

Desacralizing a Sacred Defense: The Iran–Iraq War in the Fiction of Hossein Mortezaeian Abkenar

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The Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) dominated the first decade of the Islamic Republic’s existence. The war and its consequences have been the subject of myriad works of Persian literature that include poetry, memoirs, plays, and fiction, in addition to documentary and feature-length films, all of which started to appear shortly after the Iraqi invasion of Iranian territory in September 1980. Persian literature dealing with the Iran–Iraq War remains an ideologically divided field to this day. Critics and writers use the term war literature (*adabiyat-e jang*) to refer to a broad category of writing dealing with the experiences of the war from a variety of perspectives. However, this literary genre has been dominated by a type of war literature referred to as *Sacred Defense literature* (*adabiyat-e defa’-e moqaddas*). Many of the writers of Sacred Defense

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literature have been directly supported by, and in turn write in support of, the Islamic Republic of Iran's religio-nationalist narrative of the war.¹ In so doing, writers of Sacred Defense literature often frame the war as a contemporary reenactment of the Battle of Karbala, emphasize the heroism of Iranian soldiers, and glorify acts of wartime martyrdom. The war is depicted as a binary system of good and evil, and the enemy Iraqi soldiers are demonized in the process.² Writers of war fiction who do not follow this mode of representing the war with Iraq are still a minority in Iran and often find themselves at odds with the dominant, official narrative of Sacred Defense.

One such writer is Hossein Mortezaeian Abkenar. This article treats two texts by Abkenar, a writer of fiction, screenwriter, and literary critic who has written multiple stories about the war since 1999. As the following pages demonstrate, Abkenar's war writings lie well outside the parameters of Sacred Defense literature. His texts that take up the Iran–Iraq War offer views of the eight-year conflict that not only challenge the narrative of Sacred Defense but attempt, at times, to subvert it completely. Two of his texts that are treated here: his short story “Rahman's Story” (“Dastan-e Rahman,” published in 1999) and short novel *The Scorpion on the Steps of the Andimeshk Railroad, or, There Is Blood Dripping from This Train, Sir!* (*'Aqrab ru-ye pelleh-ha-ye rah-ahan-e Andimeshk, ya, az in qatar khun michekeh, qorban!*, published in 2006). Both texts contest the narrative of Sacred Defense through decidedly negative representations of the

¹Two recent works that provide good descriptions of the state's narrative of the war, especially as it relates to culture, are Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019) and Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics and Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²A full overview of Persian-language Iran–Iraq War literature and the Sacred Defense culture requires far more space than one article. Readers interested in a broad overview of Persian fiction and the Iran–Iraq War have several (mostly Persian-language) references at their disposal. See, for example, Hasan Mir-'Abedini, *Sad sal dastan nevisi-ye Iran* (Tehran: Nashr-e Cheshmeh, 2004), or for a more recent work, Mehdi Sa'idi, *Adabiyat-e dastani-ye jang dar Iran* (Tehran: Pazhoheshgah-e 'olum-e ensani va motale'at-e ejtema'i-ye Jahad Daneshgahi, 2016). One of the first and few works in English to reference this literature, and which excellently situates it within the Larger context of post-Revolution publishing in Iran, is Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, “Introduction: Iran's Literature 1977–1997,” *Iranian Studies* 30 (1997): 193–212.

experience of war, portraits of soldiers' unpatriotic actions, and depictions of enemy combatants that radically differ from other works of fiction dealing with the conflict. Moreover, both the short story and novel break with the literary conventions of Sacred Defense literature by offering individual narratives of the war that are formally complex, relying on fragmented narratives, metafictional acts of translation, and narrators who call attention to the possibility of their own unreliability. In what follows, I offer readings of these two works by Abkenar as clear demonstrations of how the literature of the Iran–Iraq War remains an unsettled, polyphonic space of conflicting narratives of modern warfare and violence. In doing so, I use the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Brian McHale to show how Abkenar unsettles both the form and content of the Sacred Defense narrative.

