Waking with Martyrs
An exegesis towards understanding & situating the filmmaker in a dramatically structured documentary

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ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

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Abstract

This exegesis offers an understanding of the practical PhD which led to the creation of the feature documentary film *Waking with Martyrs*, a film which follows an Iranian-Australian filmmaker’s journey into war sites of Iran. On the one hand, this study situates the personal, social, political and historical context which led to the construction of the journey and the film. While it examines the personal reasons for which the filmmaker embarked on the journey, it situates Iranian war sites as new sites of pilgrimages and highlights its political and social significance in Iran. It highlights the importance of these war pilgrimages within a religious and political landscape, not only arguing for their political importance in Iran, but also for their significance in defining parts of Iranian identity. The study examines how the journey offers insight into one of Iran’s least understood pro-government groups who embark on such kinds of journeys. It further examines the way the film could be seen as an agent of shifting perspectives and changes, not only for the filmmaker, but also for the subjects in the film, and the viewing audiences.

On the other hand, this study situates the film through theories of documentary, examining in detail the processes, which led to the particular creation of the film. It examines the film within the larger scope of diasporic Iranian filmic landscape about the war and argues how this film could be seen as contributing to a new understanding of the situation within Iran.
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Introduction:

How it all started

“Our nation’s leader is that 13 year old boy [Hussein Fahmideh] who wrapped grenades around his waist and throws himself under the enemy tank to save his comrades.” – Ayatollah Khomeini

I was born in Iran, soon after the Islamic revolution of 1979 and at the height of Iran’s war with Iraq, which lasted between 1980-1988. Like many children my age, I grew up exposed to the loudly preached ideologies of the revolution and the war through the media and throughout my education. It is no wonder then that in hindsight, I could say it was the above words that I heard as a small child growing up, that many years later ignited in me the spark that became the genesis of my film *Waking with Martyrs* which I shot in 2009 and completed as part of my PhD project in 2012. What Khomeini was talking about was the widely known and repeated story of the self-sacrifice of a thirteen year old boy who at the height of the war and in the absence of Rocket Propeller Grenade launchers, had made the sudden decision to wrap a belt-full of grenades around himself and run in front of the tank to stop the enemy from approaching their barricades. His bravery had set back the enemy by days.

As a child, I was deeply affected by Hussein Fahmideh’s story. I dreamed of turning thirteen, the legal age for being drafted, and going to war. While I waited to grow up, I would often play under our dining table, imagining the table to be a tank, and myself, like Hussein, running full force towards it with grenades around me. To the eyes of everyone else, however, I was only a small boy wearing a swimming float with badly made awkward-shaped plastic grenades - available to buy at any toy store - that I would spend a long time tying to the float with found ribbons and shoe laces; more a danger to our dining table and my own head, than to anything or anyone else.

Looking back today, who knows if Hussein Fahmideh was a real person or a mythical creation constructed by the leaders of the nation to promote and invoke certain values...
and feelings in people, especially the youth, to get them to the war front. After all, when I think about it today, a name like Hussein Fahmideh carries with it certain connotations that touch deeply the values embedded in Iranian religious, social and cultural belief systems. Hussein,\(^2\) after all, was the name of prophet Mohammad’s second grandson, and the most important leader of the Shi’i Muslim world who sacrificed himself to save and uphold Islam; and Fahmideh, in Persian, means ‘wise.’ Added to this, that he happened to be thirteen, just the age when the youth could be drafted, it now seems highly unlikely that he existed. While this combination of facts, to me today, might sound unreal or highly constructed, to me as a child and teenager, Hussein Fahmideh was as real a boy as the boy next door with whom I played soccer. But he was also a true role model for me. He embodied the great value of self-sacrifice for the greater good, a value highly and overtly embedded into every aspect of Iranian education and media system back then.

While the myth of Hussein Fahmideh affected me at the social level, my attraction to Fahmideh’s story was heightened by my personal connection to the war. When the war had broken out, my father, Nasser Palangi, who was then a twenty four year old art student, had decided to travel to the occupied city of Khorramshar in the southwest of Iran for two weeks to see the situation for himself. Khorramshar used to be Iran’s wealthiest port city but it was also the first point in Iraq’s attack on Iran. By the time my father had arrived there, the whole city had been occupied and nothing had been left of the city but rubble and some few hundred civilians defending the city with their lives. With Iraq’s quick invasion, the Iranian government did not have the chance to send professional military in time, leaving the city in disarray. While they had quickly moved the women, children and the elderly into the safety of other areas, the capable young men had taken the defence of the city into their own hands until trained military could arrive.

When my father had reached the city, so moved had he been by the situation that his two weeks soon turned into six months. During this time, he lived in the Ja-me mosque, the city’s only fully standing building where soldiers gathered to pray on

\(^2\) For more information on Hussein, refer to later chapters of this study for the significance of his role in Shi’i Islam. For further reference to Shi’ism in Islam see Moojan Momen’s An Introduction to Shi’i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism, New York: Yale University Press, 1985 or Mohammad Ali Shomali’s Shi’i Islam: Origins, Faith & Practices, London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies, 2003.
regular basis and sought a safe haven. But my father was not a soldier, and he was not prepared to pick up a gun and shoot at another person. Instead, inspired by the situation, he wanted to record what he witnessed for everyone else to see. But, given that the city had been almost completely destroyed, he had limited materials. While he quickly filled up his scrapbooks with some thousands of sketches, he wanted to work on a larger scale. Without any artist paint or material, he had found some car paint in the rubble and began painting what he saw of the war on the walls of the mosque. These formed five large panels that stood out in their colourful motifs against the dusty and crumbled cityscape. These murals became the only sign of life in the deserted and dusty city. Soon, they would become an iconic site of the city’s resistance and eventual victory.

While my father left the murals behind soon after they were completed, the psychological consequences of the war, however, remained with him long after he had left the area and the war had ended. Although he had not physically engaged in the war, he had seen its consequences first hand. He had had to bury many people with his own hands and a few of his own friends had died in his arms. I remember, growing up, the war was an everyday aspect of our lives even long after it had ended. For years my father dealt with, told, and painted only the devastating scenes that he had witnessed. As we watched he filled canvas after canvas with subjects of the war, of those who had died, and of those who had survived. However, what was fascinating was that his paintings unlike some of the depictions of the war by European artists, they were not of the gore and blood associated with the war; rather, they almost always depicted a sense of surrender, of spiritual serenity, reflecting the Shi‘i Islamic belief of martyrdom in defence of one’s belief, as the highest spiritual honour. Interestingly enough, years later I learned how my father always painted me and my mother into his paintings, myself as a grown young man, both appearing as highly spiritual and as a foot soldier of the war against evil.

In hindsight, it was perhaps this very personal exposure to the war that made me more susceptible to social influences and glorifications of the war. For instance, others who grew up in the same society and era, but who had less personal and direct exposure to this aspect of the war, were not really affected by media and educational glorification of it that followed. It was the combination of these two that made me wrap floats and plastic grenades and dream of becoming the next Hussein Fahmideh, and perhaps it
has been the resonances of those memories, which led to my eventual journey into making *Waking with Martyrs* and doing this study.

However, by the time I was old enough to be drafted, the war ended. With the city of Khorramshahr and the whole area in recovery, people busied themselves with the efforts to rebuild their lives. But as the city was rebuilt, the murals became iconic, forming a great cultural and historical site for the celebration of Iran’s resistance against Saddam and his army. The large murals, five panels, five meters in height each and two metres wide, became very important because in contrast to the grey destroyed landscape that lay outside of the mosque, they were the only colourful and fully standing sites left in the city. Most soldiers who fought in that area had taken pictures by the murals, sending them back to their families and friends through the unreliable postal system of the time, telling them that they were okay and well. Consequently, many across Iran had seen images of their loved ones in front of the murals in treasured family albums. The murals had become the place where the last living images of many soldiers were taken. As the years passed, the murals continued to be a significant part of the history of the area. Parents, spouses, and children of those martyred would now travel to the region to see the spot where their loved ones had taken their last images with a smile.

By then, as we tried to continue with our lives and as my father was recovering from the consequences of what he had witnessed, the city of Khorramshahr and the celebrated murals of the war, some 800 kilometres away from Tehran and our busy lives, gradually became only a distant dream. By then, not only did I live with the continual dream of going to a war that did not exist, but also of taking pictures in front of and seeing my father’s murals. But before I ever got a chance to visit Khorramshahr we left Iran and migrated to Australia and my father’s monumental contribution remained only accessible to me through pictures, videos and other people’s experiences.

Yet, even though we left Iran, over the years, the attractions of the murals continued to grow. They became famous, and featured in almost every art book about the Iran-Iraq war, not only within Iran but also internationally with several scholars from
France and America working on them and my father’s other artwork. Similarly, the Iranian government saw the significance of the murals as upholding and representing the values of the war. While a museum of war was built in Khorramshahr, and my father asked to be its director, the murals were also to be restored. In a celebratory gesture in mid 2000s, my father was invited and asked to restore the now thirty year old murals which had begun to chip and fade under the hot southern sun of Iran. But even then, I was not able to accompany my father on the restoration journey.

The Need to Travel and Understand

It was only years later, in 2009, three months before the controversial Iranian presidential elections, when I was in Iran for a different project that I was presented with the opportunity to travel to the region. During my stay in Iran, a distant cousin, Abdullah, told me about a state-run program called Rahian-e Nour—which literally translates as Pilgrimage of Light—that for the last several years had been taking people on a tour or a pilgrimage of the sites of the war front. Every year, around Iranian New year in March, millions of people are taken from across the country to visit and experience these battle sites. During these few days the pilgrims glimpse into some of the difficulties that the martyrs and soldiers had experienced. They sleep in the same shelters on thin blankets and are woken up to the sound of machine guns in the middle of night, and they follow the same rituals as the soldiers. Added to this, to experience the actual fights, some battles are recreated where pilgrims walk the same path that the martyrs did in the middle of the night to reach a certain site where in controlled explosions bombs blow up nearby and soldiers replay certain events. En route to these sites, the caravans would also stop at the museum of war and at my father’s murals in Khorramshahr.

Abdullah and his wife were organisers of one of the caravans that took thirty people every year and they were keen to take me along on that year’s trip. Hearing this, I was torn between skepticism and a chance to finally experience the war front. After all, the intentions of a state-run program that honored the sites of a war, the end of which was

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by now already over twenty years old, as holy sites of pilgrimage seemed politically and ideologically dubious to me. Yet, I was drawn to the possibility of experiencing what I had dreamed of as a child and to renew my memories of that era. More importantly I would get a chance to visit the murals. Despite this internal conflict I decided to embark on the trip.

But my decision to go on the pilgrimage was as much fueled by my childhood desires to see the war-front as it was by a need to understand the intentions of this type of journey. As I learned more about the trip, I realized that the majority of the people who went on it were from similar socio-political backgrounds to my cousin and his wife, and avid supporters of the current regime and president, with whom I had no socio-political connection and whose perspectives I could not understand. But, since they were mostly from the group of radical people who ruled the Iranian society, I hoped to understand their point of view through interaction with them during the trip.

When I had the idea to embark on the trip, as a filmmaker I wanted to record the events that occurred. But beyond a simple recording, as someone who lived outside of Iran, my intention was to offer an understanding and glimpse of the population who went on this trip for my non-Iranian audience. Added to this was a sense of urgency and timeliness of the film. When I was in Iran making the film, we were on the cusp of a new election. This election, as everyone assumed, and we later learned, was crucial in the future of Iran’s political and social direction. Although, at the time I was making this film, the rift between the opposing parties was not so clearly defined, we were beginning to see attitudes and the expression of ideas that pointed towards this difference in ideologies. These shifting perspectives contributed to my decision in making this film. I wanted to explore, and understand, the shifting nature of Iranian politics and people’s attitudes through this film. In particular, I felt that this film would offer an alternative perspective to my audiences about those pro-government groups. Here, in explaining my intentions, I find Bill Nichols’ introduction to his *Representing Reality* most inspiring. He writes,

The pleasure and appeal of documentary film lies in its ability to make us see timely issues in need of attention, literally. We see views of the world, and what they put before us are social issues and cultural values, current problems and possible solutions, actual
situations and specific ways of representing them. The linkage between documentary and the historical world is the most distinctive feature of this tradition. Utilizing the capacities of sounds recoding and cinematography to reproduce the physical appearance of things, documentary film contributes to the formation of popular memory. It proposes perspectives on and interpretations of historic issues, processes, and events. (1991, p. ix)

When embarking on making this film, my intention too, was to utilize the medium of the documentary film to contribute to the formation of popular memory about Iran, particularly about that specific group of people who committed themselves so whole-heartedly to that journey. While during and after the elections, and even from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s first electoral role as president in 2005, the West has been following views from the opposing parties and people, there have been almost no films, stories, or glimpses into the perspectives of those who are followers of the current system made for Western viewing. The few films that have been made on this topic do not take us inside and rather address the issues as topical and from an outsider perspective. For instance Peter Lom’s 2009 Letters to the President is one such film that takes the viewers on a journey across Iran through the millions of letters that the Iranian population send to populist president Ahmadinejad. While the film does give some insight, it is not evenhanded and according to the synopsis on the film’s websites it concludes: ‘how promises and propaganda almost always kindle the sometimes desperate hope of the poor.’

On the one hand, such films that offer an outsider’s perspective provide very simplistic understanding of the situation in Iran. On the other hand, other films that were beginning to secretly come out from inside Iran showed the situation from the perspective of those living in the country. For example Sarem Yadegari’s Plain Clothes Agents (2011) is also a documentary and tells of the events from the perspective of one of the Iranian revolutionary guards. Told from this perspective, this film, like its outsider counterpart, fails to offer a balanced perspective into the events. The only film about pro-Iranian government groups made outside of Iran is Mehran Tamadon’s documentary Basidji (2009) which, similar to my own film, follows a
group of pro-government people across a Rahian-e Nour journey. I will deal at length with this film in relation to my own in later chapters of this study.

In deciding to make this film I felt that I occupied an ambivalent space that could somehow offer a more balanced perspective about Iran. By this, I mean that I was not pulled or pushed by any specific social, political or cultural agenda, or belief that sometimes comes by living or growing up in one location. As an outsider who had grown up abroad, I knew the Western culture, the interests of Western media and audiences and how to frame the concepts for their understanding. But as an insider who was also familiar with the language and culture of Iran, I also had first hand experiences that could add depth and a new dimension to my current outsider position. At the same time I did not want to be contributing to stereotypes and sensationalism that exists about Iran. I knew I had the responsibility of being as evenhanded as possible and relatively unbiased in my representation of Iran. It was in this space that I felt I had the resources and required access to contribute to understanding of the situation from a different and unique perspective. In making this film, as a filmmaker, I saw myself as contributing to what Hamid Naficy ‘accented cinema,’ a term he has coined which is aesthetic response to the experience of displacement through exile, migration or diaspora. This type of cinema according to him is constructed by filmmakers who live and work in countries other than their country of origin. (Accented Cinema p.11) This type of filmmaking, as does my film, reflects what he calls ‘double consciousness’ (p.22) of the creators.

Access here plays a significant part in having the ability to offer a significantly different perspective. While being an Iranian I already had an insider perspective, this was not enough. As we know even within Iranian society and culture there are many different layers of inclusivity and exclusivity. For me, it was only my personal and familial connection with Abdullah that gave me the access necessary to embark on, and be able to film such a trip. As I later learned, the people with whom I traveled were extremely guarded about their ideas, and it was a true privilege for me to have such open access to their ideas and opinions. It was this insider position, as Abdullah’s cousin, that made Abdullah and the rest of the group open up to me personally and share their true emotions and beliefs throughout the film. I see this access as a privilege of being an insider and as a significant point in offering a unique perspective. In addition, having my father who could recount the living memories of
that period, also offered a rare point of access. His input could also add an extra layer of information and provide further insight. This was crucial because as a first hand witness could shed new light of understanding of the war, while helping me through my journey in tracing his footsteps in visiting and understanding the murals.

This film and study, therefore, were conceived of as an agent for changing perspectives in myself, for my subject and audiences. Although the ultimate shift of perspective as the result of this film and study might seem obvious in the viewer, there were many different layers of shifting that ultimately lead to that change. As much as about being an agent of change for my viewers, the process of making this also led to a change in me, where at one point I realised as much as being the filmmaker, I had also changed and become the subject of my own film. Furthermore, as the subject who occupied an inside/outside position, both in the film as unseen subject/filmmaker and as an Iranian/Australian, my role and the changes that occurred in me play an integral part in other shifts that occurs as the result of the film, and ultimately for my audience. For example, my presence, the process of filming and the depiction of the film, leads to a change in the actual subjects of the film with whom I interact in the process of making the film, in various degrees. It is ultimately this change which plays a significant part in the way the audience’s perspective shifts about the subject/s of the film. Considering the above then, my aim throughout this exegesis is manifold. Based generally on an analysis of the role of the filmmaker and shifting perspectives in and through documentary film, this study examines the following.

