

# Debating the Iran-Iraq War on Film

Narges Bajoghli

For supporters of the Islamic Republic, it is the Iran-Iraq war, and not the 1979 revolution, that evokes the true spirit of the Islamic Republic. In 1979, the plethora of political groups that poured into the streets was united in the desire to get rid of the US-backed Shah, but divided as to the shape of post-revolutionary society. Only after the outbreak of the “imposed war” with Iraq (1980–1988) were Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his fellow clerics able to consolidate the Islamic Republic as a state. The war allowed the regime to imprison the opposition for reasons of “national security” and to mobilize the population in defense of the revolution as the regime defined it.

Key to the propaganda effort were documentary and feature films, shown in cinemas and on television, that depicted the “imposed war” as an epochal battle of righteous Islamic forces against the “infidel” regime of Saddam Hussein. The *Chronicles of Victory* series by Morteza Avini, which aired on national television throughout the eight-year war, was the most famous such production. Ever since the war ended, the official discourse of the regime, as communicated through state-run media, has sought to preserve the sacredness of the war as a symbol and keep it off-limits to the interpretive gaze of others. The task has never been easy: Ayatollah Khomeini, after all, repeatedly vowed not to quit the battlefield until an Islamic government was established in Baghdad in place of Saddam. The surprise ceasefire of 1988 left many soldiers, perhaps particularly those most devoted to the regime, feeling betrayed, since Saddam was still in power and the front lines were almost exactly where they were in 1982, when the Iraqis were driven out of Iranian territory. Already in 1988, the character of Haji Pakdel voiced these sentiments

in *Marriage of the Blessed*, written and directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who was identified as an “Islamic” filmmaker before he became famous in the West as a quietly transgressive auteur. Many Iranians were conscious, moreover, that the post-1982 phase of the war was not so “imposed”—the belief has grown over time that the Khomeini regime ordered the push into Iraqi territory in order to drag out the fighting and thus protect itself from domestic challengers. In the 1990s, directors such as Ebrahim Hatamikia and Kamal Tabrizi made films in the vein of Makhmalbaf’s that subtly challenged the official version of events.

Today, however, those who wish to sanctify the Iran-Iraq war in the public memory face bigger problems. Two thirds of Iranians are under the age of 35, too young to remember the war in detail and, judging by the recurrent protest movements since 1999, less and less willing to accept the regime’s word on faith. After the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election, hardline conservatives were ascendant. These men thought they could restore the war to its hallowed status in Iranian culture by suppressing all other views, however faintly alternative. The state confiscated Morteza Avini’s work after the disputed 2009 presidential election, for example, and Ahmadinejad loyalists forced the cadre of filmmakers from Avini’s foundation out of work. It was a familiar tale in Ahmadinejad’s second term, when paranoia ran high and cultural producers with visions of a more open Islamic Republic were cast aside.

But the Ahmadinejad-era crackdown was hardly a complete success. On television, on film, in newspapers and in other public forums, a vibrant discussion began about the war and how it is depicted in state-sanctioned cultural production. The discussion continues today after the hardliners lost the presidency. Most of this conversation takes place in Persian and is not subtitled for distribution

Narges Bajoghli is a doctoral candidate in cultural anthropology at New York University and a documentary filmmaker at the school’s Culture and Media Program.

abroad, so even many Iran watchers in the West are unaware of it. It is a vital debate, however, because in effect the contestation over the Islamic Republic's past is a struggle for the power to narrate its future as well.

"We need to tell our audience that we produced propaganda during the war," says Habib Ahmadzadeh, a writer and convener of a ten-week special edition of the talk show *Primetime Roundtable* about collective memory of the war. The series aired in 2011. "We need to fess up to that and move on. Youth don't care about the war any longer, and that's our fault. We've spent 20 years feeding them the same old lines." Ahmadzadeh's candor may seem remarkable: Not only did he rise to the rank of captain in the Revolutionary Guards, the units formed to safeguard the regime in the event of regular army dissent, but he began the "imposed war" as a member of the Basij, the "people's militia" enlisted to aid the Guards at the front. The Basijis later mounted the infamous "human wave" assaults.

