them to interact with the story, identify emotionally with key characters and relate to the situations they face, since these processes will then be reflected in listeners’ behaviour on an unconscious level.

Indeed, anyone who has followed raconteurs and novelists throughout Arab history will find that the storytellers of the Twelver Shiites have mastered the art of knitting together the intricate details and subtleties of a narrative. It is in this context that young Shiite children’s characters are shaped as they begin to envisage their ideals, their role models and their mortal foes as the sense of victimhood takes firm root in their minds and imaginations.

Shia scholars instruct parents to tell these stories to their children and to repeat them during holiday seasons and on religious occasions. For educated households, they may even assign special stories that are suitable for particular age groups. One group might be told the story of the eighth Imam, ‘Alī al-Riḍā ibn Mūsā (d. 818 CE), a second group might hear the story of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī (d. 680 CE), a third, the story of Imam al-Ḥusayn’s daughter (d. 680 CE), and so on.

4. Proverbs, aphorisms and sayings

No Shiite household would be complete without proverbs, aphorisms and pithy sayings that roll off the tongue and which, thanks to their eloquence and brevity, are easy both to memorize and to conjure on the appropriate occasions. There are numerous examples of sayings that are

²⁴ For more on this topic, see Dakhīl Allāh al-Dahmānī and al-Zahrānī Murqī, “*Dawr al-qīṣṣa fī tanmiyati thaqāfat aṭṭāli mā qabl al-madrasa* [The role of the story in developing the culture of pre-school children],” *Majallat al-tarbiya* [Journal of Education], no. 193, Part 1, 2022, 571-606.

attributed to the imams, or which describe some aspect of their lives and the conditions they faced. The use of proverbs, aphorisms, and pithy sayings is a useful technique that can be readily adapted to the purpose of entrenching a sense of victimhood.

One particular famous saying that has become a common adage is, “Never will we allow ourselves to be humiliated” (*hayhātun minnā al-dhulla*). This statement was made by al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī in a sermon he delivered on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ in Karbala when he saw the Umayyad army determined to force him to surrender and pledge allegiance to the caliph Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiya. This phrase became a slogan which Shiites use to this day. It appears in multiple forms on banners, signs, walls, cars, main streets, public roads, and articles of clothing. It also appears in the media, both print and electronic, including Shiite websites, especially during the first ten days of the month of Muḥarram on the occasion of the annual remembrance of Ashura, and on the twentieth of the month of Ṣafar commemorating the fortieth day after al-Ḥusayn’s martyrdom. More recently, it has become a slogan which is raised in the context of the uprisings staged by Shiites in various countries. Similarly, it is used when hostility intensifies between two feuding parties and one of them gains the upper hand, at which point the other opponent utters it with the intention of either securing its own rights without humiliation, or dying in the process.²⁵

Another is the words, “Here I am at your service, O Ḥusayn (*labbayka yā Husayn*).” In an expression of their willingness to die for Ḥusayn and avenge him, Shiites repeat this on the Day of Ashura in response to Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī’s cry for help during the battle of Karbala—“Is there any supporter who will come to my aid?” The Secretary-General of Hezbollah, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, has explained this call as meaning that “like Ḥusayn, the Shiite should be present in the

²⁵ See Jawād Muḥaddithī, *Mawsū‘at ‘Āshūrā* [The Encyclopedia of ‘Āshūrā], tr. from the Persian into Arabic by Khalīl Zāmil al-‘Iṣāmī (Beirut: Dār al-Rasūl al-Akram, Dār al-Maḥajja al-Bayḍā’, 1997), 483; al-Ḥasan ibn Shu‘ba, *Tuḥaf al-‘uqūl ‘an āl al-rasūl*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghifārī (Qom: Mu‘assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1404 AH/1983 CE), 241; ‘Alī ibn Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī, *Ithbāt al-waṣīyya li-l-imām ‘alī ibn abī ṭālib*, 3rd Edition (Qom: Anṣāriyān, 1384 [solar years AH]), 166.

battle, even if he is alone. Even if people abandon him, accuse him and betray him, he, his possessions, his family and his children must be present in this battle.”²⁶