Drawing on Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, and David MacDougall’s theories of subjectivity and the role of the filmmaker and subjectivity in a documentary film, this study examines the shift that occurs in me as a filmmaker where as much as being the filmmaker I also become an invisible subject in the film. As Lucien Taylor observes in his introduction to David MacDougall’s *Transcultural Cinema* ‘filmmaker and subject are bound up with each other, as inextricably, in the end, as the self is with the world.’ (1998, p. 12) Throughout this study, I tap into MacDougall’s arguments in *Transcultural Cinema* about the role of the filmmaker both as the subject and in relation to other subjects in the film. MacDougall asks a series of interesting questions in relation to the filmmaker and the subjects being filmed. He asks,
Whose story [is] it? … By what means can we distinguish the structures we believe are in our films from the structure that are discerned in them, often without our knowing, by their subjects? And is a film in any sense the same object for those who made it, for whom it may have the status of discourse, and for those who in passing have left their physical traces upon it? (1998, p.154)

Here, I draw on MacDougall’s questions and apply it to my own experience in making this film. By recollecting my own personal impression of the events of the trip, as a subject who embarked on this pilgrimage, and through recounting my interactions with the other subjects in the film, I ask the same questions. Is it my story or the story of those who we see in the film? To what extent is the trip about the subjects and to what degree does it tell my story? How does, for instance, the trip fulfill my childhood dreams, teach me about that section of the Iranian society and the current socio-political systems of Iran? How does it change my perspective about what is going on in Iran currently? In essence, by drawing on MacDougall’s proposition I examine the extent to which my perspective shifted from being the filmmaker to being a subject in the film.

Then, I consider the insider/outsider position of a diasporic filmmaker such as myself and the significance of that shift. To position myself as such a filmmaker, I draw on diasporic theories of filmmaking. In doing so, I specifically focus on concepts offered by these theorists that address the insider/outsider position of the filmmaker. Here, I draw on Trinh T. Minh-ha’s argument in her essay ‘No Master Territories,’ where she asks,

where should the dividing line between outsider and insider stop? How should it be defined? By skin color (no blacks should make films on yellows)? By language…? By nation…? By geography (in the North-South setting, East is East and East can’t meet West)? Or by political affinity (Third World on Third World counter First and Second Worlds?) What about those with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities? (1995, p. 217)

By examining my position as the insider/outsider filmmaker, and situating myself at the cross-section of two sets of cultural identities and affiliations, who claims
authority and insider/outsider status in both Australian and Iranian cultures, I analyse how my role as the filmmaker allows for shifting perspectives. This in particular I examine in relation to other shifting perspectives, namely those of the subjects in the film and of the viewers. By considering my relationship to both the subjects in the film, with whom to a certain degree I identify, and my mostly non-Iranian viewers, with whom I also identify to a certain degree, I examine how my insider/outsider position leads to shifts in perspective in both the subjects of the film and in my viewers.

To examine this above noted shift in the subjects of the film, I draw on theories of identity, subjectivity and visibility, such as those offered by Kelly Oliver in her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, and examine how through my engagement as the outside/insider, my depiction of them on film, their representation to audiences leads to a change in the way my subjects view themselves and are ultimately viewed. Oliver argues that ‘subordination, oppression, and subjectification’ damage and distort one’s sense of identity and selfhood as they ‘affect a person at the level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent’ (2001, p. 7). This has the ability to ‘render individuals or groups of people as other by objectifying them, [and] objectification undermines subjectivity [since] objects are not subjects’ (p. 7) Oliver goes on to argue that one way that subjectivity can be regained is through the process of bearing witness and becoming a speaking subject about the oppression and discrimination. She believes that this process creates a sense of understanding and recognition between the narrator/speaking subject, and the viewer/reader of the narratives. This recognition, she believes, has the power to break down stereotypes and cycles of oppression by constructing a sense of human connection and recognition of similarities between the subject/viewer. Drawing on Oliver’s line of thought I argue that many people in Iran, especially those of the highly religious minority, and those who still believe in the cause of the revolution, have been objectified and their voices silenced in the West. They have come to be represented in a sort of fanatic stereotypical representation associated with all Iran and Iranians. Here, I examine how in my role as the insider/outsider filmmaker who has a certain degree of authority in each culture, I construct a space through which these people are becoming speaking subjects and can be seen on screen. This, I argue, ultimately, creates a kind of human
recognition between the viewers/subjects of the film and leads to a shift in perspective in the way Iran and Iranians are viewed by my Western viewers.

In addition, I believe that this process operates on what Bakhtin calls a ‘double-voiced discourse,’ which ‘serves two speakers at the time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author.’ (1981, p. 324) The double-voiced discourse in the film occurs at the intersection of my experiences as the filmmaker, and my relationship with the subjects in the film. As I will examine later in this study, I gradually came to realise this double-voiced discourse when I recognised that I was as much the subject of my subjects and that we were both subjects of the film with ‘two voices…dialogically interrelated.’(p.324) But, interestingly enough, as we will see later in this study, it was only through reflection on the film, in the process of editing and in the process of writing up of this study, that I realised that a ‘potential dialogue is embedded…a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages.’ (p.325) It is this dialogue that causes the shift in perspective. This study thus takes the reader through the many shifting perspectives mentioned above in relation to my role as the filmmaker and in relation to the subjects of my film.

This study also highlights the significance of my film as contributing towards new understandings of the Taziyeh, a religious play, and its link to the Rahian-e Nour phenomenon. While on the one hand, it does this by historicising and contextualising the link between Tazieyh and Rahian-e Nour, on the other hand, it examines its contribution to the understanding of each of the two phenomena, arguing that this film could indeed be seen as adding a new element to the existing landscape of links between the two.

Additionally, this study situates my film within the landscape of existing films made by diasporic Iranian filmmakers. It will do so by offering a wide perspective of the filmic landscape by Iranian and non-Iranian documentary filmmakers who are making films about Iran. This contextualisation not only offers a relative understanding of the current situation, but it also aids the explanation of my editorial decisions and processes. This study will conclude with a step-by-step review of my personal decisions and choices in the process of editing and their relevance to my role as the filmmaker and the shifts in perspectives that I wanted to convey and represent. What
needs to made clear, however, that this study, although examining a social and political phenomenon however, is not claiming to be an anthropological or ethnographic thesis. Furthermore, although trauma and memory are always elements associated with the war, especially for those are left to pick up the pieces, neither my film nor the thesis is an exploration of this concept. While this study deals with the memory or war, and examines its legacy, it does not concern itself with in depth study of the consequences of war as a traumatic experience for individuals.

However, before I can set out in any kind of analysis, I find it imperative to set up the context and situation of Rahian-e Nour and the significance of its various elements both inside and outside of Iran. Chapter One therefore, contextualises the war and the phenomenon of the Rahian-e Nour as a newly formed War Pilgrimage in Iran.
Chapter One:

Introduction to Rahian-e Nour

Given that the Iran-Iraq war is less than half a century old, war pilgrimage is a relatively new phenomenon in Iran, with a very short history. However, elsewhere around the world, such war pilgrimages are a known activity with some considerable history. This chapter sets out to examine Iranian war pilgrimage in relation to a historical and worldly context. While it will begin with an analysis of some characteristics of war pilgrimages from around the world, it will continue by situating the Iranian version of the war pilgrimage in relation to what is normally characterised and expected of these pilgrimages. It will contextualise Rahian-e Nour, its history and importance in Iranian society and identity, particularly in relation to already existing war pilgrimages around the world, and examine the internal situation in Iran and the importance of Rahian-e Nour within the Iranian society as a new kind of narrative of national identity that is shaping and maintaining a certain form of Iranian Islamic identity based on the events of Ashura, a religious event which will be explained shortly, and the legacy of the Iran-Iraq war.

Here, I am most interested in the relationship between the historical myths and the politics of identity that is shaping the current Iranian society and Rahian-e Nour’s contribution to this discourse. To understand this, I draw on Stuart Hall’s concept of the relationship of identity and history. As Hall argues,

> cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position… (1993, p. 226)

It is while considering this politics of identity and identity formation that I position and analyse how the historical implications of the myth of the battle of Karbala, the Iran-Iraq war and Rahian-e Nour are contributing to the formation and propagation of a particular Iranian Islamic identity.
What I am most interested in this context are the performance narratives employed throughout Iranian history that reinforce certain politics of identity. Here, in particular, I look at the traditional plays of Tazieyeh as a form of participatory theatrical performance that recount the narrative of Ashura, and consider how the symbolism of this tradition has now been translated into the context of the Iran-Iraq war and performed at the battle sites of Rahian-e Nour. By drawing on Tazieyeh and considering its highly performative aspect, and its essential timelessness in that it can transform itself to reflect the situation of any era, I will consider how Rahian-e Nour can be seen as a modern interpretation of Taziyeh. By drawing on this I will analyse how the narrative of Taziye in, in the shape of the performance that is taking place at Rahian-e Nour, has continued and been transformed to serve as propaganda in the current political situation of the country. By placing this performance within a historical context, I will look at the signs and symbols, the language and theoretical performance of the pilgrimage, to demonstrate the importance of this trip as a significant cultural activity for the maintenance and construction of a new narrative of Iranian identity that is in line with the current demands of the regime.

Towards a Historical Understanding:

According to Kevin Blackburn war pilgrimages are a ‘phenomenon of the twentieth century, produced by the two world wars that were fought on an unprecedented scale and in which millions lost their lives.’ (2001, p. 2) He dates the origins of these pilgrimages to when ‘after these wars, veterans and relatives of the war dead started—in numbers no less unprecedented—to undertake what they called pilgrimages, visiting the graves of loved ones and former comrades at far-away battlefields.’ (p. 2) These pilgrimages which commenced after World War I, began with ‘tour companies…offer[ing] trips back to the battlefields and war cemeteries in France.’ (p. 2) To date, such pilgrimages are still popular among groups of people who have lost loved ones during the World Wars. For instance, there are still tours that take visitors onto battlefields of World Wars I and II across Europe.

Similarly many travel to Singapore each year to honor the Prisoners of War of World War II at the Changi Murals in the Changi Chapel. The Changi Murals are five panels of paintings painted by the sickly British Prisoner of War Bombardier Stanley Warren
during his imprisonment in Singapore during the Japanese occupation of Singapore in World War II. These murals are an interesting site of comparison for my research. Warren painted these murals inside the barracks where the British Prisoners of Wars were kept under extremely bad health conditions. Like my father would do many years later, Warren too used his opportunity in the war to paint magnificent images with significant spiritual energy. As my father would do, Warren too used any sort of material he could find to continue painting, including using whatever paint he could find, and even using human hair for makeshift brushes for constructing details. (See Humpherys, 2007, p. 197) Similarly, like my father’s images, Warren’s murals too became a significant site of spiritual connection with the war and for the survivors, and just as my father was to be invited years later to restore the paintings, so was Warren. I highlight this example here to demonstrate the significance of the marked remembrance of the war through painting as a recurring phenomenon that also marks and highlights the Iranian approach to the way the war is remembered. I use this example to demonstrate the similarities of the types of war site pilgrimages from the World Wars to the Iranian war.

War pilgrimage is even prevalent in Australia where people still honour war sites at Gallipoli in Turkey where the Australian troops fought in the First World War. Similar to other sites of war, each year during Australian and New Zealand Army Corps Day (ANZAC Day) (25th April) many travel to the site to remember and honour those who died. Like other war sites, Gallipoli has also become a spiritual site of remembrance and celebration of the bravery of the men who fought in the war.

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4 There is a feature film made about the murals called Changi Murals by Boo Junfeng in 2006 that follows Warren’s journey in the process of painting the murals.


6 There is numerous material about Gallipoli and its significance. For a filmic rendition of the events, see Peter Weir’s film Gallipoli (1981). There is also a large resource of audio visual material. See for instance the site for Australian Screen (http://aso.gov.au/titles/collections/gallipoli-on-film/) for a large audio-visual resource on the subject. Similarly, there have been numerous books and scholarly articles about the battle and the battle site as a site of pilgrimage. For instance see Les Carolyn (2002) John Masefield (2012), Peter Hart (2011) and Alan Moorehead’s (1988) books of the same title Gallipoli, among others that address various aspects of this site. For an analysis of the site as a site of pilgrimage see Garrie Hutchinson’s Gallipoli: The Pilgrimage Guide (2007) and Mat McLachlan’s Gallipoli: The Battlefield Guide (2010).
It is on this similarity of battlegrounds as sites of pilgrimages that I later draw in order to argue how the Iranian battle sites have also been transformed into sites of holy pilgrimage. However, before I need to present the reasons for the transformation of battle sites to sites of pilgrimage and for their continued popularity throughout history.

There are many reasons as to why these war pilgrimages have become and remained popular over the decades. On the one hand, people often visit these sites because these spaces give them a sense of nationalist and patriotic pride, where individuals had given up what is most precious to them, their lives, to fight for their country and its people. This is why, according to David Lloyd, these sites became sacrosanct because they were etched in the collective memory of the visitors' home country as places where young men had sacrificed their lives for their nation. To the pilgrims, the ground was "sanctified" because their relatives or comrades had fallen there. (1998, p. 13)

Often there is a lot of national and historical pride attached to battles, the sites, and the individual soldiers who fought for the safekeeping of their country or an ideal.

If these kinds of touristic activities are conducted during the lifetime of the veterans, they take on a new celebratory meaning, whereby real life heroes are honoured and remembered, forming a concrete sense of national and patriotic pride. As Michael Karen et al. put forth, ‘nothing makes war veterans happier than groups of school children showing interest in the artefacts exhibited or lectures given [on] war.’ (2009, p. 1) This happiness, they argue, ‘stems from a desire of the veteran to share their military heritage with future generations,’ and has a variety of reasons including:

the obligation to fallen comrades, the need to make sense of traumatic experience, the willingness to revive the excitement of one’s youth, and the sense of mission, sacrifice, bravery, comradeship, abolition of class barriers, devotion to a higher cause, and ingenuity. (p.1)

This kind of connection between the veterans and the values they uphold and the younger generation is essential in a nation state since as Karen et al. argue,
‘traditionally, these virtues were considered building blocks of the nation state.’ (p.1) These interactions, particularly between the young and old generations, according to Karen,

encouraged select veterans’ groups to turn their war experience into “social memory,” defined as “as artificial recollection of some experiences by some groups, institutions, or individuals in society organized according to recognizable scripts and having a moral dimension.” (p.1)

This is extremely important in upholding a kind of nationalistic and patriotic pride. As Karen argues, ‘the experience recollected along a moral script by military forces allowed the nation state to endow itself with the virtues exhibited in the veterans’ legacies.’ (p.1)

Given the nationalistic and patriotic significance that individuals and communities associate with these sites and combatants, often times the governments and politicians too pick up on their importance for maintaining a sense of national pride. This in effect can lead to a kind of myth making about the region and about those involved in the war. As Warwick Frost argues, it is as the result of this combined interest that these sites become more than contested sites of battle, instead becoming pertinent in ‘the making of myths that become important in shaping how societies (or the government of those societies) like to see themselves.’ (qtd. in Ryan 2007, p. 2) One only needs to consider the Australian example of Gallipoli to understand the importance of these sites and the Australian Government’s and politicians’ involvement in the process of national myth and identity making. While nearly a century has passed since the events of Gallipoli, even to date politicians draw from it and refer to it as being and playing an important site for the formation of Australian national identity. For instance very recently, in 2012, the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard gave a speech in Gallipoli on the day of its remembrance, where according to News.com reporter, Steve Scott, ‘our national identity was forged in 1915.’ (2012) Her speech is telling for the way Gallipoli has contributed to the Australian sense of national identity and myth, and the pride that is associated with the heroic sacrifices of the soldiers. She tells her audience,
We come back. As we will always come back. To give the best and only gift that can matter anymore – our remembrance. We remember what the Anzacs did in war. And for what they did to shape our nation in peace. In this place, they taught us to regard Australia and nowhere else as home....This is the legend of Anzac, and it belongs to every Australian. Not just those who trace their origins to the early settlers but those like me who are migrants and who freely embrace the whole of the Australian story as their own. (Scott, News.com)

Gillard’s speech not only marks the significance of the battle at Gallipoli in the Australian national sense of pride but it also highlights the significance of embracing of war heroes and the celebration of war heroism for political purposes. Her use of the word ‘legend’ to address the Anzacs indicates the sense of timelessness and universality of this experience for every Australian to share. War sites, associated with this legend, then, are no longer simply places where soldiers had died for their country, but they also become sites of political contestation, and as we will see in case of Iran, in some places more overtly so than others.