Iraqi Voices, Translation, and “Rahman’s Story”

Fiction about the Iran–Iraq War began to appear shortly after the outbreak of the war in September 1980. The most prominent early examples include short stories in the collections *Do cheshm-e bi-su* (*Two Blind Eyes*, 1984) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *Shesh tablu* (*Six Screens*, 1981) by Abdol Hay Shammasi, and the young adult novel *Do’a-ye morgh-e amin* (*The Amen Bird’s Prayer*, 1981) by Sirus Tahbaz.³ Since the appearance of Persian fiction about the war, enemy soldiers and political dissidents have been represented in works of literature. Rarely, however, do their representations exist in a manner that goes beyond using “the discourse of the other to give expression to [the author’s] own [ideological] orientations.”⁴ While this is clearest in the examples of fiction and poetry that were published in Iran during wartime, Persian literature of the Iran–Iraq War, even in the postwar period, has been dominated by the aforementioned narrative of Sacred

³Makhmalbaf’s collection contains stories published as early as February 1981, such as “A Story for the Front” (“Qessehi baraye jebheh”). Mir-‘Abedini notes that the war was the impetus for many previously unexperienced and unprofessional authors to begin writing. Their texts were published for the moral support of the troops “even if they had no artistic merit” (*Sad sal*, 889).

⁴Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 193.

Defense, with the state-sponsored publishing house, Sureh-ye Mehr, the most prolific publisher of the genre.⁵ Within the context of this literature, most Iraqi soldiers, as well as Iranian political dissidents, have generally been demonized and/or marked by silence and anonymity.⁶ In either case, they are the “simple object[s] of the author’s consciousness,”⁷ which is convenient for the overarching narrative of state-sponsored Sacred Defense literature. In Persian fiction, when these Others do speak, their words are generally an extension of their caricatured depiction as enemies or converted prisoners of war who reinforce the regime’s war narrative.⁸

Abkenar’s metafictional short story “Rahman’s Story,” however, contrasts with the typical depiction of enemy soldiers in Iran–Iraq War fiction by giving voice, albeit one mediated by an Iranian translator, to an Iraqi soldier. The story is found in Abkenar’s collection of short stories entitled *Konsert-e tar-ha-ye mamnu‘eh* (*The Concert of Forbidden Strings*), first published in 1999. The story was later translated by Sara Khalili for the July 2013 issue of the literary website

⁵Sureh-ye Mehr is the primary publishing house of the Howzeh-ye Honar va Andisheh-ye Islami (The Center for Islamic Art and Thought, hereafter, Howzeh). Officially founded in 1980, the Howzeh has been one of the main state-sponsored cultural institutions that promotes literature (fiction, poetry, and memoir), film, and art related to the Iran–Iraq War. The overwhelming majority of these cultural productions promote the Sacred Defense narrative of the war. For a detailed history of the Howzeh from its inception to the recent past, see Fatemeh Shams, “Literature, Art, and Ideology under the Islamic Republic,” in *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks*, ed. Kamran Talattof (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁶There are a couple of notable exceptions. See Davud Ghaffarzadegan, *Fal-e Khun* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Qadyani, 1996), translated by M.R. Ghanooonparvar in 2008 as *Fortune Told in Blood* (Austin, TX: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2008), and more recently, Mahmoud Dowlatbadi, *Tariq-e besmel Shodan* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2018), which was translated by Martin Weir in 2014 and published under the title *Thirst* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2014).

⁷Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 7.

⁸While this trend has continued until the present day, wartime literature provides the clearest and perhaps most well-known examples of this trend. See, for example, Qasem-‘Ali Farasat’s *Nakhl-ha-ye bi sar* (*Headless Palms*) (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1988) and the short stories of Seyyed Mehdi Shoja’i. It should be noted that these depictions also exist in other forms of cultural production dealing with the war, literary or otherwise.

Words Without Borders.⁹ Abkenar is a veteran of the war. Stylistically, he writes in a modernist Iranian vein; his work bears the influence of the likes of Bahram Sadeqi, Hushang Golshiri, and Shahriar Mandanipour, among others.

“Rahman’s Story” is exceptional in that it not only purports to provide an Iraqi perspective of the war but claims to be a translation of a story written by an Iraqi soldier. “It is true,” the narrator states, “I found this story in an Iraqi trench, full of empty canteens. One year later, I translated the story with the help of a friend, who wishes to remain unnamed.”¹⁰ Ostensibly, the narrative voice of the story’s translator is limited to its introduction, where he tells the readers that he submitted the translation to a magazine but lost the original version, that he made no changes to the events of the story, and that the story is true. He writes:

There is no room to doubt the events of this story and I do not. I spent many years at the front. Without exaggerating, I can say that I was at the frontlines of all the battles. Time and again, I also saw some of the scenes that he repeatedly describes. There are also scenes that might sound weird, or exaggerated, so much that you might think they are completely made up. They are not. They are true.