Still another phrase of importance to Shiites is, “Oh, to avenge al-Husayn (*yā li thārāt al-Husayn!*)” Shiites use this phrase to demand revenge for the blood of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī. It is also said to be the slogan chanted by the angels who will remain at his grave until the appearance of the twelfth Imam, that is, the Mahdi. Similarly, it will be the byword of the Mahdi himself when he appears seeking revenge for those slain at Karbala, and of the supporters of the Mahdi who yearn to be martyred for God’s sake. It was the slogan raised by the penitents who revolted under the leadership of Sulaymān ibn Ṣurad al-Khuzā‘ī in Kufa in the year 57 AH/676 CE, and by those who fought in the revolution spearheaded by al-Mukhtār ibn Abī ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Thaqafī.²⁷

Contemporary Shiites rely on sectarian sentiments to recruit and mobilize men to fight in their battles by evoking the notion of the injustice that continues to befall them. The battle cry, “Oh, to avenge al-Husayn!” has appeared on Shiite religious and media platforms in Syria; similarly in Yemen, Shiites raised banners bearing this slogan after the killing of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force.²⁸

Tombs and shrines have also been used by Shiite groups in the service of sectarian mobilization. In Syria, Shiites set out from the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab south of Damascus in sectarian mobilization operations, saying, “Zeinab will not be taken captive twice,” or, “Zaynab’s tomb will not be exhumed.” As a way of eliciting this sense of victimhood, Iranian Supreme Leader ‘Alī Khamenei commented on the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, saying: “Every land is

²⁶ Markaz al-‘Itra al-Ṭāhira li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Buḥūth, *Ḥurmat al-talbiya wa-l-bay‘a li ghayri al-maṣūmīn ‘alayhim al-salām* [The prohibition against reciting the *talbiyah* and the pledge of allegiance to anyone other than the infallible ones, peace be upon them], at <http://aletra.org>.

²⁷ Muḥaddithī, *Mawsū‘at ‘Āshūrā*, 485.

²⁸ Ādam Yahyā, “*al-Mazlūmiyya ‘ind al-shī‘a: kayfa waḥḥafūha li-l-ḥashd al-ṭā‘if wa khidmati ajandandatihim* [Victimhood among the Shiites: How they have employed it in sectarian mobilization and in service of their agenda], *Ṣaḥīfat al-Istiqlāl*, 21 January, 2021.

Karbala, and every day is Ashura.”²⁹ Since, for Iranians and the Shiite militias,³⁰ the legitimacy of fighting in Syria has been based primarily on the protection of their holy shrines, their presence has been concentrated for the most part in the Sayyida Zaynab area south of Damascus, where such holy shrines are located.

These proverbs and adages connect the listener to the name of the imam, or to some well-known saying that points to some of his attributes. As part of the culture of the household or family, such proverbs or adages are mentioned repeatedly in children’s hearing. If a proverb is reinforced by a story, the child will come to have a solid conception of the imams and their supernatural abilities and courage, causing them to become role models that the child seeks to emulate in both belief and action.

5. Supplications and visits

Given the vital and impactful role they play in people's lives, supplications and visits are another important means of engraining the notion of victimhood. Shiites make it a habit to recite supplications immediately following every ritual prayer and on all religious occasions, and they visit the graves of the imams on a regular basis. One of the most famous of these supplications is

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ These militias are: the Lebanese Hezbollah, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, Dhu al-Faqar Brigade, Hezbollah Battalions Iraq, Sayyid al-Shuhada Battalions, Martyr Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr Forces (Badr Organization, military wing), Kafeel Zainab Brigade, Hezbollah al-Nujaba Movement, Faylaq Waad al-Sadiq (Truthful Promise Corps), Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib (the Victorious Lion of God Brigade), Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein (the Imam Hussein Brigade), Fawj al-Tadakhkhul al-Sari (the Rapid Intervention Regiment), the Fatemiyoun Division, the Zainabiyoun Division, Saraya Ashura (the Ashura Brigades), the Haider al-Karrar Sniper Brigades, the Khorasani Vanguard Brigades, the al-Muammal Brigade (affiliated with the Mahdi Army), and the al-Rasali Youth Brigade. See Khālid al-Muṭṭlaq, “*al-Mīlīshiyāt allatī tudīruhā īrān fī sūriyā* [Iranian-Run Militias in Syria],” Harmon Center for Contemporary Studies, 29 December, 2020, at: harmoon.org/reports (accessed 9 April, 2023); and Ḥātim al-Fallāḥī, “*al-mīlīshiyāt al-irāqīyya fī sūriyā: al-dawr wa-l-mustaqbal* [Iraqi Militias in Syria: Their Role and Future],” at studies.aljazeera.net (accessed 9 April, 2023).