Aside from being sites that are often politically charged where various politicians and governments can draw on the nationalistic sense of pride that exists in and around the idea of those sites and the fallen soldiers, usually across the board, war pilgrimages are favored by local governments because of their tourism benefits. As Bruce Prideaux argues in his article ‘Echoes of War: Battlefield Tourism,’ battlefields are paradoxical spaces. Whereas at one time they were the ultimate space of horror and bloodshed for a nation, sometimes a space of pride or national defeat, in times of peace those horrific spaces become places where people can then travel to in search of adventure. As Prideaux puts it, ‘where combatants once fell, visitors now reflect, question, experience sadness or even express gladness.’ (2007, p. 17) As he argues, the interest in these battlefields as touristic sites has led to a new subcategory of tourism, named as ‘dark tourism’ in which visitors are engaged on many different emotional and psychological and even physical levels of experience that more commercial touristic sites may not provide. As Prideaux puts it, battlefields, more than almost any other form of touristic experience, create
deep emotional feelings. Battlefields are poignant reminders of humanity’s inability to live at peace with neighbors and a statement of the selfishness of individuals and nations who seek to take what is not theirs through aggression. Moreover, they are also a testimony to those who make a stand against tyranny and injustice, sometimes at the expense of their own lives. Battlefields are also reminders of the past and for some are the places where national pride was born or national disgrace was suffered. (2007, p.18)

That is why these sites have the ability to draw on the emotions, whether personal or national, of the visitors, engaging them on many different emotional levels during their touristic endeavors. To achieve this, sometimes organizers and managers of these sites and tours also create a more holistic experience for visitors beyond museums and trail walks. As Prideaux notes, battlefield sites often ‘include new experiences such as re-enactments, alternative histories, and the addition of sites that have an association with military activity.’ (p.18) He provides examples from the US Civil War battlefields and the re-enactments that took place at those sites, demonstrating how they led to an encouragement of similar re-enactments nation wide. Similarly, he also puts forward the example of how the small of village of Cambridge in New Zealand, celebrates Armistices Day with a range of activities including re-enactments of actual battles, and also alternative battles that would have a more favorable outcome for the New Zealand troops. (p.18)

Inevitably this kind of tourism brings in favourable economic conditions to the region. As Chris Ryan argues in the introduction to Battlefield Tourism, ‘this kind of tourism is no different from other forms for attractions that bring out-of-region visitors, and also attract revenues and possible job creations that might not otherwise exist.’ (2007, p.14) For example, Ryan examines how ‘Red Tourism’ in China, where visitors are taken on tours of revolutionary sites in remote regions, has contributed to the production of a new economy for the remote regions of the country. As he puts it ‘the improvement of economic wellbeing of rural China is fully consistent with the ideals of the Chinese communist revolution, and the use of tourism to achieve this is thus understandable.’ (p.15) He then goes on to demonstrate how the newly incorporated transport links for the purpose of accessing these remotes sites, not only brings in new
revenues into the remote regions, but also open up these remote regions to the rest of the nation, leading to their redevelopment. As he puts it the very existence of these new lines of transport, ‘opens up parts of China previously more difficult to access, and thus the rural parts are brought into mainstream of economic life.’ (p.15) Furthermore, the emotional engagement of the visitors with the region makes it more likely for them to spend money on memorabilia merchandise, as well as making charitable contributions to the region. This, as we will see later in this thesis, has been extremely significant in Iran’s war pilgrimage sites.

However, aside from the above reasons for which battlefield tourism has continued to remain of interest around the world, there is another very significant reason why people are attracted to return to battle sites as sites of pilgrimage. This has to do with a kind of religious association to the battle sites. David Blackburn believes that these pilgrimages have ‘a close relationship with the rituals of religious pilgrimages.’ (2001, p.3) John Urry also draws on the comparison between tourism and pilgrimage, arguing how such sites can become associated with a kind of religious pilgrimage. As he puts it, ‘both the pilgrim and the tourist engage in “worship” of shrines which are sacred, albeit in different ways, and as a result gain some kind of uplifting experience.’ (qtd in Blackburn, p. 5) Urry draws the conclusion that tourism and pilgrimages both involve essentially the same type of ‘gaze’ upon a ‘sacred object,’ in which case the battle sites could be gazed upon as sacred spaces. (qtd in Blackburn, p. 5)

Added to this is the kind of spiritual attribute attached to the ‘altruistic’ acts of the fallen heroes. This experience is more highlighted for those who have had some sort of personal connection to the site, for example if one of their loved ones or friends had been a fallen soldier in those sites. For them these sites have personal relevance. This is why David Lloyd argues that there was a similarity between a religious or spiritual pilgrimage and visiting of battle sites. As he argues, ‘many travelers felt that in visiting the battlefields or war memorials they were coming to a sacred place’ rather than just stopping by the local attractions. Lloyd concludes that ‘tourism and pilgrimages represented alternate and overlapping modes of perceiving a journey,’ and that ‘both forms of travel were often seen as having a moral purpose.’ (1998, p. 218) Needless to say often times these travels overlap and take on a wholly religious
perspective. And as we will see, the new Rahian-e Nour pilgrimages in Iran are prime examples of this kind of cross over.

While war pilgrimages have been an ongoing activity since World War I across Europe and other countries, in Iran these pilgrimages, attended *en masse*, are a new phenomenon, emerging three decades after the Iran-Iraq war ended. In what follows, I will give a brief history of the war and a history of war pilgrimage in Iran, arguing for its similarity to other war pilgrimages around the world. I also delve further into the unique aspects of this phenomenon, examining its development in relation to the Iranian socio-historical, religious, and political context.

**A brief history of Iran-Iraq War:**

To understand the Iran-Iraq war, we need to understand the historical situation of the region leading into the war, starting with the Iranian revolution. Although discontent against the Pahlavi monarchy had been simmering for several decades, beginning in 1978 the Iranian people began to protest *en masse* against the Iranian regime publically. While there were a multitude of reasons for the uprising against the 2,500 year old monarchy that had ruled Iran, including economical concerns, social gaps, Iran’s foreign policy, and a lack of human rights and freedom of speech, one of the main motivating factors of the revolution was religion based. Ever since the Arab invasion in the 7th century and the introduction of Islam into Iran, Iranians have lived with religion as an integral part of their social and cultural identity. Throughout the ages, various monarchs had valued and to a small degree, respected people’s diverse religious beliefs. Throughout Iranian history, religious clergy, though usually behind the scenes, had collaborated with the monarchs to rule the country in line with people’s religious systems and beliefs.

However, in the 1930s, the Iranian king, Reza Shah Pahlavi who had forcefully taken the throne from the Qajar Dynasty who had ruled Iran since the mid 1700s, decided to modernize the country. It was, historians believe, the constant presence of Western forces in Iran that influenced Reza Shah’s drive for modernisation in the 1930s. Through an ambitious modernisation scheme, inspired by Turkey’s Mustafa Kamal Ataturk who had modernized Turkey in the early 1900s, Reza Shah vastly and rapidly
pushed Iran forward into the modern age by implementing various Western systems, including economical, educational, and even cultural, to replace traditional ones. In this process, Reza Shah consequently attempted to replace traditional religious systems with more modern and secular ones. However, the most memorable and controversial consequence of modernization came in 1936, when Reza Shah decided to modernize even ‘the face’ of the country. In a controversial decision Reza Shah ordered men to wear suits and Western-style hats, and women to put the veil aside. Launching an anti-veil offensive, he sent soldiers to roam the streets of cities and villages on horseback, pulling the veil from women’s heads. Of course, this was highly offensive not only to the masses, many of whom lived by religious laws, but also to the clergy who saw Reza Shah’s actions as great religious sacrilege. Ironically, an action that was meant to lead women into freedom, limited their movement. For many traditional women for whom the veil formed a significant part of their identity, appearing unveiled was like appearing nude in public. Consequently, many women of conservative families were pushed further into the domestic realm, refusing to even leave their homes, while prior to this movement they had much more freedom of movement in the society. Over the decades, as Reza Shah’s son replaced him, this compulsory ban on the veil gradually lifted and people had the choice of attire.

Although soon after its encounter with modernization Iran was on its way to becoming one of the Middle East’s most economically developed countries, it had climbed the economic ladder at the price of the majority of its population’s discontent. While changes introduced within this plan affected all aspects of Iranian life, including as Ali Mirsepassi points out, ‘economic relations, social institutions and cultural patterns of the country’ (2000, p. 73), what was neglected was the complex process needed for accommodating social change. This was particularly the case in the transformation of a predominantly religious society into a secular one which introduced a move away from traditional religiously driven schools of thought that operated throughout every aspect of society. Aside from this religious discontent, there were a lot of various anti-Shah movements that were driven by various schools of political and ideological thoughts. These, which included Marxist beliefs, contributed greatly to what eventually became the revolution. Consequently,

7 In his book Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran (1997) Asef Bayat deals with the various movements that led to the eventual revolution.
discontent continued to bubble in silence among the population, leading to its height in the 1960s and eventually leading to the overthrow of the Shah in 1979.

The man mainly responsible for the revolution was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a clergy leader who instigated uprisings against the Shah and his regime. Basing his arguments on Islam, Khomeini promised a religious democracy wherein people would have more freedom of expression in line with Islamic rules. Khomeini’s ideas were backed up and revved up by Iranian intellectuals and philosophers of the time. Among them was for example Ali Shariati, a prominent philosopher and sociologist, who argued that Iran should have a modernized Islamic government, thus projecting the possibility of taking what is the best of modernity and Islam thus constructing an ideal, almost utopian Islamic society. This concept and idea intrigued people who by then felt great pressure from the Shah’s government who had silenced them in many ways. Added to this was the fact that there was a very public presence of such leaders reaching into all corners of the country, from large cities to distant villages via secret pamphlets and tape recordings. While general discontent was building, these leaders greatly contributed to what came next. It was this context which led to the eventual overthrow of the Shah in February of 1979.8

Iraq attacked Iran a year after the revolution in 1980. In September of that year Saddam Hussein led his army to attack Iran. Sharing a border on the south west of Iran, the Iraqi army quickly overtook parts of the province of Khuzestan, occupying large cities like Khorramshahr. This was a crucial area because, as noted earlier, it is Iran’s port in the south and also the home to many oil refineries which are of great importance to the country’s economy. But to this day there is no clear reason for his

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9 There are many speculative reasons as to why Iraq attacked Iran. While some, like Efarim Karsh in The Iran-Iraq War (2009) argue that the attack had a deep historical root with Iraq wanting to assert leadership and taking control of the Middle East, others like Farhang Rajaie in The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression (1993), believe the attack was due to Iraq’s recognition of an opportunity for invasion, given Iran’s weak political and social state after the revolution. There are, of course, numerous points of views on both sides of Iran and Iraq on the reasons for the war. See for instance Gary McCuen (1987), M.S. El Azhary (1984), Edward Willett (2003) all with titles The Iran-Iraq War for various perspectives.
sudden attack on Iran. In general, historians and sociologists believe that Iraq detected a weakness in Iran after the revolution and was looking for chances to expand its own territory, particularly by taking over a very oil rich region of the countryside. Others believe that Saddam Hussein saw Iran’s new Shi’i government as a threat and used this opportunity as an offensive attack to prevent any kind of similar regime change in his own country.

However, no matter what the reason, Iran was taken off guard and not ready to defend itself. Following the upheaval of the revolution, the Iranian armed forces had been almost completely immobilized and dismantled. Many leading army and navy men had been executed for their allegiance to the previous regime. Similarly thousands had been let go and dismissed. The compulsory army training for young men had lost its stringent quality. Consequently, when Iraq attacked, Iran had no structured defence force. Yet, despite the lack of an organised army and navy, Iranian civilians took on responsibility to defend themselves. For example, when the city of Khorramshahr was attacked and almost completely occupied, only 120 civilians, most of whom gradually perished in the process, defended and prevented the Iraqi army from proceeding further into other parts of the country while they waited for trained armed forces to arrive from other parts of the country.

Over the eight years of the war, hundreds and thousands of young men from all over Iran were taken into the region to fight. Most of them came voluntarily and many were under aged and came out of the passion to fight and defend their own country. They travelled from large cities as well as small and remote villages and were mostly untrained. The ideal that led their desire to fight was that of holy defence of their country and religion against Iraq’s forceful invasion. Generally speaking, these young men did not come to fight for money or to gain any reputation. They came to fight knowing that there was a great possibility of death if they were lucky, and if not, of permanent lifetime injuries, or of being taken prisoner of war. Added to this was the government’s direct influence in promoting the values of ‘holy defence’ of the revolution and one’s country. For example, while patriarchal and spiritual songs were constantly played and preached in schools to educate the youngsters about the value of martyrdom and war, some rumours repeated over many years, have it that the government went as far as handing out plastic keys to children of disadvantaged
families, telling them this was the key to paradise\textsuperscript{10} if they went and fought for their country and the revolution. In short it was in fact the very concept of martyrdom and being killed in defence of one’s country and beliefs that attracted these young men to the war. This, as we will see later, forms a significant aspect of Iranian sense of identity. As Roxanne Varzi argues, when the war broke out, the

new Islamic cultural producers of the state began to construct an Islamic republic with a very specific emphasis on the mystical notion of \textit{bikhodi,} self-annihilation, and \textit{shahadat,} martyrdom, that had been carried over from the revolution days and was fast becoming a precursor of Islamic citizenship. (2006, p. 5)

She believes that this idea heightened when the war broke out ‘at which time nation building became synonymous with martyrdom.’ (p.5) It was also at this time the Hussein Fahmideh story was told by Imam Khomeini.

But, despite some of the ethical questions involved in this process, it was this kind of recruitment that led to the gradual mobilisation of the Iranian army. The Iranian army not only did not let Iraq proceed any further into the country, but they also managed to take back the occupied city of Khorramshahr after two years. The war eventually came to an end eight years later in 1988 when the two countries agreed to a ceasefire. During this time both sides had lost millions of men, many civilians, and a huge sum of resources and yet nothing had come out of it for both countries but a trail of destruction and death.

\textbf{The Origins of Rahian-e Nour}

Visits to the Iran-Iraq war sites began almost as soon as the war was over. Although there is no written documentation about these trips, and few people have spoken about this publically, groups of people had begun to visit the sites of the war from as early as 1989. Nasser Palangi, my father, for instance, recalls how as soon as the war was over, small groups began to visit the still destroyed sites. Among the first groups of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{10} For an interesting analysis of the ‘plastic key to heaven,’ see Kevin Sullivan’s ‘The (Plastic) Key to Understanding Iranian Martyrdom,’ in Real Clear World online, May 3, 2013. http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2013/05/03/iran_martyr_state_plastic_paradise_keys.html}
people to visit these sites were artists, poets, writers and painters who used their experiences for inspiration to produce work. He remembers that he was among one of the first group of artists to return to the war sites with a group of other artists for whom the trip was extremely emotional and affective, and which eventually led to the creation of many books of poetry, short stories, and paintings by this group. Even on the first page of the website for Rahian-e Nour (Rahianenoor.com), it is stated that the beginnings of these trips were instigated by families of those who had lost loved ones also began to come to the sites to see for themselves the places where their loved ones had fallen. These visits, however, were usually privately organized and in small numbers, more as a sort of private solace and coming to terms with the past rather than any kind of overt political or ideological statement.

It has only been in the last twelve years, according to the information on the Rahian-e Nour site that it has become a systematically organized event supported by various governmental organizations. Although Rahian-e Nour has its own organization, one of the main supporters of these events is the Centre for the Preservation of the Holy Defence, led by the same people who had encouraged and promoted the war as a kind of holy defence of the values of Islam and the Islamic revolution during the war. A governmental organization established in 1990, it claims to be responsible for the preservation and distribution of information on ‘the holy defence’ and the ideals upheld by the revolution and the war. It also has the support of the army who cooperate with the groups to put on re-enactments, shows, lectures and speeches about the history of the war.

The first official Rahian-e Nour was organized in 2000, taking with it a small number of people. Over the years, this number has grown, with greater dedicated resources. These trips are usually undertaken during the summer school holidays or during the Persian New Year in March when the schools have a long stretch of holidays. Often these trips last for up to five days, and take participants on tours of main battle sites. Often caravans are organized in small numbers from different regions, each caravan, like the one Abdullah and Mahya were taking, bringing some tens of people with everyone aiming to come together for the main days of the event. The trips are usually undertaken by bus or train from all regions of Iran. The long haul journey itself, which involves numerous stops, is a significant process of the pilgrimage. In 2009
when I attended, there were nearly two million people who participated during the New Year’s holidays, from all across Iran.

Like other pilgrimages around the world, Rahian-e Nour too has shared characteristics. Many who visit the war sites are relatives of those who had been involved in the war, who want to remember and honour the land in which their loved ones had fallen. During the time I went on Rahian-e Nour, it was obvious that many who had come were related to those martyred. Similarly, visits to these sites affect the economy of the region and cause redevelopment of certain areas. The arrival of so many people into these regions has clearly boosted the economy of the region and contributed to better facilities being built. For example, to make way for the arrival of pilgrims, roads with better conditions have been made, thus connecting some remote regions to each other. The construction of these roads not only brings in tourists but it also opens up the door for the connection of the locals to more facilities, like education and healthcare. Additionally, the influx of a new tourist population, inevitably gives the local population a boost in their businesses. For example, a lot of the local population, especially small children, could be seen selling souvenirs of the city en route, in various cities. Most importantly, Rahian-e Nour has taken on a sacred connotation to the war sites that sanctify martyrdom, and values patriotic ideas. This element, as I will emphasize later, is an important aspect of the Rahian-e Nour experience that closely ties with a kind of political ideology and religious indoctrination that it entails.