“But what will the readers say?!” the magazine’s editor asked.

I told him, “Whatever the case, the person who reads the story will be its final judge.”¹¹

Once the translator steps aside, the narrator of “Rahman’s Story” becomes an unnamed Iraqi soldier who along with his fellow soldier, Rahman, are separated from their battalion in the desert regions between the two countries, and happen upon an injured Iranian teenage soldier, whom they take prisoner. The three are in an unnamed location, alone, lost, and without water. The two Iraqis have bound the Iranian and are

⁹Hossein Mortezaeian Abkenar, “Rahman’s Story,” *Words Without Borders*, trans. Sara Khalili (July 2013), www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/rahmans-story.

¹⁰Hossein Mortezaeian Abkenar, “Dastan-e Rahman” (“Rahman’s Story”), in *Konsert-e tar-ha-ye mamnu’eh (A Concert of Forbidden Strings)* (Tehran: Agah, 1999), 53–72. Quote on p. 55. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹Abkenar, “Dastan-e Rahman,” 57.

trying to figure out what to do next. Rahman sends the narrator out to look for water and, while he is gone, kills the Iranian and takes his boots and dog tag. The narrator comes back and is furious. He screams at Rahman, demanding to know why he killed the soldier. They get into a fistfight and eventually Rahman leaves, setting off for nowhere in particular. The author is left alone with the corpse and buries it. Shortly thereafter, he sets off in search of Rahman and finds him by following the trail of his blood. He is dead and the narrator buries his body as well. The following day, tired and thirsty, he finds an abandoned Iraqi trench and searches for water, finding a little but not enough to survive. Before dying, he writes the story of the events that transpired, using various sheets of paper that are in the trench, which the Iranian writer and co-translator later happens upon. That barren trench is where the Iraqis' war story ends and the Iranians' story of translation begins.

The events that unfolded in the days prior to the death of the unnamed narrator are deeply personal and revolve around survival and revenge. Each of the two Iraqi soldiers had already been at the war front for some time. Rahman had suffered severe injuries and was given leave, yet he refused to go home; in fact, he begged to stay. He remained at the front for one reason: Iranian missiles had struck his family home and killed his two brothers, Rahim and Qader. The narrator recalls once asking Rahman why he would not leave the army, when, in fact, no one wanted to be there. In response, Rahman points to a picture, which he always carried, telling the narrator, "This was Qader and this was Rahim... They pulled my mother out alive and grief killed her less than forty days after they had died."¹² The narrator falls quiet and Rahman continues: "What about you? You thought that I've just gotten used to this lousy military salary, or that I came to fight for my flag, or—I don't know—the motherland? . . . No, I didn't lose any land to take back [. . .] I lost two people and I will take two people, with this very bayonet!"¹³ With this statement, the possibility emerges of reading this text as a simple act of revenge, since Rahman never claims that he is fighting for Iraqi

¹²Abkenar, "Dastan-e Rahman," 61.

¹³Abkenar, "Dastan-e Rahman," 61.

territorial claims or for a contemporary Qadisiyya.¹⁴ He is a man who lost his family and wants nothing more than to avenge their deaths. In writing such a character, Abkenar adds a critical polyphonic element to the dominant depiction of Iraqi soldiers, one which humanizes them and allows readers to consider various motivations for going to war.

Once the action on which the story centers—the killing of the Iranian soldier and even Rahman’s presence at the war front—is revealed to be driven entirely by a personal desire for revenge, the ideology of the war loses its potency. This is taken a step further when both Iraqis recognize the similarity found between the fighters on both sides of the war. The narrator thinks back to a time when he and Rahman were together on the front:

At night, we would look out at the horizon that was brighter than all the nearby embankments. The ones that were further away were red with flames and a yellow light that seemed to flicker. The sounds of exploding mortar shells and missiles would go silent for a moment and we would suddenly realize what a clamor they had been making. Rahman would say, “Poor Naft-Shahr!”
I would say, “Yeah, but they’re probably saying the same thing.”
“They’re also right,” he would say.¹⁵

This position reveals itself in multiple moments throughout the story, attacking the binary system around which the official narrative revolves.¹⁶ Within these moments, the war emerges as a conflict driven by a