the one uttered against Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. It is known as the supplication against “the idols of Quraysh,” which is one of the numerous derogatory epithets Shiites apply to the caliphs Abū Bakr and ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, because, in Shiite belief, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb usurped ‘Alī’s right to the caliphate after the death of the Prophet. Out of prudence, some Shiites do not state explicitly that Abū Bakr and ‘Umar are the individuals to whom the term “idols of Quraysh” refers. According to al-Kāshānī, the term is a reference to Pharaoh and Haman. However, it is noteworthy that among Shiites, “Pharaoh” and “Haman” are codewords for Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. They also call Abū Bakr “the calf of the Umma,”³¹ and ‘Umar “al-Sāmīrī (the Samaritan).”³²

This supplication, which includes curses, insults, and prayers calling down woe and destruction on Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and their two daughters, ‘Ā’isha and Ḥafṣa, is considered to be of great importance and merit. Shiite scholars have devoted significant attention to this supplication. Indeed, they have written more than ten commentaries on it, including *al-Balad al-Amīn* by al-Kafāmī (d. 905 AH/1499 CE). Reciting this supplication is believed to bring particular benefits to the reciter. If one recites it once, God will record seventy thousand good deeds to his name and erase seventy thousand bad deeds, raise him seventy thousand degrees, and meet seventy thousand needs. If one curses Abū Bakr and ‘Umar in the morning, no sin of his will be recorded against him until evening, and if he curses them in the evening, no sin of his will be recorded against him until morning. It is noteworthy that a requirement of the Shiite creed is that one renounce Abū

³¹ The Shiites liken Abū Bakr to the golden calf which the Children of Israel bowed down to in the wilderness, and ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb to “al-Sāmīrī,” a Jewish figure who is said to have made a statue in the form of a golden calf as an idol for the Children of Israel to worship after Moses had gone to meet his Lord on Mt. Sinai (see *Sūrat Ṭaha* 20:80, 83-97). For in addition to usurping the caliphate, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar are condemned by the Shiites for having abused Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet, and deprived her of her inheritance, that is, the property at Fadak. See Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī al-Ṣadūq, *Thawāb al-A’māl wa ‘iqāb al-‘amāl* [Rewards and Punishments for Deeds] (Qom: Al-Radi Publications, 1368 AH/1948 CE), 216; and Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī al-Ṣadūq, *al-Khiṣā’* [Attributes], ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghifārī (Qom: Publications of the Community of Teachers at the Qom Seminary, 1403 AH/1982 CE), 458.

³² For more details on al-Sāmīrī, see Uri Rubin, “Tradition in Transformation: the Ark of the Covenant and the Golden Calf in Biblical and Islamic Historiography,” *Oriens*, vol. 36, 2001, 202-203.

Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and Muʿāwiya. Shiites believe that renouncing these individuals will heal illness and bring bodily health, and that whoever renounces them and dies that same night will be assured of entering Paradise.³³

6. Religious occasions

The Shiites celebrate approximately one hundred religious events over the course of twelve lunar months. These include the commemoration of martyrdoms, births, battles, and so on, with occasions memorializing the martyrdom of the imams enjoying the greatest interest. Shiite religious occasions are viewed as performing the purpose of reviving concern for the household of the Prophet, as they involve remembering them, introducing people to them, and increasing people's awareness of their virtues and importance.

The sixth imam, Jaʿfar al-Šādiq³⁴ (d. 765 CE) is reported to have said to al-Fuḍayl ibn Yasār (d. circa 148 AH/765 CE),³⁵

"Do you gather and relate past accounts?"

"Yes," Fuḍayl replied, "may I be your ransom."

"I love these gatherings," [said the imam]. "So revive our memory, O Fuḍayl. May God have mercy on those who revive our memory."³⁶

Shiites believe that these occasions perform important educational functions, including:

1. Establishing and deepening spiritual love and emotional attachment to the Prophet and his immaculate household.

³³ See Ibrāhīm ibn ʿAlī al-Kafʿamī, *al-Miṣbāḥ* (Qom: Dar al-Radi (al-Zahidi), 1405 AH/1984 CE), 552-553; Mīrzā Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʿil wa mustanbaṭ al-masāʿil* (Qom: Muʿassasat Āl al-Bayt, 1408 AH/1987 CE), 4: 305, *ḥadīth* No. 8-5021.

³⁴ See M.G.S. Hodgson, "Djaʿfar al-Šadiq," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed., vol. II, 374-375.