However, despite the similarities of Rahian-e Nour to other journeys into sites of war, there are several elements that succinctly differentiate it from others that occur around the world. As we will see in the next section of this chapter, this war pilgrimage is one that is heavily influenced by the theocratic government, and has a certain religious symbolism that is reflective of the Shi’i Muslim Iranian experience. It is also a highly a political journey that encourages certain state-manifested values that underlie the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the values the state wants to transfer to its people. Finally, given current political rifts and the situation in Iran, the sudden popularity of these trips during the Persian New Year could be seen as highly political. In the next section, Rahian-e Nour will be analysed in relation to the Islamic and cultural history of Iran and the current situation, identifying how these differences make Rahian-e Nour a uniquely Iranian experience.
The Battle of Karbala:

If we are to understand the uniqueness of the Iranian war-pilgrimage, we need to contextualize it in relation to the history of Shi’i Islam in Iran. As noted earlier, Islam entered Iran, or what was then Persia, in the 7th century in the year 642 A.D. The Arab invasion affected Iran’s political, social and more significantly religious direction. Previous to the invasion, Zoroastrianism was the major religion of Persia. But when the Arabs invaded, they introduced Islam, and shifted the entire history of the country towards that of Islam. The sect of Islam introduced and practiced within the Persian Empire was Shi’ism. Shi’i Islam differs largely from other sects of Islam, mainly from the Sunni, in that it states or upholds that following Prophet Mohammad there are twelve leaders who are called Imams, who are direct descendents of the Prophet. These twelve Imams, according to Shi’i belief, are pure at heart and are sinless, like the prophet himself. Their lives, births, deaths, and teachings are celebrated across the Shi’i world. While they are all highly revered by people of this faith, among these twelve there are two that are of utmost significance in the Shi’i faith.

The first is Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad. Imam Hussein, according to Shi’i belief, is responsible for spreading Shi’i Islam and maintaining it in the face of enemy forces who were trying to eradicate it. The height of Imam Hussein’s fight to sustain Islam happened at the battle of Ashura in Karbala. According to Shi’i belief, on the 10th day of the tenth month of Shi’i calendar, which is Ashura, Imam Hussein and his men fought a battle against Yazid. Yazid was the


12 Read more about the history of Shi’i Islam and the differences between Shi’ism and Sunnism in Lesley Hazelton’s After the Prophet: The Epic Story of the Shia-Sunni Split in Islam, Toronto: Random House, 2009.

13 For narrative description of Imam Hussein’s life and history see ‘The Third Imam’ (p. 196) in Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai’s Shi’ite Islam, New York: State University of New York, 1975.
ruler, or Caliphite of the time who wanted to eradicate Shi’i Islam. The battle between Imam Hussein and Yazdi’s army happened in the deserts of Karbala, which is now in modern day Iraq. During the battle, after suffering severe thirst in the heat because Yazid denied them water, Imam Hussein and his stronghold of men were martyred in defense of Islam and what they believed was justice. Shi’i Muslims believe that it was the sacrifice of Imam Hussein and his men, which has led to revival and survival of Shi’i Islam over the centuries.

This battle is the most significant in Shi’i Islamic history. Its narrative has somewhat become a catalyst for Shi’i Muslim ideology and belief, one where justice, bravery and faith are celebrated and fought for against evil forces of tyranny. So significant is the battle that every year it is remembered and marked as a significant event in Shi’i Islamic calendar. Across the world, every year for ten days, Shi’i believers embark on ceremonies, including marches and self-flagellations, to remember the pain of the fallen Imam. On these days they listen to sermons and narrative reconstructions of the events of Ashura, and play out the battle in traditional plays known as Taziyeh.

Interestingly, Karbala and the big stretch of dessert upon which Imam Hussein was martyred, is considered holy ground. Every year, millions of Shi’i from across the world go to Karbala as pilgrims. These pilgrimages, like those conducted later for the Iranian battle sites, are cathartic journeys of self-purification, often life-changing for those who embark on them. But the journey to Karbala is not without risk. Given that Iraq is a majorly Sunni country, with great sectarian conflict between the Shi’i and Sunni, Karbala as the epicenter of Shi’i belief is often the target of terrorist attacks. Every year, there is at least one terrorist attack on groups of pilgrims, killing and injuring many in the process.

**Taziyeh:**

In remembering the events of Karbala, there is a distinctly theatrical way in which the Iranian Shi’i remembers the events called Taziyeh, which according to scholars of language literally means ‘to mourn.’ Taziyeh is a performance that depicts the battle

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14 See Kevin Sim’s documentary *Once Upon a Time* (2007) which follows a group of Iranian pilgrims into Karbala for an insightful understanding of the socio-political and significance of this trip for Iranian pilgrims.
of Karbala leading to Imam Hussein’s death. Performed every year to commemorate Imam Hussein’s death, it is a form of play that has distinctive elements, each unique to its own. For instance, this is a performance that relies heavily on the participation of the audience in moving the play’s mood along. The stage is set on a round platform where there is often very little distance between the performers and the audience. Tazieyeh recounts one of the most fundamental narratives that forms the Iranian Shi’i sense of identity, the understanding of good/evil, oppressed/oppressor and villain/hero. It is also a timeless narrative that speaks beyond the performance on the stage. As Negar Mottahedeh observes Tazieyeh transforms not only the time of the present into a messianic time filled with possibilities of revolutionary action and redemption, it transforms the stage into a public stage populated with the everyday life and concerns of the masses. (2005, p. 29)

Taziyeh ‘a reenactment of sacred history, cites the past in the context of the present, thus transforming the past into its most minute details.’ (p.32) As I later further discuss, Taziyeh has come to be extended beyond its traditional form.

**Taziyeh as a Reflection of Iranian Shi’i identity**

The story of the battle of Karbala has formed a significant element of the Shi’i sense of identity and perspective on the world. Inevitably with Iran having the largest number of the Shi’i Muslims, which are a minority within the Islamic world, it continues to affect various aspects of people’s lives beyond a religious context. Imam Hussein’s story and the myth of Ashura, operate on a symbolic level for the Shi’i faith. Imam Hussein’s battle is the ultimate fight between good and evil. It is the manifestation of the struggle against injustice, tyranny and oppression. Moreover, for Shi’i Muslims, Hussein, who had sacrificed his life to save Islam, became a martyr. As Kevin Sim narrates in his film *Once Upon a Time In Iran* (2007) Hussein became the ‘master of martyrs. An eternal martyr, sacrificed in the eternal struggle of free man against oppression.’ This, as Sim continues to narrate, has informed the way that the Shi’i people, especially in Iran, see the world: always in terms of this battle and in relation to the struggles between good and evil. The battle of Karbala formed ‘a model, a benchmark’ for those oppressed and became ‘a symbol of hope for the
oppressed and a figure of fear for the oppressors.’ As Sim puts it this ‘ancient story shapes the way Iranians respond to threats.’

Throughout Iranian history, this parallel has been drawn on and repeated both on personal and on social levels. In the recent history of Iran for instance, the narrative of Ashura and its symbolism of the oppressed/oppressor formed the discourse of the 1979 Islamic revolution. As Hamid Dabashi observes,

in the course of the Islamic revolution, the figure of Khomeini was immediately identified with that of Hussein….With the same token, the late Shah was identified with Yazid, a usurper in power, corrupt, tyrannical, banal, and demonic. The configuration of the protagonist and the antagonist in this drama transformed the battle between Khomeini and the Shah into the simulacrum of the battle of Karbala. (2008, p. 191)

In 1980 when the war broke out between Iran and Iraq, the same discourse was replicated. This time, the roles were clearer and more literal, particularly because the war was an ‘imposed war’ initiated by Saddam. Here, the soldiers who put their own lives on the line were like Hussein in whose tradition they were ready to sacrifice their own lives for the greater good of their country, and Saddam and his army were like Yazid. At this time, the discourse of the battle of Karbala was directly drawn upon to address the war. The media became a propaganda machine that gave ‘public opinion form and stability, direct[ed] its power through the definition of [the] situation and the identification of the players in a social drama.’ (Combs & Combs, 1994, p. 10) In cinemas, on television, in revolutionary songs, posters, the radio and any other format of communication, this parallel was clearly drawn between the battle of Karbala and the Iran-Iraq war. People were encouraged to actively participate in the war. Martyrdom, in defense of one’s country and in the tradition of Imam Hussein, took on the highest spiritual value. It was within this context that Imam Khomeini’s reference to Hussein Fahmideh, whose image went on to become the watermark of 1000 Rial notes in Iran, made impressive etches on the depth of my being and that twenty years later led to this study and film.

However, this discourse has continued to affect the Iranian society until very recently. In 2009, during the time I was shooting the film, Iranians were about to vote. Leading
up to this election, the Iranian government wanted to mobilise its forces and ensure the votes of the youth who, some thirty years after the revolution and the war, were beginning to forget the state’s revolutionary values. While I will talk about this later at length, this plays an important backdrop in the reasons for the significance of the Rahian-e Nour journey in 2009.

Consequently, it is within this socio-historical context that the rest of this thesis should be approached and understood. As we will see, it is based on this historical context that I in turn approach and introduce Rahian-e Nour and the concept of martyrdom throughout this thesis. As I will examine Rahian-e Nour in the larger context of the Iranian society, my study also extends and expands this relationship to shed a new perspective on the post-election events of Iran in 2009.

The second significant figure that we must understand if we are to understand the full significance of the Rahian-e Nour, is the last Shi‘i Imam, Imam Mahdi. According to Shi‘i belief, Imam Mahdi is the last Shi‘i Imam and is the 12th descendant of Prophet Mohammad. Born in the 10th century, it is believed that Imam Mahdi has gone into hiding, or occultation. Like the Judeo-Christian religions where believers anticipate the return of the messiah, in Shi‘i Islam, too, believers anticipate the return or ‘zuhur’ of Imam Mahdi. Promised to return at a time of great injustice in the world, his return in the Shi‘i faith embodies the aspirations of his followers in the restoration of the purity of Faith which will bring true and uncorrupted guidance to all mankind, creating a just social order and a world free from oppression in which Islamic revelation will be the norm of all nations. (Sachedina, 1981, pg 2)

According to traditional beliefs, ‘Imam Mahdi will lead the forces of righteousness against the forces of evil in one final apocalyptic battle in which the enemies of the Imam will be defeated.’ (Moomen, 1985, p.166) Religious narratives have it that in 941 AD before he disappeared, Imam Mahdi visited a pious man in a dream and asked him to build a mosque in a village named Jamkaran some 80 miles from Southeast of what is now Tehran. In the dream, the Imam had promised that once the mosque was built, he would visit to lead the prayer that would mark his Grand Return. A small mosque was consequently built, near to which there was a well. Locals believed that
this well was directly connected to the city of Samarra in Iraq where the Imam had begun his occultation. However, because Samarra was no longer a Shi‘i city, the assumption was that the Imam would reappear in Jamkaran. Although a small mosque, in 1972 a few years before the revolution, the government of Prime Minister Amir Abbass Hoveiyda, financed the building of road from the city of Qom to Jamkaran. The city of Qom is the most prominent centre for Shi‘i studies, housing the seminars from which grand Mullahs have studied and emerged. This move was to allow the Shi‘i believers to access the site given that pilgrimage to Iraq was virtually impossible at the time. While in its early days of access the site only received dozens of pilgrims per month, in the 1990s a group of religious entrepreneurs saw its religious and economical potential and expanded the site. By the 2000s, according to Amir Taheri, ‘many of the estimated 12 million pilgrims who visited Qom [each year] also spent a few hours in Jamkaran.’ (2010, p. 81)

But by then, Imam Mahdi and Jamkaran became politicized and infused with the Islamic government when in 2005, prior to the elections, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, visited Jamkaran to ask whether the Hidden Imam would support his presidential candidacy. The Imam supposedly endorsed his decision, despite the fact that by then he had less than 1% chance of winning.\textsuperscript{15} When he did win the elections in 2005 for two terms, he saw Jamkaran as a pivotal point for his winning and has been promoting it as a significant site for Muslim Pilgrimage. Its mosque has since then been upgraded when in 2008 the presidential office allocated $17 million to expanding it for pilgrims. (Taheri 2010, p. 82)

This is why for Ahmadinejad the winning battle was associated with battle of good against evil as represented by Imam Mahdi and the discourses of Shi‘i Islam. Ahmadinejad regularly drew on the significance of Imam Mahdi and Jamkaran in his public speeches and the overcoming of good against evil. In a statement during Friday prayers give date, for instance, he remarked

our revolution’s main mission is to pave the way for the reappearance of the 12\textsuperscript{th} Imam, the Mahdi…Therefore, Iran should become a powerful, developed and model Islamic society.

\textsuperscript{15} For an interesting analysis of Jamkaran see Reza Taheri’s \textit{Persian Nights}, New York: New Material, 2010, p. 80-82.
Today, we should define our economic, cultural and political policies based on the policy of Imam Mahdi’s return. We should avoid copying the West's policies and systems. (UNWebcast site)

Most famous among his references to Mahdi was in his UN speech in 2005, which he ended with the following confusing words for those unfamiliar with the Mahdi myth. ‘O mighty Lord I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace.’

Consequently, many in current Iranian civil society also deeply believe in Imam Mahdi’s return, and see him as the ultimate saviour of the world’s problems. Although this is wrapped in rumours that are not denied, some superstitious people believe that a select few in Iranian leadership including Ahmadinejad and supreme leader Khamenei have connections with Mahdi, whom they refer to as Agha. The use of this term, Agha, however, has a double meaning. Agha, in Persian means Mister, or Sir. If used in everyday speech, it could refer to a man, but here it has taken on a symbolic meaning to specifically refer to someone of importance, in particular Imam Mahdi. Additionally, this term is used interchangeably to refer to both Imam Mahdi, and Iran’s current supreme leader, Imam Khamenei. What this interchangeable use of the term does, however, is to add a whole new mystical, spiritual level of leadership to Khamenei’s leadership, making him as holy and significant as one of the leading historical figures of Shi’i Islam. This becomes clear in the film where people like Mahya, Abdullah’s wife, refer to Agha but use the term interchangeably between Imam Mahdi and Khamenei.

It is within the above historical, social and political context, that we can approach and better understand Rahian-e Nour as a new phenomenon within the Iranian society. The above context also allows us to consider the difference between Rahian-e Nour and other world pilgrimages across the world. In what remains of this chapter, I will consider further how Rahian-e Nour, like other sites of war pilgrimages, has taken on a religious aspect but will argue for its difference from those in other parts of the world in relation to the concept of Ashura and Karbala. Furthermore, I will examine how this site has also become a political site, almost propaganda, for upholding and maintaining values of the Islamic revolution and the current regime.
Rahian-e Nour as Religious Pilgrimage:

Rahian-e Nour, like many other war-site pilgrimages is a journey, which has taken on religious symbolism. The religious overtone of this journey is made overtly obvious throughout every step of the journey. Given the significance of Ashura and the battle of Karbala for Shi’i Iranians, many draw parallels between the battle of Karbala and the Iran-Iraq war. Battle sites, as such, then become holy ground, where revered soldiers, in the tradition of Imam Hussein, fought the ultimate battle against evil, paying the ultimate price of their own life in sacrifice defending their Islamic values. Pilgrims and organizers constantly refer to the battle sites as Iran’s Karbala. Even Abdullah candidly calls the front lines of the war Iran’s Karbala. Visits to these sites are extremely sacred to many, especially so because of the conflict in Iraq and the inaccessibility of Karbala for Shi’i Iranian pilgrims. Some even believe that a visit to these sites is an honor and that not everyone has the privilege to come to these sites. For example, Mahya, Abdullah’s wife, really believes that the Martyrs must call your name, and that without having what she calls ‘an invitation’ from them, no matter how hard one tries to get there, one would not be able to come to these sites. So, she believes that everyone who is there has been called to be there by the martyrs themselves. Throughout the days of the pilgrimage, panegyrist songs and various sermons are organized recounting the events of Karbala, and linking them to the fallen soldiers of the Iran/Iraq war. Within this context, the fallen martyrs are viewed as extremely sacred, whose spirit and blood bless the land. Indeed, so blessed is this land, that many choose to walk barefoot on the hot desert sand as a sign of respect. This religious aspect of the trip is also extended to a sense of patriotism. Many pilgrims are patriotic and view these battle sites as sites of Iran’s proud resistance against the evil regime of Saddam. The fallen soldiers are viewed as heroes who saved their country’s honour as did Imam Hussein, with the ultimate sacrifice of their own lives. Like Imam Hussein’s sacrifice that forever saved Islam, it was the soldier’s self-sacrifice that saved their country from the forceful evil oppression of Saddam Hussein and his army.
However, unlike trips in other parts of the world, these journeys are also explicitly political, almost propaganda-like, in nature. That they are organized by the Iranian Government, the section in particular for the maintenance of ‘the holy defense’ in order to uphold the values of the Islamic revolution and the war, is a telling sign of the nature of these journeys. Although the first of these journeys happened as soon as the war had ended, and while over the last several years people had been visiting these sites in small numbers, it was only in 2009 and leading to one of the most controversial elections in Iran, that Rahian-e Nour expanded into a huge event. As those who fervently work for the organization claim, as we see in the film, these trips are very much about drawing on these site’s elements to maintain and uphold the values of the Islamic Revolution. Among the crowd that attends, one can see a particular group of Iranian society who are strong supporters of Khamenei and his regime—although as we will see in later chapters of this study inevitably this has changed after the election and what followed.