¹⁴Qadisiyya refers to the battle in 636 CE between the relatively small Arab-Muslim army and the Sassanian Empire. The Arabs’ decisive victory over the Persians in that battle led to the Islamic conquest of Persia. Saddam Hussein named the war against Iran “Qadisiyyat Saddam” (Saddam’s Qadisiyya). For more on the Iraqi narrative of Saddam’s Qadisiyya, see Dina Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁵Abkenar, “Dastan-e Rahman,” 61. Naft-Shahr (also known as Naft-e Shahr) is a city in the Iranian province of Kurdistan, near the Iraqi border. Its proximity to the Iraqi border and large oilfields made it an early target during the Iraqi invasion, and it was later subject to heavy bombing by the Iraqi military.

¹⁶In fact, it attacks the binary system of good/evil and friend/enemy that existed in both Iran and Iraq at the time.

tautological logic of revenge—killing the enemy only because he killed one of your own—with both sides seemingly motivated by the same logic. Taken one step further, the parity between both sides culminates in the story’s final lines, as the narrator records his last word—a desperate plea for anyone who finds him to give him water:

I’m alive, but I’ve fallen asleep from thirst. If you throw a bucket of water on my face, I’ll come to life and drink, I’ll drink the water . . . It’s warm here, burning, fire . . . I’m your friend. I like you, whoever you are. I’ve written this in your language so that you know I haven’t died. I am alive, but I’ve just lost my dog tag. Arab or ‘*Ajam*, what difference does it make? I am thirsty. Your canteen is full of water. Gently wake me. I’ve forgotten my name. Call me ‘Rahman.’¹⁷

Abkenar’s “Rahman’s Story” chips away at the binarism created by the official war culture of Sacred Defense. By framing the entire story as a translation, Abkenar employs powerful discourses of the Other as well as sympathetic mutual understanding. The co-translator’s introductory remarks that insist on the story’s truth stave off any prejudicial claims that Iraqi soldiers were ideological slaves to Saddam’s Qadisiyya. Instead, the story creates a narrative of personal motivations for Iraqi soldiers to be at the war front. The story’s final sentences ask readers to equate the experiences of Iranian and Iraqi soldiers: Arab or ‘*Ajam*, Iraqi or Iranian, it makes no difference.¹⁸ “Rahman’s Story” engages with the enemy side of the war to create a sense of parity between the situations in which Iraqi and Iranian soldiers found themselves. In doing so, Abkenar attacks the fundamental “truths” about the war promoted by the wartime state. This approach was taken a step further in a later publication to which I now turn.

The War Front as Dystopia

In chapter eight of Abkenar’s 2006 novel, *The Scorpion on the Steps of the Andimeshk Railroad, or, There Is Blood Dripping from This Train*,

¹⁷Abkenar, “Dastan-e Rahman,” 72.

¹⁸Within Persian literature, the work whose depiction of Iraqi soldiers is most like Abkenar’s is Dowlatabadi’s *Tariq-e besmel Shodan*.

Sir! (henceforth *The Scorpion*), ‘Ali, a fellow conscript and friend of the novel’s main protagonist, Morteza, pleadingly complains to Morteza about his eminent departure and that of another conscript from the unit, Siavash:

What do you mean you two get to leave, and I have to stay here all alone in this middle-of-nowhere desert for another three months with all this garbage? No I can’t, I can’t . . . I’m not like those idiots you see who get off from kissing ass and ratting on others [. . .] They’re saying I have to stay another four months, but we all know that in four months, if the war’s not over they won’t let us go. We’ll end up like those guys over there who have a five-year military service. The poor things. You’ve seen ‘em. Most of them have white hair, they’re old, they have wives and kids, they’re hopeless [. . .] I can’t deal with this . . . son of a bitch, where can I go to get out of here . . . give me a lighter . . . to hell with this ass of commander [. . .] Here, look, take a souvenir from us, make sure that the MP doesn’t catch you . . . do you have a match? No? Forget about it, I have one. Look at its tail, it’s not for nothing that they call it a *kazhdom* - the crooked tailed scorpion . . . you know what it does when it’s surrounded by fire and can’t escape? . . . You don’t know? . . . Well, look at this!¹⁹