³⁵ Al-Fuḍayl ibn Yasār al-Nahdī Abū al-Qāsim al-Baṣrī was a Shiite jurist and a companion of Imam al-Bāqir. He died during the lifetime of Jaʿfar al-Šādiq, and is highly revered among Shiites. See Abū al-Qāsim al-Mūsawī al-Khawʿī, *Muʿjam rijāl al-ḥadīth wa taḥṣīl ṭabaqāt al-ruwāḥ* (Lexicon of ḥadīth scholars and detailed classes of narrators) (Najaf: Muʿassasat al-Imam al-Khawʿī al-Islāmiyya, Maṭbaʿat al-Ādāb, 1399 AH/1978 CE), 14: 356.

³⁶ al-Majlisī, *Bḥār al-Anwār*, 44: 282.

2. Reinforcing religious slogans and rituals in the Shiite community, thus preparing the community to accept the imam and his justice, and to constantly prepare for revolution.
3. Renewing the bond between Shiites, their history and their creed.³⁷

The most important and widely celebrated of these religious occasions is the Day of Ashura, or the so-called “commemoration of al-Ḥusayn,” which is the anniversary of the killing of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī. Shiites set aside this day as a day of mourning in which wakes and funeral processions are held, as well as other ceremonies to which reference will be made. It bears noting that other Shiite imams were also killed, the first of them being ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, who was treacherously murdered. However, the Shiites have placed the greatest emphasis by far on the Day of Ashura commemorating the death of al-Ḥusayn, and this for a number of reasons:

1. The revolutionary character al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī’s movement, as he came out demanding his right to rule through an armed struggle.
2. The fact that the opponent was the Umayyad state, which represented a purely Sunni state with all its flaws and weaknesses.
3. The fact that this movement ended with his martyrdom.

These are the three most prominent features of contemporary Shiite doctrinal literature: revolution, revenge, and martyrdom. Thus, the act of giving this occasion such centrality has been an important means of instilling these concepts in the hearts and mind of Shiites, children and adults alike. The most cursory observation of the rites and rituals of the commemoration of al-Ḥusayn’s martyrdom will make this unmistakably clear.

The following are the most important rituals involved in this occasion:

- **Ḥusayni gatherings** (*al-majālis al-ḥusayniyyah*), also referred to as ceremonies of condolence (*marāsim al-‘azā’*) or Ashura gatherings (*al-majālis al-‘āshūriyyah*). These gatherings, which are held during the first ten days of the month of Muḥarram in mosques, homes and halls especially designated for this purpose known as Ḥusayniyyahs,³⁸ include exhortation, guidance, sermons, and the remembrance of the tragic events surrounding al-Ḥusayn’s death. Sometimes a passage from

³⁷ See ‘Abd Allāh Ḥassān, *al-Fikr al-tarbawī al-imāmī: Īran numūdhajan* [Imami educational thought: Iran as a model] (Beirut: Markaz al-Ḥaḍāra li Tanmiyat al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 2008), 2: 11-13.

³⁸ Muḥammad Mahdī Shams al-Dīn, *Thawrat al-ḥusayn fī al-wijdān al-sha‘bi* (Beirut: al-Dār al-Islāmiyya, 1980), 291.

this story will be read, and a scene from its events may be acted out as a way of mourning al-Ḥusayn's death anew. The writer of such texts is called *kātib al-majālis*, while its reader is referred as *al-qāri'*. According to Shiite sources, such ceremonies date back to ancient times, when they were held by angels, jinns, and prophets.³⁹

- **Ḥusayni processions.** These are marches staged by Shiites in memory of Ashura and the killing of al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī. Groups of people gather at an agreed-upon location and walk together, forming a folkloric, religious, social march or demonstration that makes its way down streets and roads according to a specific pattern. Marchers sing poetry in unison, chanting elegies in mourning for al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī and the other imams, and in many cases, slapping themselves or striking themselves with chains. The formula for these processions is most likely to have crystallized during the Safavid era (1501-1722 CE). Each procession has its own logo and flag, and sometimes it may have its own name.

The procession of mourning takes place during the first ten days of the month of Muḥarram, which include remembrances of the killing of the other imams, as well as the death of the Prophet and his daughter Fāṭima al-Zahrā'. Processions of mourning in Iraq, especially in the cities of Najaf and Karbala, date back to the period of Mu'izz al-Dawlah (932-967 CE) and Rukn al-Dawlah (932-976 CE). In Iraq's major cities, it is customary for each locality or neighbourhood to organize its own funeral procession. It first prepares a suitable place for participants to gather in order to perform certain rites and rituals, thus preparing themselves to take part in the march. The place chosen is often a mosque, a Ḥusayniyyah, a takiyyah, or a large house, while in some cities and villages, a large tent is erected in one of its major squares.