More importantly, given that the revolution is now more than thirty years old, there are few young people who remember or feel passionate about the revolution and its causes. Consequently, as we see in the film, these trips have recently become about remembering and ensuring that the young people do remember and are made to feel as though these values still live on in the country. Furthermore, there is great emphasis on the need for conversion. At every corner during the pilgrimage, we hear stories of how people from China and Christians from other parts of the world converted to Islam upon their visit to these sites. And as I later realized, as the foreign filmmaker, I was also the unknowing subject of an attempted conversion.

This is why the government spends millions of dollars every year on these events. According to one of the men who worked there, each night costs the government at least 30 million tomans (roughly SUS15,000 dollars). In Iran $15,000 is a lot of money, roughly equivalent to a high annual salary in the private sector. According to those who are passionate for the cause, this is considered not much to pay. As we see in the film in an interview on the bus, Mahaya’s brother who is a volunteer helper on the sites for six months of the year, clearly and bluntly argues and believes that even if one person is transformed through these experiences, then the money is well spent because they will spread the word and bring in new people. He explicitly says that if
the organizers are smart enough, they can ‘cook’ the idea in the visitor’s mind, and that even if one person changes in the process they have achieved their goal.

Also, another sign that these trips are political propaganda is in their timing. In the Iranian calendar there is a mixture of religious and secular events. While the religious are mostly Islamic, the non-religious events are normally events left from Zoroastrian times. One of these events still upheld in Iranian society is the Now Rouz, or the new year, which happens on March 21 at spring equinox. Until recently, this was a non-political non-religious celebration, a time that people spent with their families. Now Rouz is celebrated for thirteen days during which schools are on holiday and a majority of businesses are put on hold. However in recent years, it is during these times that Rahian-e Nour has been taking pilgrims to the war sites, replacing a much loved ‘neutral’ holiday with a politically and religiously oriented activity. Added to this, images of Rahian-e Nour have also replaced celebratory images that we once used to see during this time on television. In recent years, moments after the new year, instead of seeing traditional images of spring, flowers and gardens, and hearing songs of celebration, state television shows live shots of pilgrims on Rahian-e Nour as they welcome in the new year with tears in remembrance of the war, the martyrs and more importantly the values and ideals of the Islamic revolution. This is usually followed by a speech by Khameini (by which time the majority have already turned off their televisions)!

Another significant aspect of Rahian-e Nour that has to be highlighted here is the various kinds of cultural productions that are created in and through the program. The representation of war and its glorification has continually been part of the Iranian media mission ever since the early days of the war. However, a glimpse at the history of Iranian media reveals the repetition of the same archival material for many years. Indeed two generations of Iranians can easily remember growing up with the same material screened continuously throughout the media. In this context, Rahian-e Nour has provided an opportunity for the renewal of the kinds of images that are emerging from the war front. The organizers have been actively engaging filmmakers, photographers, and musicians to engage with the program. While numerous local television documentaries and reports have been made about this every year, there is also an active encouragement for participation in creating Rahian-e Nour themed programs by the organizers, particularly from those who have the potential to take the
material beyond the borders of Iran. For instance, several high profile photographers like Newsha Tavakolian, a very young Iranian photojournalist, and Abbas Kowsari, have both reported on Rahian-e Nour. However, both have been banned from Iran due to the political nature of their later work. That is why in order to screen and encourage a certain kind of participation, a festival for the production of cultural work about Rahian-e Nour has been established. The festival, now in its tenth year, every year, calls out for fictional and documentary films, as well as photographs and musical pieces about Rahian-e Nour. According to the website in their tenth year, they had over 1500 image submission and some seventy film submissions to choose from in their screenings. In fact, I was one who was contacted after filming in Iran to consider screening my film as part of the film festival, an offer I refused because I was not sure about the interpretation of those who would view the film. I was not sure if they would understand or agree with my perspective. Given the nature of the Iranian society, if disagreements arose, this could have caused for me to be put on some list and made trouble later in my life.

Additionally, Rahian-e Nour has an array of memorabilia that they hand out as part of the package of the holiday. These include posters, pens, religious books, and other items that are then distributed through the pilgrims to others in the wider society upon their return. The free merchandise which always bear the Rahian-e Nour mark, which the pilgrims take back as souvenirs, plays a significant part in the dissemination of information and in gaining interest in the movement.

It is within this context that we have to understand Rahian-e Nour and my film. This chapter has set out to construct a basic understanding of Rahian-e Nour as situated in the Iranian socio-political and historical context. In what follows, I set out to examine and situate the way my film operates within this context, paying special attention to the shifting perspectives that are offered by Rahian-e Nour to me, my film and Iranian society at large.
Chapter Two:

Shifting perspectives and role of the filmmaker

The idea for making a film about Rahian-e-Nour, certainly one in which I was the subject, was unexpected and unplanned. I was in Iran in February 2009 for a different project when near the end of the month I met my cousin, Abdullah, after many years in a dinner party. I could not recognize the once thin young man, similar age as myself, who had now turned into a fully bearded and full-bellied man with a wife. Although as children we used to play together regularly, our years apart and our different lifestyles seemed to have certainly differentiated us now. Although always more religious than me, during the years that I had lived in Australia, Abdullah had become a panegyrist, singing and reciting religious songs at various religious ceremonies, performing soothing songs that touched everyone’s hearts and brought tears to their eyes. Over the years, Abdullah was also one who traveled regularly to various religious pilgrimages, having frequently traveled to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and Karbala in Iraq. That year, together with his new wife Mahya, a devout follower of Khamenei and his teachings, he had begun organizing caravans to Rahian-e-Nour. It was first at this meeting that I heard about the existence of the Rahian-e-Nour phenomena. The more I learned about the trip, the more interested I became to know more about it. In response Abdullah and Mahya were very keen and interested to inform me and in fact they were very encouraging that I go along with them near the end of March.

At first I was very reluctant because of the program’s state run nature. But then, it dawned on me that the journey would give me the opportunity to experience the war sites and also to see the murals that my father had painted. Then, the idea came that I could make this trip into a film about those who embark on the trip. Given the proximity to the 2009 elections in June, which everyone knew would be a controversial one either way, I wanted to make a film that shed light on some of the previously unseen and unheard groups in the Iranian society, many of whom were at some point avid supporters of the Khamenei and Ahmadinejad regime. As noted earlier in this thesis, I wanted to make this film to offer a new angle and to shift the
perspective of my viewers about some of the misrepresentations and lack of representations of this particular group of people for my mostly Western audiences.

I discussed the idea of making a film about the trip with Abdullah, asking about the possibilities of filming on the trip. Mahya and Abdullah were both thrilled by the idea and were very encouraging. I borrowed a camera and a tripod, and set out on the bus journey to make what I thought would be a film about Rahian-e-Nour on March 17th 2009. But it would not be until much later that I would realize that the film I had set out to make about Rahian-e-Nour would shift into a personal film where I become the subject of my subjects and the film becomes equally as much about my personal journey as an insight into Rahian-e-Nour.

**Editing and Shifting Perspectives:**

The realization in this shift in the film’s focus came to me in distinct parts through the process of editing. After the process of filming and looking through the footage, I realized that there were in fact two journeys that were happening simultaneously, where one without the other would leave the film incomplete and lacking in interest. The visibly depicted journey was of a group of people going on the Rahian-e-Nour pilgrimage. Yet, this journey, by itself, lacked a sort of cohesiveness and appeared to be missing a sense of filmic purpose and story. While the final destination and the sense of the journey was clear, there was not enough engagement with subjects to attract and maintain the viewer’s attention. The narrative arc of the journey was not clear. The characters’ changes and transformations did not come through. This is when I realized there was also a second less visible journey, the journey of myself as the filmmaker and as someone who wanted to retrace his father’s footsteps, which as I later realized was tightly linked to the journey of the other pilgrims.

Originally when I set out to make this film, I had envisioned it as what Bill Nichols calls an ‘observatory’ documentary where as a filmmaker I was ‘invisible and non-participatory.’ (2001, p.116) My role was like the ‘fly on the wall’ where my camera observed and recorded the Rahian-e-Nour journey. Initially, and throughout the process of the filming, I did not see myself as having an active role, not as a filmmaker, and certainly not as a member of the traveling party who was on his own journey. In shooting the film, I had stayed behind the camera at all times.
It was, however, not until the editing process that I discovered that what I had set out to create had shifted. In seeing the footage, in hindsight of the journey, I realized that I had shifted from what I thought was an observer to a participant in the film. The film’s style then had changed to what Nichols calls ‘participatory’ where as a filmmaker I had become part of the film. As Nichols describes it, in participatory documentary films, ‘the filmmaker steps out from behind the cloak of the voice-over commentary, steps away from poetic meditation, steps down from a fly-on-the-wall perch, and becomes a social actor (almost) like any other.’ (2001, p. 116)

It was in the process of editing that I realized this shift where my position as an insider/outsider, and one who was in fact related to the caravan leader and some of the other people in the bus, had inevitably brought me, though less visibly, into the film, not only as an active participant but also as a subject of the film. The process had happened so subtly that it was only in hindsight that I recognized the shift. For example, early on in the bus trip, there are some sandwiches that are being handed out, and someone takes one and hands it to me. My hand takes the sandwich from behind the camera, immediately shifting my position as an observer to one with some sort of agency and presence. Although my body is still invisible I gain some sort of a physical relationship with my onscreen subjects. Similarly, later in the film, when breakfast is being served, Abdullah counts an extra bowl and says ‘one for the filmmaker.’ Consequently, despite being invisible, by being addressed and acknowledged I have become a subject in the film. I was suddenly occupying what Nichols calls ‘blurred boundaries,’ where there is not a clear-cut distinction between subject and filmmaker, or even between fact and what is constructed or what we create to appear like fact. It was upon seeing these interactions between myself and the subjects of the film that I initially realized the fluidity of my position as subject and filmmaker. In the same way that MacDougall’s position is challenged and made fluid in making Link Up Diary (1987), a film about Aboriginal Stolen Generations, when he is handed a cup of tea and spoken to, I also recognized the variability of my role as the filmmaker. As MacDougall speaks of about the variability of the subjectivity of the filmmaker when he writes, ‘the filmmaker’s subjectivity is thus variable, sometimes standing apart, sometimes joining with the subjectivity of others at the moment of filming, always ebbing and flowing.’ (MacDougall 1998, p. 30)
But as the journey progressed my position shifted even more from filmmaker to subject. After we had reached Shalamche, one of the biggest battle sites and one of the most emotionally charged sites, Mahya had pulled me aside and said she wanted to recite a poem on camera. Her poem reads:

Today that the mirror’s heart
Is made of stone,
Love is also colorless

Who ever doesn’t know
You, yourself know
Oh, Agha (12th Imam)
God knows I miss you.

After reciting this poem about Agha (interchangeably addressing Khamenei, and Imam Mahdi) and an appeal for help in our spiritual journey, in finding the right path, Mahya addresses me directly. She asks me to put my camera down for a minute and take a look around. Maybe, she says, I’ll find the right path sooner because I had reached this point through a different way, a path different to hers. Although in the heat of the moment I had not been aware of the implications of her words, I did actually put down my camera for a few minutes and tried to connect on a deeper level to my surroundings. It was only during the process of editing that I realized that there had actually been a shift in my role as the filmmaker at that point in time. By being addressed directly by Mahya on camera, I had become inevitably also the still invisible subject of my own film. Although my presence had been acknowledged by my subjects through offerings of food, it is only through this direct address that a clear shift occurs in my role as a filmmaker to a subject. This is the turning point where the journey and film became clearly more than an observation of Mahya, Abdullah and the others who had embarked on Rahian-e-Nour. Rather, Mahya’s address hints at the fact that this could also have been a journey of self-discovery for me, a journey of conversion from their point of view.

It was after noticing in the process of editing Mahay’s direct address to me that I recognized that in fact throughout the process of the film and the journey, I had been the subject of my subjects. My role as an Iranian had given me insider ability to enter into this realm. However, as someone who did not live in Iran, I was also an outsider to
this group. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, I had assumed the insider/outsider role as a diasporic filmmaker:

Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider. She is this Inappropriate Other/ Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at…. (1995, p. 5)

It had been this insider/outsider role that had given me access and inevitably made me the subject of my own subjects, and shifted the nature of the film from an observational film to a participatory one. As I gained more understanding of the dynamics of this situation during editing, the fact that for me to be so easily given permission to film was a rare privilege. Filming in Iran, specially filming events such as these is highly restricted. Firstly, people with such highly ideologically religious values, who form a minority of the Iranian population, are always on guard about giving others access. They are guarded about information seeping out through spies and others who would use this information against them after getting too close. Yet surprisingly, my idea to film this journey had been highly welcomed by Abdullah and everyone else who had organized the trip. It was only in hindsight that I recognized the reason for this. In the process of editing, I realized that during the entire trip, various people had hinted at and told accounts of those who came from outside of Iran on this journey, who were deeply moved and had converted and found ‘the right path.’ In one of the speeches for instance, one of the speakers effusively narrates the conversion of a Chinese lady. She had come as a tourist to Iran to visit some nearby cities. Someone had mentioned about Rahian-e Nour, and she had been interested without knowing much about the history of the war, or the ‘sacredness’ of the area. But soon after her arrival, he claims, without anyone having told her anything, she kneels on the ground and starts to weep, claiming that she feels like she has arrived home. Of course, she coverts to Islam right there, and comes back every year to celebrate ‘her birthday’ in the area.
While I was privy to many such stories, I was also told such stories directly, and only in hindsight realized that perhaps many of them were aimed and constructed with the knowledge of my presence and the presence of my camera. There is a point in the film, where on our way to our last destination, Mahay’s brother, Mahdi Reza, tells me effusively about an American woman who came to Rahian-e-Nour, wearing a skirt and a jacket. But she was so moved by the experience that she converted right there and then to his surprise started to wear the chador, the all-enveloping black cloak that traditional women wear. It was after this that he made the blunt admission that these programs are aimed at converting people.

It was in hindsight in the process of editing that I realized that while I had used my insider/outsider position to negotiate a space where I could make this film about this trip, my position and my film was also being negotiated by my subjects. As an insider, who had shown interest to go on this trip, I was someone who they thought somewhat agreed with their cause. My family relations with Abdullah gave the added impression that I would probably be a subject who was agreeable and trustworthy. As an outsider, however, I was not fully one of their own, and had the potential to be converted. Furthermore, I made an interesting subject because living beyond Iran and as a filmmaker, I had the ability not only to be converted personally, but my conversion would also be captured on film. My film would then consequently travel beyond Iran and would act as a kind of propagation for this religious program, its ideologies and its causes. Later, this was hinted when Abdullah called me after the trip, and asked me to meet him and one of his superiors who wanted to know the direction of the film. I never went to the meeting. But it was then that I first realized that while I thought I had been making a film about Rahian-e-Nour, my subjects had also been directing my film, one that would be about me and my journey of conversion.

Interestingly, in the process of editing, I realized that the process had indeed affected me to a certain degree. And in fact my interaction with my subjects had transformed not only my perception but also the direction of the film. As MacDougall tells us, ‘film, filmmaker, and subjects are drawn together in a fusion from which they are destined to be forced apart.’ (1998. p. 30) In my actual journey, and what I had not captured on film, was that I had been emotionally moved to a certain degree by my interaction with my subjects. For instance, that I had actually taken Mahya’s advice and put down my camera and tried to understand what she meant was the first of such
changes. The greater change however, came gradually. So gradually immersed had I become with my subjects and the situation that I was utterly moved by the entire experience. For example, at the end of the journey there was a raffle draw for a trip to Karbala. Of all the caravans, a little boy from our group by the name of Hussein won the draw. Hussein's winning of the ticket moved me emotionally and made me think and for some time believe that there was perhaps something bigger at play in these trips. In fact, so immersed had I become in the trip that when I returned to Tehran at the height of the New Year’s celebrations, it took me a few days to adjust back and blend in with the majority of the population. So affected I was by the entire experience that for a few days, until I gained back my perspective, I viewed the rest of the society as ungrateful for the sacrifice of the martyrs and forgetful that perhaps their very existence and independence today depended on the fight that the soldiers put up during the war.

It had been these un-captured shifts in me, and the realization that as much as being the filmmaker I was also the subject of my own film, that inevitably shifted and influenced the editing of the film. The inclusion and reflection of my journey and shifts in perspective thus became inevitable. For indeed, although I had been slightly moved by the journey, I still had not converted to the cause, and was not about to make a film that would reflect the issue as if I had. What had moved me more, and shifted my perception more in the process, had been seeing my father’s murals and feeling a connection to him and his past through the paintings. However, I could not also deny that there had been some sort of a slight shift in my perception about martyrdom and the sacrifices of those who had defended the country as the result of my encounter with those in Rahian-e-Nour. Consequently, in the editorial process, I had to make the decision to include a narration that reflected all that I had experienced.