‘Ali then presents Morteza with a scorpion that he encircles with fire. Surrounded by a flame, the scorpion, along with the other recurring scorpions in the novel, goes into spasms from the heat. Its writhing, bony body thrashes about within the circle, giving the impression to an observer that, in a fit of uncontrolled paranoia, the scorpion commits suicide by stabbing itself with its venomous stingers.²⁰

This image of the crazed scorpion is a metaphor for the Iranian conscript throughout Abkenar’s award-winning novel, originally

¹⁹Abkenar, ‘*Aqrab ru-ye pelleh-ha-ye rah-ahan-e Andimeshk, ya, khun az in qatar michekeh, qorban!* (*The Scorpion on the Steps of the Andimeshk Railroad, or, There Is Blood Dripping from This Train, Sir!*) (Tehran: Nashr-e Nay, 2006), 36–37. For the sake of readability, I have added punctuation to this excerpt.

²⁰Of course, scientists have proven that this is not suicide, but a reaction to the extreme heat, which most varieties of scorpions cannot handle. Nevertheless, it remains a common urban legend in many parts of the world that scorpions “commit suicide” when encircled by fire.

published by Tehran-based Nay Publishing House.²¹ In its first year of publication, *The Scorpion* was nominated for several Iranian literary prizes, including the once-prestigious prize for best first novel given by the Hushang Golshiri Foundation.²² *The Scorpion* received a great deal of press and went through three printings in Iran before it was banned.²³ Paris-based Persian-language publisher Nakojaa reissued the novel in 2012.

The Scorpion presents perhaps the most dystopian view of the war front that has been published in contemporary Persian literature. However, beyond pushing the limits of content, Abkenar's novel also offers one of the most, if not the most, formally complex fictional presentations of the Iran–Iraq War. Set in the final days of the conflict, *The Scorpion* focuses on Morteza Hedayati, a conscripted soldier from Tehran, discharged and attempting to make his way back home from the war front, via the small town of Andimeshk, which was ravaged during the war.²⁴ What ensues are a series of nightmarish vignettes framed in a wandering, non-linear narrative that blurs dreams and reality, fact and fiction. By focusing on the return home, *The Scorpion* avoids the battlefield setting of many war novels and evades depictions of war front heroism that make up so much of the state-sponsored Sacred Defense narrative of the war. In and of itself, that was not new at the time of the book's publication. In other fictional texts, the war had been and continues to be treated in various ways, whether from the viewpoint of the home front, of exile, or as flashbacks. However, before the publication of this short novel, neither had the experience of the battlefield nor the return home been described in such a hellish and surrealistic manner. The novel breaks

²¹Nay is a private publisher that is unaffiliated with the government-sponsored cultural institutions such as the previously mentioned publisher of war literature, Sureh-ye Mehr.

²²This prize was discontinued in 2014.

²³The decision to ban the publication of the novel came as a surprise to the publisher, who had planned to distribute the already printed third edition of the book. See "Enteshar-e roman-e toqif shodeh-ye 'Aqrab dar Faranseh'" ("The Publication of Banned Novel, *The Scorpion* in France"), *Radio Zamaneh*, 17 January 2001, www.radiozamaneh.com/30387.

²⁴The choice of name here may be much more than coincidence and could be read as a possible combination of the author's middle name and the name of the father of modernist Persian literature, Sadegh Hedayat.

with what had become conventional modes of writing about the war experience by straying away from the heroism that overpowered, and continues to overpower, most Iranian war fiction, avoiding any discourse of martyrdom and combining elements of the uncanny and fantastic, in a decidedly non-religious mode, into a narrative of the war. Moreover, it exhibits an overwhelming use of colloquial language, regional accents, and oppositional ideologies, which brings to the text a “plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights, each with its own world,” and which works against any depiction of the Iranian military forces as homogeneously religious and nationalist.²⁵ Significantly, its depiction of Iranian soldiers is anything but patriotic, showing corrupt and cruel senior officers and military police, on the one hand, and frightened, drug-using soldiers who hate the front and the filth of the trenches, on the other. The novel presents the defense of the homeland as anything but “sacred.”