But forthrightness such as that voiced by Ahmadzadeh is common in private conversations with the cultural producers of the Islamic Republic, even many who might be expected to echo the messages of the "cinema of sacred defense." And in the 2011 *Primetime Roundtable* series, the directors of cultural centers dedicated to the war broached such criticisms on national television. These pro-regime cultural producers are all themselves card-carrying members of the Basij and Revolutionary Guards and most are war veterans. Thus, they all have the credentials to challenge more hardline elements, such as those that wielded power during the Ahmadinejad years. These writers and directors are as wedded to the Islamic Republic as are the more rigid factions. Most of them, indeed, receive sponsorships and funding from banks and companies controlled by the Guards to make films in line with a conservative understanding of the war.

One filmmaker who gets hefty subventions is Masoud Dehnamaki, a leading member of Ansar-e Hezbollah, a loose conglomerate of hardline paramilitaries that has no official connection to the state but is probably subordinate somehow to the Basij. Thanks to ticket sales, Dehnamaki might be the best-known practitioner of the new subsidized Iran-Iraq war cinema, but he is hardly the most respected in Iran, not even among his conservative peers.

In the spring of 2014, Dehnamaki made headlines in the West with a blockbuster slapstick comedy, *The Ascendants*, set during the Iran-Iraq war. *The Ascendants* opens with the central character, Mohammad, being accepted at university through the nationwide entrance exam. His parents are elated that their son will be entering the country's finest medical school. But Mohammad wants first to volunteer as a Basiji to fight in the war. Despite his father faking a heart attack to discourage him, Mohammad goes to the neighborhood mosque to enlist. There he is met by a Basiji commander, Morteza, who lectures the volunteers on the

virtues of fighting for their country: "I thank God that I see a group of young men who are on their way to the sacred front. You've put aside everything, your university education, your lives, to go and fight. You can go to university later. When I see that the line to take the university exam is longer than the line to enlist, I am truly saddened. But you are all real men. You don't hide behind your studies." This distinction between the patriotic, self-sacrificing Basiji and the soft, self-seeking intellectual was and remains a common theme in the state's discourse. With the likes of this scene, *The Ascendants* ridicules non-believers in the "sacred defense" and puts the Basij back on the pedestal where the hardliners think they belong. "Dehnamaki brings back the tired cliché of 'us versus them' in *The Ascendants*," one retired commander in the Revolutionary Guards told me. "We need to stop creating such a schism between ourselves and those who didn't fight. They had their reasons for not fighting. We needed them to become doctors and engineers while we were at the front. Why can't we learn to accept people's choices instead of creating a hierarchy?"

As a Hezbollahi, Dehnamaki is notorious for allegedly giving the order to raid dormitories at the University of Tehran to quell the student protests of July 1999. But he is also a hardline culture warrior, having started several institutions dedicated to policing memory of the 1980s. His first journal, *Shalamcheh*, named after a town on the front lines, was shut down. Four days later, Dehnamaki applied to launch a new publication, which he named *Jebhe* (Front) in clear homage to the war. He described this magazine as more political than the first because he was moving from criticism of public morals to criticism of the political elite. As he told the *New York Times* in 2005: "There was a time when I believed that the people were the problem, but that was a mistake. The real problem is our rulers, who have become used to corruption and cannot fulfill the promises of social justice and equality from the early days of the revolution." After 55 issues, *Jebhe* was shut down as well. After losing a third short-lived journal, he turned to filmmaking with the documentary *Poverty and Prostitution* (2002). The film was banned, presumably because it drew a straight line from state neglect of the poor to the selling of sex. It was popular on the black market, however, due to the curiosity of an ultra-conservative personality breaking a cultural taboo. His second documentary, *Which Independence? Which Freedom?* (2004), addressing soccer violence, went relatively unnoticed. So Dehnamaki decided to make feature films, releasing *The Outcasts* (2007), a comedy about the war that at the time was the highest-grossing film in Iranian cinematic history, due in large part to its broad humor and appropriation of popular slang and protest music. It is something that only a director with Dehnamaki's background could attempt, and *The Outcasts* eventually became a trilogy.

The first film is set in 1988, the last year of the war. The characters' accents reveal their ethnic origins (Azeri,

Kurdish, Khorasani and so on), depicting the imagined community of a unified Iranian nation in time of war. The film begins when Majid, a convict from southern Tehran, is released from jail. To save face with the neighbors and Narges, the woman he loves, Majid and his friends pretend that his absence was due to pilgrimage to Mecca. His lie is instantly exposed and Narges vows never to speak to him again. To prove himself worthy of marrying her, Majid decides to go to the front—the ultimate arena for displaying manhood and bravery. He plans to go for a short time, take a few pictures to prove he was there and return an “honorable” man.