**The shifting of subjectivities of subjects and the camera**

Theorists of identity and subjectivity often argue that an individual’s sense of identity and subjectivity is constructed by visibility and recognition of similarities in others. Oliver argues that ‘individuals who have experienced discrimination and subordination, have been “othered.”’ (2001, p. 7) This process undermines subjectivity, for she believes that often times in this process those Othered become
hypervisible as a type and invisible as individuals. This type of hypervisibility as much as invisibility affects individual identities because it fails to allow people to be recognized as individual subjects. Oliver believes that part of the process of regaining subjectivity is gaining recognition from the dominant culture which had led to such oppression and Othering. While part of this process of reconstruction of subjectivity involves gaining voice and becoming a speaking subject about issues, another aspect includes gaining visibility and being seen and recognized by others.

Documentary film, particularly ethnographic films that aim at lessening the gap between social groups, as MacDougall believes, could be seen as a vehicle for overcoming this sense of Othering. As he puts it, such films that he identifies as ‘transcultural’ not only could be seen in the traditional sense of ‘crossing cultural boundaries,’ but they are ‘also transcultural in another sense: that of defying such boundaries. They remind us that cultural difference is at best a fragile concept, often undone by perceptions that create sudden affinities between ourselves and others apparently so different from us.’ (1998, p. 245)

When I set out to make a film about Rahian-e-Nour, part of my reason was out of a sense of obligation that I felt towards a particular group of people and their beliefs. In the West, particularly in Australia, there is a shroud of mystery around Iran and Iranian history. From my personal experience as an Australian, I knew that for instance, the Iran-Iraq war, its consequences and its effect today within the Iranian society had been misrepresented and under-represented. For example, while few in the Australian population at large would know that Iran ever had a war with Iraq, even fewer know of the dire consequences of this war. Consequently, much of the understanding of the situation has been made hypervisible within a specific context and represented stereotypically within the general situation of the Middle East. Added to this has been Iran’s convoluted and conflicted relationship with the West, which continuously puts Iran in the news headlines. While after 9/11 this often has been represented in relation to America’s declaration of Iran as Axis of Evil by American president George W. Bush in 2001, alongside Cuba and North Korea, and framed within the perspective of it as a fundamentally Islamic country, this representation was slightly reframed again in 2009.
As Iran began fighting for nuclear rights, and more recently in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, Iran was framed in the news in a new though still problematic light. However, Iran’s representation in the news is always stereotypical, topical, and extremely on the surface, giving little chance for the representation of issues affecting the population of Iran as individuals and of course, represented far less from alternative and marginal perspectives.

Added to this has been the difficulty of filmmaking in Iran in light of various restrictions and government imposed censorships. While ever since these laws were imposed after the revolution, fiction filmmakers had managed to find alternative modes of representations through creative use of symbols and poetic modes of representations, documentary filmmakers have had a more difficult time. As we know the depiction of real events can only be glossed over in so many ways while it would still maintain its authenticity. This is why, generally in Iran, documentary films have not been a popular mode of expression for filmmakers. This is why one can see the richness of Iranian fictional cinema where filmmakers masterfully blur the boundaries between fiction and reality to express and address deep-seated social issues.

But censorship on documentary films that depicted real and actual events became even more apparent around and especially after the 2009 elections which marked a crucial year in Iranian political history. The 10th presidential election was a controversial one because it offered the Iranian population the opportunity to vote for reformist candidates or to re-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for a second term in the office. When, despite popular belief and support of the leading reformist candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi, Ahmadinejad won, the Iranian population accused the government of tampering with the votes. Consequently violent protests broke out across Tehran. Thousands were arrested, many hundred were killed during the protests, and many more went missing without a trace. During this time, documentation of the events became significant as thousands of mobile footage were uploaded onto the Internet daily showing brutality against the people. The showcase of such violence involved international human rights agencies in the domestic situation. This is why after this filming, particularly documentary style filming became suspect by the government. Many documentary filmmakers were arrested at this time, or prevented from working in Iran altogether.
Overall, however, I believe censorship, particularly in documentary filmmaking has caused for a stereotypical kind of representation of Iran and Iranians. While Iranian fictional filmmakers have mastered and found a balance of blending fact and fiction to address deep-seated social issues, their representation still does not offer direct insight into issues and concerns in the way documentary filmmaking does. This lack of representation of documentary type narratives and stereotypical representations through fictional films within a particular social and political framework, I believe could be seen as hampering and silencing some of the true stories and voices of the Iranian population for both Western and Iranian audiences.

While this can be said generally about Iran, I believe the reflections of this type of stereotypical representation can be clearly seen in the absence of the Iran-Iraq war in Western media. Within Iran, cinema of the war is a popular genre and began during the war. As Pedram Khosronejad argues ‘the inception of Iranian war cinema (documentary and fiction) occurred with the beginning of the war in Iran.’ (2012, p. 3) He believes that it was during this period that ‘with the voluntary absence of the international media, a few Iranian filmmakers tried to capture and recreate the images and scenes of this human disaster.’ (p. 3) Khosronejad argues that Iranian war cinema could be divided into two categories of documentaries and fiction. However, he argues that even the origins and inspiration for the fictional films could be traced back to the documentaries made of the war, during the war. As he puts it,

when we study the process of the creation of Iranian war cinema carefully, we understand that, from the beginning, most of the films of this school have been documentary films made during the Iran-Iraq War, sometimes produced rapidly, as reportage, and sometimes with strong propaganda and religious slogan. (p.x)

Khosronejad also believes that these documentaries had various uses and purposes. He points out the significance of these documentaries for the society as points of information for audiences via national media. He writes, ‘one of the primary means of providing immediate information to society and mobilizing volunteers to go to the cities under attack and to the warfronts was national radio and television.’ (p. x)

While in Iran there are countless films made about the war, particularly documentaries, and although they have formed the landscape of Iranian cinema and its
history, it should be noted that both fiction and documentary about the war have not really had an enthusiastic audience beyond Iran. As Hamid Dabashi argues in the introduction to Khosronejad’s book, ‘except for Iranians themselves, scarcely anyone outside Iran knows the contours of this [war] cinema, its narrative themes and its visual registers.’ (Khosronejad, p. vi)

In addition, while films about the war have not really been exported beyond Iran, given the sensitivity of the topic and the government’s control over issues of access, even fewer films have been made about the war by foreign production companies. It is within this context that I set out to make and analyze this documentary film about the resonances of the Iran-Iraq war. My aim in making this film as an Iranian and Australian was to shed some light on the situation for Australian and other Western audiences.

While staying true and fair to those whom I wanted to represent, and told through a journey in the company of real characters with flaws and contradictions, I wanted for this to be a human story that takes the viewer inside this particular pocket of the Iranian society. In short, I wanted to bring to vision, give voice to, and construct a space through which the characters that we follow in the film would be represented beyond stereotypes. I wanted the film to be a space for negotiation and representation of that particular group in the Iranian society who had been made hypervisible as religious fanatics and through this to be a space for the reconstruction of their subjectivity in the West. By representing this unrepresented cross-section of the Iranian society I wanted to overcome this stereotypical representation, particularly through the very human and emotional stories that we encounter during the journey shown by the film.

However in this representation, I soon realized that the situation was much more complicated. As an insider/outsider I was not insider enough to know exactly what I was representing and my representation might have lacked any kind of authenticity or truth to their actual experiences. Whatever attempt I had wanted to make to mould my audiences’ view and shift their perspective about this group would have been contrived and unfaithful to the actual conditions, as they experienced, understood and viewed the film. Consequently, instead of attempting to intervene to shift the perspective of my audience, I realized that those on camera could do that themselves.
In fact, I realized that the camera had led to a change in the subjectivities of those who I filmed, which itself would be the cause of shift in the viewers’ perception. Here again, my role was negotiated. In the process of editing, I had to pull back myself and let those represented speak for themselves.

In fact, without me having to do anything extra at all, the presence of the camera leads to a shift in the subjects, both in how they view themselves, and how they are viewed. Halfway through the film, on one of our stops, when men and women separated into their own quarters, I gave my camera to Mahya to film the women’s section. By chance, that same evening, for the first time ever, a group of women from our caravan were allowed entry into the room of one of the greatest war heroes, Sayyad Shirazi. Initially, in the dark, we hear Mahya’s voice, as she tells us that this trip had been different from the beginning. And by different, she means more difficult. What had made the journey extremely difficult had been the fact that we had to change four buses to get to our destination, whereas usually one single bus would have brought the pilgrims straight through. However, when early in the journey, even before leaving Tehran, the bus is stopped by the road authorities and not allowed to leave because it lacked a global tracking system, the journey takes on a different challenge and a tough start. Given that we were on the cusp of the New Year’s celebrations, large buses had all been pre-booked. Consequently, we had to stop over in several cities to find and change buses to eventually make it to our destinations on time. It is in this context that Mahya says that usually it is easier to get to this point, without so much difficulty. Yet from the beginning she felt this trip was going to be different, more blessed. That, she believes, is because of the camera’s presence. Soon after, thrilled by the fact that the women have been allowed into the chambers of Sayyad Shirazi, Mahya faces the camera and says that this has never happened before to any group of women. Others have been asking why this group? What makes them so special that they were given entry? She giggles and says it is because they have a camera, a camera all the way from Australia.

Mahya’s confession to and about the camera suddenly gives her a sense of agency. She becomes a speaking subject about her own emotions and beliefs. Although we had seen Mahya as a character on screen up to this point, here we recognize her agency: as a passionate believer of the cause and as an active agent in organizing the trips. This representation, consequently, gives her a sense of individuality and differentiates her
from other women who may appear to look similar to the viewer under the chador. Furthermore, her strong belief that it has been the camera that has given them privileges during the trip adds to this point. Although it is true that she sees the camera as a way for propagating the cause of which she is true believer, it is also symbolic of her need to be recognized and acknowledged by others who will consequently view her on screen. This process gives her a sense of agency, as Oliver argues, and through this process of speech she regains her new subjectivity by becoming a speaking subject. She is no longer a faceless, nameless woman under the chador without a voice. This not only shifts her position, but it also shifts the perception of the audience. Although I am not one to predict the exact shifts that will occur in my audience as the result of seeing this on screen, what is for sure is that the audience, too, will to their own degree, hear her voice and recognize her as an individual and active agent. And as Oliver argues, recognition is the first step in understanding that the other is a human being too.

This could lead to different layers of shift in perspective. On the one level, Mahya as a woman shifts from an invisible Iranian woman to one with agency and a voice. But on a social level, by understanding her position, some audiences might identify with and understand her cause. In this case, interestingly enough, my film then has transformed into a propaganda film, without much intervention from me, to promote her cause by engaging the audience with her views. Had I not recognized that I was the subject of my subjects, and that this shift in perspectives was happening, the film would probably have been released into the world with this connotation. What this means is that by later understanding in the editing process that I had become my subjects’ subject, I was able to counteract this kind of move towards the kind of propaganda that Mahya’s story would have connoted.

This film also offers a shift in the audience by offering alternative and at times opposing and informative perspectives on some of the least understood issues of Islam and Iran. For instance, one of the most mysterious aspects of life in Iran is women’s covering or veiling. Western perception of Iranian women is of them being covered in the black chador. However, within the Iranian society, the veil is a complex issue. Although an Islamic practice, and an essential part of women’s public appearance, veiling has become such an integrated part of Iranian society that the boundaries of it between culture and religion are never clearly defined. In this context, some view
veiling as forceful and an invasion of women’s freedom, while others see it as liberating by giving women safety and security in the public male-dominated realm. Overall, veiling is a sensitive topic, particularly amongst those with opposing perspectives on the issue. Given this sensitivity there have been few films that offer an alternative or debate on the concept of veiling. During the journey, from our initial encounter on the bus, we see all the women dressed in the chador. When we travel to the war sites, we also see all the women dressed in the chador. However, the few who are not, who wear a scarf only and a coat, stand out considerably. At certain points, however, they too are guided into what are called Hijab Stations where they go into one end dressed as they are and come out on the other end with a black chador. Overall, the trip appears to offer a sense of uniformity of belief and appearance of Iranian women. However, during one of the bus rides, the women start to talk about the concept of veiling as one of the women clearly asks Mahay’s mother about this concept. Mahay’s mother is a woman who is highly educated in religion and has some authority in the field. A clear tension arises as the women engage in almost a heated discussion about the concept of veiling with Mahya’s mother referring to the Quran and citing passages. After heated debate, she concludes that the idea of veil is for women to choose appropriate cover so as not to stand out in a given situation. In short it means modesty. The other woman then concludes that if she is in a situation where wearing the hijab or veil makes her stand out, like on a beach somewhere in another country, then her hijab or covering should be a bikini because she would blend in and not stand out if everyone else is wearing a bikini. This causes a stir and enables interesting and conflicting perspectives and arguments to surface amongst the women on the concept of hijab. I highlight this part of the journey as a significant turning point in the subjectivities of Iranian women for Western audiences. This is so because by arguing about this controversial and often misunderstood concept, and by having such diverse opinions about the subject, the women and their discussion allows for the introduction of alternative subjectivities and beliefs of Iranian women about this topic: an issue that hardly ever gets debated out in public for both Iranian and Western audiences.

This chapter has analyzed the various shifts that occur as the result of this film. On the one hand it has examined the various shifts in me as a filmmaker/subject, and in my subjects on screen and consequently possible shifts that could occur in the viewer. In
the next chapter I will consider the role of my film as a new play of Taziyeh, one which adds to the transformation of the concept of Taziyeh.

Chapter Three:

Rahian-e Nour as a form of Taziyeh & Waking with Martyrs as a new form of Taziyeh

Taziyeh, as briefly mentioned in the introduction is a form of play that depicts the events of the Karbala battle on stage. According to linguists Taziyeh literally means mourning for the dead. It is believed that in the Iranian social context, the term was originally used generally in connection with lamentation for the dead. But later it came to specifically refer to the mourning ceremonies held for the martyred Imam Hussein. Negar Mottahedeh’s definition of Taziyeh can sum up well the essence of Taziyeh. She writes,

[Taziyeh] is the traditionally accepted term for the “theatrical” performance or dramas that reenact, recount, and recollect the lives of the extended family of the Prophet Mohammad…The venerated figures represented in ta’ziyeh are known as the “fourteen Infallibles” (chahardah ma’sum) by Shi’i Muslims. They include the Prophet Mohammad himself, the Twelve Imams, starting with Imam Ali, and the Prophet Mohammad’s daughter, the mother of Imam Hasan and Hosayn (Hussein), known as Fatemeh. (2005, p. 25)

Taziyeh, then, is ‘virtually the sole dramatic spectacle of a tragic nature which we encounter in the Islamic world prior to its cultural contact with the West.’ (M.M Badawi qtd in Jamshid Malik’pur 2004, p. 4) Taziyeh grew in Iran as a public presentation, very gradually starting with small indoor and private gatherings. These then developed into large-scale public presentations by the Safavid period in the 17th century. Scholars believe this development had to do with a kind of ‘nationalization of Shi’ism during the Safavid period’ (Malik’pur, p. 15). But Taziyeh as a performance was banned when Reza Shah took power from the Qajar dynasty in the early 1900s
and set out to modernize Iran. Part of this modernization scheme included a radical secularization as noted earlier. This included the exclusion and banning of elements that mark a country as religious. While this included radical changes such as banning on women’s veiling, it also extended to the exclusion of Taziyeh as a public performance. However, several decades later, when Mohammad Reza Shah, Reza Shah’s son replaced him (1941-1979) after he abdicated the throne, a more lenient approach was put into place towards religious expression and once again, small elements of Islam seeped through the culture in public, including the return of Taziyeh as a public performance. Despite maintaining the country’s modern appearance, Taziyeh evolved from a simple religious ceremony to be depicted as traditional Iranian theatre play which was even sometimes performed for Western audiences as part of theatre festivals in Iran. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979 which overthrew the monarchy and replaced it with a theocracy, Taziyeh continued to evolve and to this day is performed annually during the ten day period leading up to the anniversary of Imam Hussein’s death.

Just as the Karbala narrative itself has been continually shifting in nature to reflect Iran’s situation, I argue that the very tradition of Taziyeh could also be shifting and changing from traditionally performed theatre plays to reflect Iran’s shifting nature. My argument here is that new forms of performance like Rahian-e Nour could be seen as a new and modern spin on the age-old tradition of Karbala and Taziyeh that Iran has been privy to for the last three hundred years. As Negar Mottahedeh argues, in Taziyeh characters ‘come alive on the stage of Iranian “newest days” and take part in the dramatic reenactment of Islam’s antiquity—a resurrection, in drama, historically scheduled for Judgment Day.’ (2005, p. 25) In what follows, I demonstrate how Rahian-e Nour, the elements that it draws on and even the very timing of it during the new year indeed constitute a reconstruction, a new form of Taziyeh suited for and reflective of the current Iranian socio-political context. Furthermore, I will argue that my film, particularly seen from the perspective of those being filmed, could be seen as paving the way for the introduction of this new form of Taziyeh to Western audiences; and thus the film itself might be considered to be further shifting the nature and form of Taziyeh.