Food and drinks are prepared for procession participants and guests, while large processions also prepare the equipment, props and other supplies needed to stage *tashābīh*, popular plays that re-enact certain scenes from the Battle of Karbala on the morning of Ashura. Each mourning procession has a leader and volunteer assistants whose task is to manage and organize the affairs of the procession, prepare individuals to perform the rites and rituals, provide the necessary instructions, assign roles and tasks, and, overall, to shoulder all responsibilities associated with the event. Procession leaders are often the heads of neighbourhoods and

³⁹ Their details are related by Ja'far al-Tusturī in his *al-Khaṣā'is al-Ḥusayniyya*. See Muḥaddithī, *Mawsū'at 'Āshūrā'*, 399-400, 402.

dignitaries. In addition, each procession has its own orator, poet, and *rādūd*.⁴⁰ As for the assistants, their duties include preparing everything needed to hold, organize and oversee the processions, collecting donations, doing event publicity, and communicating with other processions and groups.⁴¹

- ***al-Shayla***: *al-Shayla* is a colloquial term used in Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia derived from the verb *shāla*, meaning to remove, and applied figuratively to the elegies that are chanted in the mourning processions.⁴²

- ***al-Laṭmiyya***: A term taken from the Iraqi, Bahraini and Kuwaiti dialects, the *laṭmiyya* is a popular Shiite poem of lamentation. The term is derived from the verb *laṭama*, meaning to slap, since attendees slap their chests in response to the sorrowful occasion (though it is used figuratively, since slapping is generally to the face). *Laṭmiyyas* are sung on many occasions, especially in commemoration of the deaths of the imams and Fāṭima al-Zahrā'. As we have seen, the most important of these occasions is the commemoration of the death of al-Ḥusayn during the month of Muḥarram, when Shiites gather in a single procession (the Ḥusayni procession) with a chanter (known as the *rādūd*), who sings a poem of lamentation in which he immortalizes the misfortunes that befell the family of the Prophet.

The *laṭmiyya* has a distinctive vocabulary associated with it, as well as a variety of meters that are derived from those of Arabic poetry or invented by its author. There is a significant number of Shiite *rādūds*, both past and present, who have specialized in composing poems of mourning. From Iraq we have Ḥamza al-Ṣaghīr, Bāsim al-Karbalā'ī, Yāsīn al-Rumaythī, and 'Abd al-Jalīl al-Karbalā'ī. From Saudi Arabia we have al-Sayyid Qāsim al-Shakhṣ, Maḥmūd al-Makkī, Tāmir al-Shakhṣ, 'Alī Abū Khaḍr, Faṭḥī al-Bādhir, Ḥusayn al-Ramaḍān, Aḥmad 'Alī al-Nāṣir, Qāsim al-

⁴⁰ The *rādūd* is the person who recites the poems and elegies during the days of mourning for the imams, especially for al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī. This generally takes place in the Ḥusayniyyas, the mourning ceremonies, and in processions involving self-harm through slapping and striking with chains. The recitation is usually done in a distinctive, somber melody. See Muḥaddithī, *Mawsū'at 'Āshūrā'*, 193.

⁴¹ Ibrāhīm al-Ḥaydarī, *Trāḡidiyā karbalā'* [The Tragedy of Karbala] (Beirut: Dar Al-Saqi, 1999), 103-105; and Muḥaddithī, *Mawsū'at 'Āshūrā'*, 428-429.

⁴² Al-Ashwal, "*al-tarbiya al-aqdiyya*," 11.

Dayf, Ḥusayn al-Hudaybī, and ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Jawāhir. In Bahrain, we have Ja‘far al-Darrāzī, Sāliḥ al-Darrāzī, Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Akraf, Ghazī al-‘Ābid, the brothers Ḥusayn, Ja‘far and Mahdi Sahwān, Amīr al-Mūsawī, Fāḍil al-Bilādī, ‘Abd al-Amīr al-Bilādī, the brothers Abū Dharr, and Murtaẓā, Ḥusayn, Ḥasan, and Muḥammad al-Ḥalwājī. From Qatar we have Nizār al-Qaṭarī’, and from Kuwait, Ḥusayn al-‘Aryān, Sayyid Walīd al-Mazīdī, Ṣalāḥ al-Ramaḍān, and ‘Alī Maḥdī.