Not wanting to travel alone, Majid convinces his friends to journey with him to the front. With him go Amir, a drug addict, Beyram, a simple-minded coward, Bijan, a thief, and Mostafa, an old neighborhood friend. Once they arrive at the front, the gang of five is immediately discharged for bad behavior: They gamble, smoke and pray improperly, and Amir continues to use drugs. But a kind cleric and Basiji, Morteza, the same character who appears in *The Ascendants*, is determined to reform the young men. Morteza sets out to demonstrate to Majid and his friends that their social codes are not truly manly; instead, they must model themselves after the other soldiers, who in turn are emulating Imam Hussein.

In these films, the Basiji as the ideal man is juxtaposed with the *luti* (thug). The Basiji embodies discipline—he is obedient to the nation and to Islam. The *luti*, on the other hand, is a deviant anti-authoritarian. Critics, indeed, reacted negatively to the film’s conceit that the “sacred defense” could be entrusted to local thugs, however rehabilitated.

In the controversial third installment of *The Outcasts*, Dehnamaki unleashed his disdain for reformists in the state, portraying the youths who participated in the Green Movement during the June 2009 presidential election as nothing but dupes of mendacious politicians, some of whom appear as corrupt clerics at the front in the original film.

Implicit in these movies, and explicit in Dehnamaki’s interviews, is the idea that social “outcasts” such as Green Movement youth need to be taught proper Islamic revolutionary values by those who embody the true spirit of the Basij. Much like Ahmadinejad and his entourage, Dehnamaki is highly critical of the elite clerics who wield political power in Iran. His sharpest jabs in the films are aimed at the clerics who are too scared to visit the front, but who later use the war as a way to gain political prestige. He told one Iranian television reporter: “We have to continue the *adam sazi* [literally, “people building”] that the Imam [Khomeini] preached.... Look at what he did to that young generation of the war—how he trained us.... We have to struggle against the current state in society to do the same. Our war is a war of ideas.” In another interview, with *Rooz Online* in 2007, Dehnamaki made clear that revolutionary aspirations underpin all of his cultural work: “At one time we shed blood

for these principles and ideals. At another time we believed in publications. Today, we think that cinema is the most effective medium—and so we choose that.”

Much like the Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, pro-regime filmmakers, and not just Dehnamaki, think they must inoculate youth against the lies they hear from opposition groups at home and abroad. This sense has only heightened with the involvement of foreign powers in Syria’s civil war and the turmoil in Egypt, both of which developments have alarmed the Iranian political elite. I have been privy to numerous conversations in production rooms where these filmmakers discussed projects meant to “warn” youth of the dangers of trusting opposition groups. New documentaries with this theme are in production, again with funding from the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij.

These two institutions owe their current position in the Islamic Republic—from top posts in the state bureaucracy to preferential access to state contracts—to the Iran-Iraq war. The Guards and the Basij thus have a huge stake not only in passing on lessons of the “imposed war” to the next generation, but also in defining what those lessons are. Indeed, the continuation of the Islamic Republic in its present form is arguably dependent upon the success of regime proponents in reconstituting the younger generation in their ideal revolutionary mold.

Can the hardliners continue to use the symbolism of the Iran-Iraq war to reform the youth they see as dissolute? For all his box office success, the case of Dehnamaki bodes ill. Secular artists dislike him, of course, but so do many who are sympathetic to the regime. In dozens of interviews with filmmakers who are on the payroll of Basij and Guards-funded organizations, in fact, I have yet to find a single one who admires Dehnamaki’s work, even among other Hezbollahis, who, much like their secular counterparts, accuse *The Ascendants’* director of superficiality and lack of subtlety. Dehnamaki attracts moviegoers in droves with his lowbrow jokes, with his soundtracks, featuring protest songs and banned music from the Iranian diaspora in Los Angeles, and with extensive advertising campaigns. But his unreconstructed conservative message is out of step with cultural trends among the Iranians the hardliners hope to reach. He crosses no red lines.

Perhaps most revealing are the attitudes of war veterans themselves toward the “sacred defense” narrative. Veterans of all political stripes complain about being used as props in the literature of the parastatal Martyrs’ Foundation. The ex-soldiers express similar contempt for the state-sponsored camera crews who circulate annually to ask the same formulaic questions in expectation of receiving the same equally formulaic responses. In my own encounters with veterans, before I switch on my camera or my recorder, I am frequently asked: “Miss, do you want the official version that we have to tell the television crews every year?” ■