Before we proceed however, for us to understand this new reformation of Taziyeh, there needs to be an explanation of the structural and symbolic elements of this
traditional form of theatre. It is by drawing on these elements, and analyzing them in the modern context of Rahian-e Nour as we see it in the film that I argue for the shifting shape of Taziyeh.

There is no doubt that Taziyeh is a play that has and continues to represent a deep sense of historical and religious identification among Shi’i Muslims of Iran. There are many different perspectives on how this performance represents, depicts and maintains that sense of deep-rooted identity. Some scholars, like Comet de Gobineau, argue that the audience ‘recognized in this history of brutality the legitimization of their belief in the rightful claimants of the Prophet Mohammad’s throne and saw their Shi’i identity revealed in the ta’ziyeh.’ (qtd in Mottahedeh, 2005, p. 29) Mottahedeh goes on to argue that Taziyeh itself

must be seen as a space in which phantasmic Shi’i identity could be forged. The annual commemorative events not only offered spiritual renewal for the Twelver Shi’is but also situated the cultural difference of the…subjects vis-à-vis their neighbors. The performances marked their identity as “difference.” This difference can be formulated as an identity associated with the meek, but no less victorious, Imam—a validating identity which can be neither robbed nor destroyed by….others. (p.29)

Similarly, William Beeman also highlights the significance of Taziyeh in the formation of identity as he argues that it ‘offers the opportunity for the spectators ritually to renew their commitment to a religious and ideological order of which they are an integral part. This ideological order does not limit itself strictly to religious dimensions but includes a political and nationalistic dimension as well. (qtd in Mottahedeh 2005, p. 29)

However, the elements associated with this kind of identity, though religiously and historically rooted, are by no means static. Just as the associations of the meaning of the very battle of Karbala has shifted over centuries, from an Islamic association to a nationalist association with the Shah and Imam Khomeini and then in relation to the Iran and Iraq war, so the shifting nature of Taziyeh and what it represents has evolved. As Mottahedeh puts it, Taziyeh dramas ‘have clearly captured the mythological forces and rationalities that have filtered through various modern institutions and that have
animated both personal and collective initiatives at particular times in Iranian history.’ (p.29)

As was noted in Chapter One, page 28, historically speaking, the Islamic revolution provided a good example of where aspects of this performance and its associated ideology were translated into a nationalistic and political form - where the Shah was continuously referred to as the corrupt power, like Yazid, and the people of the country were seen as the meek who were oppressed under his rule and force. Similarly, this idea was reflected on and extended towards the war between Iran and Iraq where the war became a Taziyeh like performance of the Iranian people and soldiers against the forceful Saddam Hussein regime. Going to war was like taking part in a Taziyeh to renew one’s religious belief and connection. As will be discussed shortly, even the dress code and the rituals of those going to the war was to a degree a kind of performance which alluded to the elements often seen in a Taziyeh performance.

Carrying this sense of continued identity, aside from the recurring thematic story, are the stylistic and performative aspects of the play that make it unique. Taziyeh is a very emotive performance often performed outdoors on a round open stage. It is an inclusive performance, where the audiences are also as much involved in moving the play along as the actors. The round stage, set in the middle of the theatre, does not separate the audience from the performers. As the actors perform, in clearly symbolic clothing, the audience cheer and participate in progressing the play forward. They cry loudly and openly when the man representing Yazid, or the devil, acts wiley, and when the man in the white representing Imam Hussein is martyred. They also sympathize with the surviving children who represent the innocence in the situation of the play and in turn of Islam. They cry again when characters dressed in black represent the mourning for the death of the beloved martyrs. In this performance colors are extremely symbolic. Drawing on highly stylized colors of red as evil, white as good, green as innocence, and black as a sign of mourning, the play draws on the audiences’ emotions. These colors and symbols are not only used in the clothing but they extend to use in flags and decorations around the performance.

But what is significant is that these colors and the use of the flags extend beyond the duration of the play and into other aspects of Iranian Shi’i life, thus translating into a
political and national context. For example, during the Iraq-Iran war, the same colors and flags that are used in Taziyeh were used during battle. Soldiers wore headbands of green to represent their innocence. Flags of red and black that bore the name of Imam Hussein were also erected to represent the evil and the mourning associated with the war. In this way, elements of the costumes of Taziyeh could be seen as extending into and manifesting in the actual physical lives of people.

This is why the play emotionally and physically engages the audience. Taziyeh forms a significant part of the Karbala story and it has played a crucial role in keeping the story of Karbala visually alive and close to people’s hearts. As Shahriari argues, this performance is ‘a collective journey to the innermost layers of the hidden historical collective of unconscious of actors/spectators.’ (qtd in Malik’pur, 2004, p. 12) As mentioned already, however, I believe that like the Karbala story, Taziyeh as a kind of performance that engages the audience/spectators has also had great shifts in its associated meaning. While traditionally Taziyeh is a theatre play that engages the audience with the intention of shifting their perspective or belief, I argue that this kind of play can be seen beyond a specific kind of theatre performance and is transformed into other forms of performances, for audiences further and wider than solely Iranian Shi’i viewers. In what remains of this chapter, I set out to argue how I believe this shift has occurred first and foremost through Rahian-e Nour and what its implications are, and then how my film could be seen as extending this phenomenon as a new kind of Taziyeh beyond the Iranian borders.

First, however, we need to understand how Rahian-e Nour as a journey could be seen as a kind of Taziyeh performance itself. Taziyeh, as understood as a play, has historically only been represented and performed within the ten days of the month of Ashura, leading up to the battle of Karbala. However, what I argue is that Rahian-e Nour could be seen as extending Taziyeh, shifting its nature and time specificity, and completely changing its purpose to a national and political purpose. What becomes evident in attending Rahian-e Nour is that the entire program seems to have been constructed to feel like a physical journey into the battle sites of Karbala, almost a physical and real manifestation of the battle of Karbala, a very large Taziyeh. As mentioned, over the years the war sites for the Iran-Iraq war have come to be referred to as ‘the Karbala of Iran’ where many innocent Iranians fought in a bloody battle against the so believe evil forces of Saddam Hussein. As Abdullah directly tells us on
the bus, traveling to these sites is like traveling to Iran’s Karbala. Added to this has been the fact that the discourse surrounding the journey continuously draws on the emphasis and parallel between the battle of Karbala and the war between Iran and Iraq. This emphasis begins on the way on the buses, as the participants deliberately engage in readings and sermons that highlight this as a trip to Iran’s Karbala. This discourse continues at the war sites with more sermons on site as eulogists continually draw parallels between Imam Hussein, the battle of Karbala and the lives lost during the Iran-Iraq war. Costumes, props, and decorations for the pilgrimage and war sites are chosen very specifically and reflect the colors and elements of Karbala. For instance, those who work and volunteer for the event all wear army uniforms, to remind people of the fallen soldiers. Sometimes, they wear the green headbands around their heads to reflect the martyrs and to allude to Imam Hussein and his army’s innocence. Women who attend the event are made to wear the black chador. Signage, flags and decorations too are done in alignment with the colors used in a Taziyeh play. Red flags are hoisted throughout the region to indicate the bloodshed and evil of the war, while green flags and white flags indicate the innocence of those who lost their lives in the war. Here, as in attending the play, there is an emotive engagement with the participants/audiences, as they sit in groups and respond to different performances and sermons, remembering the war that is always contextualized in relation to the battle of Karbala. Unlike traditional Taziyeh where the stage is formally set, here it feels like the entire place has turned into one big stage for emotional engagement and performance and everyone is welcomed and encouraged to participate at any time and in any form they wish.

However, there is an added element to this Taziyeh. While in traditional Taziyeh audiences watch the play while engaging emotionally, in Rahian-e Nour the audience’s emotions are stirred through a different physical experience and reconstruction of the war. The fact that participants walk barefoot, wear certain clothes, and are taken on re-enactments of night battles, engages them on a totally new level of emotional as well as physical experience. It is due to these resemblances that I argue that Rahian-e Nour could be seen as a new kind of Taziyeh that transcends the stage and time-specificity to engage audiences.

What is significant to note here is that by taking this kind of engagement beyond its traditional, time specific performance, its enactment allows for it to be transformed
from a religious ceremony into a political and nationalistic performance. Each year Rahian-e Nour is held twice. Once during the summer holidays, and the other during the Persian New Year. Although appearing to be organized to coincide with school and public holidays, the choice for these dates are highly political and calculated by the government. This becomes clear when we look at the New Year event which attracts more people than the summer journey. Coinciding with Spring Equinox on March 21st, traditionally, this holiday has been about the celebration of spring and renewal of life. It is a holiday that is family-oriented where families tend to visit each other, leaving aside any hostilities they might have held during the year. As a non-religious holiday, people often take time off and travel to other cities and spend family time together. Unlike the Western calendar where the year changes at exactly midnight, in the Persian calendar the year changes according to specific astrological calculations of star alignments. Consequently, the year changes at different times every year according to these calculations. There is a specific traditional ritual leading up to the year change. It has become historical tradition as far as anyone remembers radio and television existing in Iran that a certain number of bells ring, followed by a specific joyful tune. This is then usually followed by fun and family oriented shows to include live music performances to celebrate the New Year.

That Rahian-e Nour should take place during the Persian New Year, is telling of the government’s attempt to not only politicize the event, but also to use it to overcome and over throw one of the few remaining highly celebrated secular events of the Persian calendar. In addition, this could be seen as attempt to attract people, especially young people, to the government’s cause. Rahian-e Nour is a government subsidized initiative. This means that an all inclusive road trip to the south of Iran at the peak of the holiday seasons would usually cost less than a family meal depending on where you sign up to depart from. For many who embark on the trip, particularly the poorer part of the population and the youth, this could be seen as a rare holiday with their friends and family subsidized by their friendly government. Consequently, by choosing to travel on a holiday to these sites, many people are exposed to the discourses and ideologies preached throughout the trips while being conveniently diverted from celebrating one of the last remaining secular holidays of the country.

Added to this is the fact that Rahian-e Nour has continuous live coverage leading up to and throughout the New Year which again diverts the attention of audiences who
remain in the large cities from the festivities to a remembering of the war. Consequently, the entire New Year celebrations which used to have a celebratory tone, turns into a somber remembrance of the thirty year old war.

This is why ultimately this entire program could be seen as a political set-up to engage the senses of audiences both those who are present on the sites and via the media, and to divert their attention from secular festivities back to the ethos of the current Islamic republic and regime. Given the general discontent of the Iranian public about the regime, this could be seen as a means to re-capture the population’s attention towards the Islamic republic and reminding people of its almost forgotten religious values.

Thus far, I have argued how I perceive Rahian-e Nour to be an extended Taziyeh performance which transcends beyond the stage and into an entire pilgrimage. What I want to argue from here on is how my own film could be perceived to be a kind of an addition or extension of this kind of Taziyeh from the perspective of those who encouraged my participation and making of the film.

Although from my own perspective, this film was a very personal film about my journey and about the group of people who travel to Rahian-e Nour, in the eyes of my subjects, this film was the opportunity they were looking for to promote their own cause. And it is within this context that I argue that my film could be seen as a new kind of Taziyeh.

While Rahian-e Nour could be seen as a kind of wider manifestation of this Taziyeh that is more inclusive of participants and moving beyond the time and space limits of the older performances, I believe that my film could be seen as an extension of this concept. While Rahian-e Nour, too, is limited in its space and time—to the front lines and to two specific times in the year—a film about this event could offer an experience beyond those limited time and spaces. Especially in a digital world where information and videos are easily accessible worldwide through the Internet, it has become apparent to everyone that the way to spread a message has also to conform to this new medium of expression and presentation. My film has the potential to transfer that limited Taziyeh performance and its message, and make it timeless for audiences across the globe.
However, given my position as an outsider/insider who is aware of the political implications of this film on both sides of the political fence, I know that this film has the potential to be seen either as propaganda for the Iranian government or as an anti-Iranian government film, depending on the perspective of the audience. This is why I found myself at a junction where in the process of editing, I had to some degree make my work more fictive, to use Michael Renov’s words, to construct the truth as I saw it. As Renov argues in the introduction of *Theorizing Documentary*, ‘all discursive forms—documentary included—if not fictional, are at least fictive, by virtue of their tropic character (their recourse to tropes or rhetorical figures.’ (1993, p.7) Renov draws on Hayden White’s argument that ‘every mimesis can be shown to be distorted and can serve, therefore, as an occasion for yet another description of the same phenomenon.’ (1993, p.7) He believes that every documentary representation can have a different meaning depending on ‘its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier (via choices of language, lens, proximity, and sound environment.’ He concludes by arguing that ‘the itinerary of a truth’s passage’ where he defines truth as ‘propositional and provisional’ is therefore ‘qualitatively akin to that of fiction.’ (p.7) Consequently according to him ‘this is only another way of saying that there is nothing inherently less creative about nonfictional representations, both may create a “truth” of the text.’ (p.7) But he goes on to argue that this can create a political problem of representation. He argues

What differs is the extent to which the referent of the documentary sign may be considered as a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context rather than fabricated for the screen. Of course, the very act of plucking and recontextualizing profilmic elements is a kind of violence, particularly when cultural specificity is at issue as it is with ethnographic texts. There the question of the adequacy of a representation system as a stand-in for lived experience arises most forcefully. The question, seemingly epistemological in character, is, in fact, a deeply charged political issue. (p.7)

Renov’s words well express why I am aware of the political implications of my film and precisely why in the process of editing, inclusions and exclusions have been imperative for the ways in which I have framed the film. In what follows, I examine
and explain my editing process and my explanation of the transformation of this film into a personal story of someone affected by the situation, simply framed within Rahian-e Nour, rather than constructing a more politically charged film.
Chapter Four:

The Editing Process

In this chapter, I set out to highlight and explain my editorial decision and process in the making of *Waking with Martyrs*. However, as my personal decisions in the process of editing were very much influenced by the existing landscape of documentary films about Iran by Western filmmakers, and by Iranians like myself who live abroad, I will begin this chapter by contextualizing this film before proceeding to expand on my editorial decisions.

**The Landscape of Documentaries about Iran**

As mentioned, making a film in Iran is an extremely lengthy and difficult process. Iranians have mastered the art of surpassing and overcoming the obstacles to make films. As is known worldwide, Iran has a healthy cinema with 60 to 70 fiction films produced every year since the Islamic Revolution, some reaching international levels of success despite controversial topics and issues that they address. Interestingly enough feature films seem to be more favorable in Iran. While the fictionalizing of issues gives filmmakers more flexibility to express more controversial ideas, audiences also seem more in favor of watching fictionalized films. Additionally, the government seems less restricted in allowing feature films to be made as opposed to documentaries which could be exposing of certain issues that it wants to avoid.

This is why making a documentary in Iran by Iranian filmmakers could be a difficult process. While various permissions, clearances and permits need to be obtained, there also needs to be a screening right permission. Often times, while films can be made, sometimes by taking risks and without permissions, they would not get a public exposure because they will be denied the final screening permit. As noted in Chapter Two of this thesis, making documentaries in Iran became especially difficult after the 2009 controversial elections, and after the uprisings. What documentary filmmaking for Iranians even more difficult was that after 2009 the government created a law against anyone who worked with the BBC and some other international channels who advocated the political upheavals.
While no foreign film crew has managed to make a fiction feature film in Iran, ironically within this context, non-Iranians have successfully managed to penetrate into Iran to make a number of interesting documentaries over the last several decades. These films, however, often act as kinds of rudimentary introduction and a means of access to Iran. For instance, here one could name Paul Sapin’s *Rageah Inside Iran* (2007), a BBC documentary made in the first year of Ahamdinejad’s presidential year where he travels and talks to the people about issues that affect them. Similarly, one could also name the American documentary series about travel to exotic places called *Iran: Yesterday and Today* (2009) presented by Rick Steves. More superficial than Sapin’s film, this is an overview of the beauty of Iran as a touristic destination and as a way of gaining access to Iran. Beautifully shot, the film begins with the narrator telling us that this film is about ‘understanding Iran and the 70 million people who call it home.’ Ironically, it does not offer any understanding of life in Iran but rather surveys the most generic tourist sites of the country, like cities of Isfahan and Shiraz, while making superficial contact with the people he encounters. On a more topical issue there is another American documentary by journalist Shane Smith who travels to Iran to understand the Iranian film industry in a film called *Inside Iranian Cinema* (2013). His film is slightly more controversial as he tries to dig under the surface slightly to offer an understanding of Iranian cinema.

While these films have all been successfully made, the narrators in the films do highlight the difficulty of making the film in Iran. For instance Rageah started his film by stating how he managed to gain access to Iran after a year and half of bureaucratic wrangling. Similarly, Smith too, tells of the difficulties and rejections of getting a visa to Iran, until he and his team were finally invited to attend and report on the Urban Iranian Film Festival in Tehran. Even then, when in Tehran they were very cautious about filming and hid their cameras until they have registered and gained the proper authorization to make their film.