Given the availability of audio and video recording technology,⁴³ the names of many such *rādūds* who are listened to widely by Shiites throughout the year, especially in the months of Muḥarram, Ṣafar, and Ramaḍān, have remained familiar to many. Dozens of taped recordings of *laṭmiyyahs* are available in stores or online; they are also sold as DVDs and broadcast on Shiite TV channels. Interestingly, non-Arab Shiites recite *laṭmiyyahs* and poems of mourning in their own languages and styles.⁴⁴

Victimization among Shiites in modern times

In recent years, Shiite leaders have used the blood of their followers in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and even Yemen as fuel to stoke the fires of grievance in people’s hearts and to demonstrate the ongoing injustices being suffered by the Shiite community. They made use of the killing of ‘Imād Mughniyya, a military leader in the Lebanese Hezbollah, on 12 February 2008, to reinforce this idea. Similarly, they exploited the killing of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, at the hands of US forces on 3 January 2020. This man’s assassination presented an opportunity to revive and perpetuate Shiite laments; thus, pictures of him lined city streets and adorned public squares as a warrior for God who had received the martyrdom he deserved. Indeed, Shiites throughout the world have circulated images of Imam al-Ḥusayn receiving Soleimani with an embrace that bespeaks their shared victimhood. What better way to promote the ideal of martyrdom, which Shiite leaders hold up as sacred to their followers, by proclaiming the state of blessedness that awaits every member of the sect who remains devoted to jihad and perseveres in blind obedience?⁴⁵

⁴³ The sound effects, colors and dramatic elements that mark politicized religious events contribute still further to creating the desired emotional effect in their audiences.

⁴⁴ Muḥaddithī, *Mawsū‘at ‘Āshūrā*, 386-387.

⁴⁵ Yaḥyā, “*al-Mazlūmiyya ‘ind al-shī‘a*.”

Shiite leaders have justified the intervention of Iran and Shiite militias in Syria as a means of protecting their holy shrines. Hence, their presence in Syria is concentrated in the Sayyida Zaynab neighbourhood south of Damascus, where such shrines are located. Similarly, the Houthis in Yemen justified the coup they staged in 2014 as necessary to reclaim the rights that had been taken from them in 1962 (in reference to the Yemeni revolution that established the republic and destroyed the Zaidi Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen [1918-1962 CE]). The Houthis speak of having suffered over fifty years of marginalization and political exclusion, complaining of the injustice that befell them during the six wars waged against them by Ali Abdullah Saleh (former president of Yemen) in Saada between 2004 and 2009. Despite the fact that these wars resulted from the Houthis' rebellion against the state and their seizure of taxes and government centres in the Saada Governorate in northern Yemen, the Houthis portrayed themselves as their victims.⁴⁶

Conclusion

As we have seen, the idea of victimhood has been one of the most conspicuous features of Shiite discourse throughout history. Indeed, it has formed the basis for an entire way of life within the Twelver Shiite sect. It constitutes a central theme of their thought, and figures prominently in Shiite religious and political mobilization. Shiite leaders have made use of historical events revolving around Saqīfat Banī Sā'ida, the land in Fadak, the killing of al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī and others in the service of their aims by citing them as the basis for the notion of victimhood.

The Shiites use educational methods whose purpose is to engrain a sense of victimhood in the minds of successive generations, the aim being to create a collective consciousness that is conducive to unquestioning submission to the edicts of their jurists and other ulema. The killing of al-Ḥusayn bin 'Alī is viewed as the most important basis for the idea of victimhood, which has shaped the behaviours of the Twelver Shiite community and its view of society and the world around it. Thus, the hostile behaviour of countries that have been established on the basis of Twelver Shiite thought is simply a natural outcome of educational processes that stir up hatred against those who oppose them by consolidating the idea of victimhood.

The Shiites sympathize with the oppressed individual who demands his rights but who, rather than being granted these rights, is resisted and killed. When the Shiites feel that someone was killed simply for defending his rights and refusing to live with humiliation, they empathize

⁴⁶ Ibid.

with him deeply, which is the important point. As al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī declared in Karbala, “I see death as nothing but happiness, and life with the oppressors as nothing but weariness and discontent.” This sense of grievance may intensify feelings of hatred and bitterness toward the oppressor. Similarly, the pride taken by an oppressed individual in his position and his refusal to concede may engender feelings of love and respect for his person in the hearts of others, who will then be motivated to follow his example and adopt his ideals, as people are naturally disposed to love those who do good to them and hate those who mistreat them.