On the other hand, over the last decade or so, there has been a significant rise in the number of documentary films made about Iran by Iranians who live abroad, like myself. These films are often personal accounts, and unlike those made by non-Iranians they are often about intimate and topical subjects that non-Iranians would not have the insider access to. These groups of filmmakers have the best vantage point for expression of certain issues. While on the one hand, they have the cultural insider
knowledge which gives them direct access that foreigner filmmakers would not, they are also faced with less restrictions. Often, filmmakers such as myself, use their personal connection, and know-how of the country to make films without gaining permission from the government. Then, because they are not intending to screen their films publically in Iran, they simply put together their films upon return to the country in which they reside and screen their films publically where they often get much public exposure for managing to present intimate portrayals of an otherwise inaccessible country. These films then are usually smuggled, or downloaded from the Internet, and begin to circulate privately in Iran. Oftentimes, it is through documentaries made by this group of people that we gain intimate insight into some of the country’s most controversial and marginal issues.

Among these filmmakers, for instance, one could mention filmmakers like Moslem Mansouri, who lives between the United States and Europe and who has made several documentaries about intimate topics in Iran, including his 2002 documentary on prostitution *Epitath* which anonymously speaks to prostitutes in Iran about their conditions. Similarly, Faiborz Davoodian a Los Angeles based Iranian actor returned to Iran after many years to make a film entitled *Iran is My Home* (2003). This too is an intimate engagement of Iranian people and explores the narrator’s sense of identity in relation to his home country.

Of the more successful and well-received diasporic Iranian filmmakers who have made documentaries about Iran, one has to name Nahid Perrson Sarvestani. Based in Sweden, Sarvestani has made several high profile and intimate documentaries about Iran, including her famous documentary *The Queen and I* (2008) where she examines her own personal relationship with the former Iranian Queen, Farah. But her most controversial film entitled *Prostitution Behind the Veil*, for which she was briefly imprisoned in Iran in 2007, follows very intimately the lives of two prostitutes, offering a rare insight into this rising issue in Iran. Her most recent film, *My Stolen Revolution* (2013) follows Sarvestani as she traces back her revolutionary roots to Iran and reunites with some of her former prison mates in Iran. Sarvestani’s films are extremely intimate in nature and due to their candid approach have been both the subject of praise and extreme criticism. While some applaud her for her bravery and portrayal of marginal topics, others have been extremely critical of her and accused her of representing the dark side of Iran.
Tanaz Ehshagian, an Iranian-American filmmaker has also made another documentary called *Be Like Others* (2008) about transsexuals in Iran. The film closely follows the marginal lives of a number of transgender individuals as they undergo the process of sex change in Iran. The film was very well received. A BBC 2, France 5, ITVS production, it premiered at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival and went on to win the Teddy special jury prize at the Berlin Film Festival as well as the ELSE Siegessaule Reader's Choice Award and was nominated for an Emmy award.

But among diasporic Iranian filmmakers who have been making high profile documentaries in Iran, one has to mention Mehran Tamadon. A French based Iranian architect-turned-filmmaker, Tamadon has made several documentaries in Iran on sensitive and topical issues. After making *Beheshte Zahra* (2007) about the mothers of those martyred in the war who go week after week to mourn their son’s death in the cemetery, Tamadon was inspired to make his controversial documentary *Basidji* (2009). *Basidji* follows Tamadon as he personally approaches a group of Iranian pro-government people called the Basidji. Basidji are members of the Sazmane Basij-e Mostaz'afin which literally translates as ‘The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed.’ It is a paramilitary volunteer militia group established in 1979 by order of Ayatollah Khomeini. The original organization consisted of civilian volunteers who Ayatollah Khomeini urged to fight in the Iran-Iraq war. Today the force consists of young Iranians who have volunteered. Currently Basidji serve as an auxiliary force engaged in activities such as internal security as well as law enforcement auxiliary, the providing of social service, organizing of public religious ceremonies, and policing of morals and the suppression of dissident gatherings. The Basidjis are also one of the strongholds that forms and runs the Rahian-e Nour initiative. In his film Tamadon follows a number of Basidji leaders to Rahian-e Nour. Shot mostly in interview style, with the filmmaker leading the film’s narrative through questions, the film offers an intimate but cautious understanding of some of the ideologies of Iran’s least recognized group of pro-government people.

It is within this filmic landscape that my film is situated. The films I have highlighted here show the diversity of representation on Iran and topics associated with it by both Iranian and non-Iranian filmmakers. However, among the diasporic group of filmmakers that I identity with, and find my filmmaking most similar to Tamadon’s. In my research I came across an interesting report on Tamadon’s film on the Iranian
Voice of America’s Channel about the film’s premier in Toronto Film Festival in 2009, which for me situated the way such films are viewed. In introducing the film, the reporter, Behnam Nateghi says

this film is a documentary, but it is not a documentary that investigates a topic for the audience like a reportage. Rather, it is a dramatic story that unfolds in front of the camera of real events. It is more like a cinema of reality rather than a documentary film.

The reporter goes on to situate the film alongside other films that were being screened as part of the Iranian selection for the Toronto Film Festival in 2009. He argues that while in that same year there were other films that showed the mainstream side of the protests and those affected by it, like Hana Makhmalbaf’s Green Days (2009) and Australian-Iranian Gronaz Mousavi’s My Tehran for Sale (2009), Tamadon’s film takes us to the other side of the spectrum where we are faced with people who could potentially be the ones doing the beating of people on the streets. When asked about the way the film was made, the reporter highlights that the film is a very ‘human’ film. The filmmaker, according to him, used his humanity and his emotional human connection to get close to the subjects who open up to him to speak of their views and experiences. He believes through this human connection the filmmaker has opened up a safe space of discussion where this particular group of the society’s perspective is heard without being judged, and consequently the film can be seen as a point of dialogue for further understanding of this group of people and their point of views. He reports on some of the critics of the film who believe that the fact that the camera is so openly present and the filmmaker so actively involved, as a subject in the film himself, is significant in the way the film is understood. This approach not only makes the subjects of the film active, but it is also the way in for creating change for audiences and for the subjects themselves.

I see my own film similar to Tamadon’s and situated in the same filmic landscape. While the films were made by filmmakers from different parts of the world, both of our aspirations is to open up a space for understanding of a marginalized group within the Iranian society, a group whose perspective the Western world rarely gets to recognize. However, what differentiates my film is that although the film does offer us a glimpse into the lives of this particular group of people, it is also a very personal film
about my own journey. However, the realization that in addition to offering a glimpse into this group of the society, this was also a personal film, came into recognition and realization only through the various stages of the editing process about the process of which I explain in the next section of this study.

**A Step by Step Analysis of the Editing Process:**

1st *Cut:*

When I set out to edit the film as a story, the very first idea I had in mind was a story that followed Abdullah and Mahya’s journey as a couple through Rahian-e Nour. I wanted to use the couple as a conduit to introduce and analyze that particular part of the Iranian society. In this version, I had no narration. Places, times and people were identified with titles and subtitles.

However, as the editing process progressed, and as I had a chance to distance myself from the familiar story, and in consultation with non-Iranian viewers, I realized that this version lacked any real intimacy. Although Abdullah and Mahya were the main characters of the film, they did not give us enough insight into the situation. Nor did their story have an arc. In this cut, the film was a reportage of Rahian-e Nour with people hopping on and off buses, going to very similar locations, repeating the same rituals with Abdullah and Mahya as their guide.

In this version, I followed real time and chronological representation of events. But as I later realized this made for repetitive and unnecessary material to the point that the film became boring for the viewers. The repeated action caused loss of interest in the rituals.

The first cut also entirely excluded myself as a subject in the film. Initially, I had decided that I wanted to cut out any personal connection with the story. This was based around two facts that I understood only in hindsight. First, although having been so close to the process, I had missed the fact this was a very personal journey. My decision to add myself into the film as a subject only came through a meditative reflection of the process of the editing of the film, and the realization of the very
personal significance of the journey for myself and for my relationship with my father much later in the editing process.

The second reason that I had cut myself out of the film was that I wanted to disassociate myself with the subject matter because I had initially thought this was a journey about Rahian-e Nour. Although I had gone on this journey, I had little identification with my subjects and their beliefs. Initially, I saw this film as their journey, and my presence was like a fly on the wall, a way of reporting on their experiences. As such I did not feel that this was my journey and as the result, I decided to exclude myself entirely from this first draft of the film. This was purely an observational version, where as the filmmaker, I was totally absent in the film.

This version almost did not carry its own weight as a feature length film, and could have simply been cut down to a half an hour television report.

2nd Cut:

It was after much consultation with audiences, both Iranian and non-Iranian, and advise from my supervisors that I decided that film needed much more layers for it to carry its weight as a feature.

One of the layers I realized was contextualization of the film for my non-Iranian audiences. Although some of my Iranian audiences who were familiar with the war and the Rahian-e Nour phenomenon understood the film, I realized that the film, and the purpose of the entire trip was vague for my non-Iranian audiences. One way to solve this problem was through contextualizing of the Rahian-e Nour initiative and the war through a short written blurb at the beginning of the film that explained the war and the Rahian-e Nour initiative.

In this version, I also cut down a lot of the repetitions of actions and locations that had disinterested my test audience. However, despite this initial contextualization, the film did not still have a story arc. From feedback from audiences and my supervisors, the film did not carry the audiences with interest.

3rd Cut:

It was only after beginning to research about documentary film and the role of the filmmaker, and in hindsight of watching the footage again more objectively, that I
realized that this film was a very personal journey. In the third cut consequently I added a layer to the film through the inclusion of my own personal reasons for embarking on the journey. This cut included an initial introductory commentary about my childhood dream of going to the war, and the opportunity gained as the result of having met Abdullah after returning to Iran.

In this cut, I also realized that I needed more historical setting up. I contextualized Rahian-e Nour through archival footage of the war at the beginning to give the film. This archival footage, not only helped contextualize the film historically but it also added a sense of historical weight and significance to the film.

However, feedback from my viewers and supervisors indicated that although the film had a better set up, it still lacked explanations and nuances that were unclear to non-Iranian audiences.

4th Cut:

The fourth cut of the film had a significant improvement in terms of structure and narrative. Several factors influenced this sudden change and improvement.

First of all, at this stage I had shown the film to my father. Ironically, my father was also a passenger on the bus during the film but in the process of disassociating myself, I had not included him in the filming process. But through talking to him, I realized that in reality the reason that I had embarked on the trip initially had been to retrace his footsteps and to see the murals that he had painted. This sudden realization, not only highlighted my own significance as a character in the film, as a subject, but also added an extra layer of story to the film which could be explained by my father.

My father who had been present during the war, and returned to the sites on one of the very first informally organized Rahian-e Nour pilgrimages, could be the key to contextualizing the film historically and in an informal and personal manner. Consequently, I added interviews with my father about his perspective of the war then and of Rahian-e Nour now. This adds an extra layer of clarification for audiences and gives my journey a clearer purpose.

Consequently, my father’s presence also shifted my presence in the story and the narrative structure of the film. It was here when I set out to include myself in the film.
as a subject that I recognized my own significance in the film, and my own shifting and changing presence. This added an interesting layer to the narration with an extra dramatic twist to the film in relation to the subject I was filming.

Secondly, it was at this stage that I started working with an editor. As an editor and someone unfamiliar with the background and story of the film, he offered suggestions that helped with reframing and reshaping the structure and narrative of the film. Having spoken to him about the context, the story, and my relationship with my father, he made me realize that the film was missing significant context for non-Iranian audiences and that the structure needed major revisions for it to carry it as an engaging feature film.

It was in working with the editor that I decided on the significance of further contextualizing the film. While the introduction set up Rahian-e Nour as a historical context, the film was still missing explanations on the presence of the significance of martyrdom, Ashura and the battle of Karbala that currently formed the backbones of the Rahian-e Nour initiative. It was with this knowledge that I inserted and added narrative elements, visual elements, and explanations of Martyrdom and Ashura given by people in the film, to give a fuller picture of the situation to non-Iranian audiences.

Added to this was the fact that I realized that although I was making a documentary that was telling a story about a journey, that journey did not necessarily need to follow the chronology and sequence of the actual journey. The editor’s presence here helped greatly. As an editor of fiction film, he saw great similarities between my film and a film of fiction. Here, elements could still be shifted and moved around while still holding the integrity and reality of real events. Theorists of documentary are also aware of this process. For instance and as noted earlier, Renov acknowledges the similarity of fiction and documentary in *Theorizing Documentary*. He argues, ‘in a number of ways, fictional and nonfictional forms are enmeshed in one another—particularly regarding semiotics, narrativity, and questions of performance.’ (1993, p.2) After putting forth several examples where documentaries do share these traits with fictional films, such as in Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, and Vertov’s *Man with Movie Camera* he concludes that ‘fiction and nonfictional categories share key conceptual and discursive characteristics.’ He goes on to add that
indeed, nonfiction contains any number of “fictive” elements, moments at which presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention. Among these fictive ingredients we may include the construction of character….emerging though recourse to ideal and imagined categories of hero or genius, the use of poetic language, narration, or musical accompaniments…or the creation of suspense via the agency of embedded narratives (e.g., tales told by interview subjects) or various dramatic arcs (here, the “crisis of structure” comes to mind). (1993, p. 2)

Although thus far in my previous versions I had realized the need for fictionalizing the truths to some degree by highlighting certain aspects such as construction of character and addition of narratives in my own voice to engage myself in the film, it was then that I thought about a major restructure of the chronology of the film to solve the “structure crisis.” This, restructure involved me more as a character and highlighted my story and in a way shifted the style of my film from what I thought was a participatory film to what David MacDougall calls ‘beyond observational cinema.’ As he puts it,

beyond observational cinema lies the possibility of a participatory cinema bearing witness to the “event” of the film and making strengths of what most films are at pains to conceal. Here the filmmaker acknowledges his entry upon the world of his subjects and yet asks them to imprint directly upon the film their own culture. This should not imply a relaxation of the filmmaker’s purposefulness, nor should it cause him to abandon the perspective that an outsider can bring to another culture. By revealing his role, the filmmaker enhances the value of his material as evidence. By entering actively into the world of his subjects, he can provoke a greater flow of information about them. By given them access to the film, he makes possible corrections, addictions, and illuminations that only their response to the material can elicit. (1985, p. 238)
In my own work, I recognized this need to move beyond the observational mode, by fictionalizing the chronology of the event, and by engaging myself more in order to highlight my engagement with the subjects in the film, as well as those who would view the film. For example, in the chronology of the events, we arrive at my father’s mural site halfway through the journey. However, given that I had now structured the film to revolve around my retracing of my father’s footsteps, I decided to shift the chronology of the events to make the murals the final destination of my journey. In this structure I wanted to capture the essence of the journey instead of the chronology of the journey. This restructure not only allowed for me to create a climax in the film, but it also allowed for cutting out of some of the repeated material and footage of the film, thus creating a structure that has a story arc is more engaging with audiences. This structure now offered a climax, where we reach the paintings, and a closure to the story after we leave the sites and go back to Tehran.
Conclusion:

This exegesis contributes to further understanding and situation of my work and research. On the one hand, it has been a research that has situated my work within a larger framework. It has done this through a historical contextualization of the Iran-Iraq war, the phenomena of Rahian-e Nour, and Taziyeh and the situation of my work within this context. As such it has situated my work by offering the larger framework within and into which my work has been produced. It has examined the filmic landscape of documentary in Iran, and those being made in Iran by both Iranians and non-Iranians. Through this analysis this study has highlighted the specific space in which my work is situated from an insider/outsider perspective.

Furthermore, this study has highlighted the significance of this type of film for shifting perspectives. It has done this in particular by considering the significance of this film as a conduit for shifting perspectives of the subjects, the viewers, and the filmmaker. The study has demonstrated this by taking the reader on a journey of the encounter with the subjects and the filmmaker, and drawing on theories of subjectivities that identify how the film might affect the perception of the audiences about the subjects of the film.

Simultaneously, this research has been one of the few that sheds light on the Rahian-e Nour as a new phenomenon and as a new type of war pilgrimage emerging alongside other existing similar events around the world. Given the very currency of this topic, and the inaccessibility of research due to its political sensitivity, few people outside of Iran have had insider access to offer an understanding of Rahian-e Nour in this manner. This thesis, thus, in part contributes to this understanding.

On the other hand, this written thesis has documented the journey and the editing process leading to the final product. As such, it takes the reader through a logical understanding of editorial decisions at each step of the editing process from the first to the final cut of the film.

Although when setting out on making this film and doing the research, the process of writing this thesis and making the film seemed independent of each other, I have found a strange connection in the process. The process of research, reading, and
researching has offered unique and thought provoking ideas which have directly influenced my thought process and reflected in the editing process. For example, it was in researching about the concepts of shifting perspectives and the position of the filmmaker that I eventually realized the very shifting nature of myself both as a filmmaker and a subject within this film. This is why in hindsight the process of writing and editing have been co-dependent on each other, each activity offering its contribution towards a better understanding of the film for myself as a filmmaker, and for my audiences.
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