Despite all of this, the first page of *The Scorpion* opens with the following sentence, which a number of Iranian literary critics have latched onto in their critiques of the novel: “All the scenes of this novel are real” (*Tamam-e sahneh-ha-ye in roman vage'ist*).²⁶ Not only is this an inversion of the more typical opening statement that absolves the author of all responsibility for any similarities between the events and characters of a fictional work and those of real life, but it makes a claim to the representation of reality that is more typically found in reportage, memoirs, or biographies.²⁷ For a fictional work that so clearly relies on the surreal, it is no wonder that critics have found it difficult to reconcile that sentence with *The Scorpion's* narrative. In an interview shortly after the book was published and found its way onto the list of nominees for a number of Iranian book prizes, the author stated, “Yes, all the novel's scenes are, in fact, true. They've been recreated after passing through my own mental filter.”²⁸ It was

²⁵Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, 8–10.

²⁶Abkenar, *The Scorpion*, 4.

²⁷This claim is even more striking given the extremely large number of war memoirs that have been published, largely by state-sponsored publishing houses.

²⁸“*Aqrab ru-ye pelleh-ha-ye rah-ahan-e Andimeshk: negahi-ye motafavet-e defa'-e moqaddas*” (“*The Scorpion on the Steps of the Andimeshk Railroad: A Different Look at the Sacred Defense*”), *IBNA (Iran Book News Agency)*, 24 October 2007, www.ibna.ir/fa/doc/report/9755/ -عقرب-روی-پله-های-راه-آهن-اندیمشک-نگاهی-متفاوت-دفاع-مقدس

an approach that was lauded by some critics for “opening horizons and breaking all the clichés of Iranian war literature,”²⁹ while doing little to assuage pro-government critics, such as Ahmad Shakeri, who condemned the book as “worthless” and “overly pessimistic.”³⁰ The two comments reflect the bipolar nature of criticism toward war literature in contemporary Iran between “independent” agencies unaffiliated with the government (Iran Book News Agency, IBNA) and hardline supporters of the governmental wartime narrative (Shakeri).

The Scorpion's opening scene creates the mood of the novel. A third-person narrator sets the stage for the nightmarish world in which Morteza lives:

Private Morteza Hedayati, dispatched on Nowruz, 1986, from Tehran, sat on the steps of the Andimeshk railroad station, waiting for them to come and take him away. Squatting, with his legs up against his chest, he rested his chin on his knees and stared ahead at the asphalt, the darkness of the trees and the green grass covered in blackness. From near and far he could hear bursts of gunfire and the single shots of snipers.

The eyes of soldiers hidden in the brush flashed in the darkness. Military police officers with white boots and tassels hanging from their shoulders were pushing aside leaves and branches to gather up the deserting soldiers. They carried large flashlights in their hands and batons, but no guns. A truck trailed nearby and for any soldier they found, two men would take his hands and feet and toss him into it atop the other soldiers.

[...]

One of the MPs held a large pitchfork. He would drive it into any place that he would see a pile of dirt or a dense bush and then pull it out, driving down and pulling out, driving down and pulling out. Sometimes a soldier would cry out “Ay!” And the MP would

²⁹“*Aqrab ru-ye pelleh-ha-ye rah-ahan-e Andimeshk*,” *INBA*.

³⁰“Enteqad-e Shakeri az davari-ye ketab-e sal-e moqaddas” (“Shakeri’s Critique of the Judgement of the Sacred Defense Book of the Year”), *Ketab News*, 8 November 2007, www.ketabnews.com/fa/news/1805/انتقاد-شاکری-از-داوری-کتابسال-دفاع-مقدس.

forcefully pull up the pitchfork and throw the soldier into the truck, arms and legs flailing in the air. The moaning of soldiers could be heard from inside the truck, as well as the crushing sound of their broken bones.

The weather was hellish. The smell of gunpowder and fish filled the hot air.

[...]

It was around 11:00 pm. Around the year 1988.³¹

In its final chapters, the novel returns to this scene. Its representation of the military police and other senior officers and platoon leaders is decidedly negative, casting them as the primary villains of the story. The chapters that connect the opening scene to the end of the story are various flashbacks of time at the front or the hellish journey to Andimeshk, made first with a crazed, bloodied driver of a dump truck used primarily for the transport of supplies and men, as well as on foot. As an entirely dystopian experience, the war front in *The Scorpion* is a place from which any conscripted soldier wants only to escape, and the journey back is arduous if not impossible, even if the soldier has properly received his leave. All soldiers away from the front are assumed to be deserters and are pursued as such, as in the above excerpt.

The journey to the Andimeshk Railway Station and the experiences in the war front trenches are the novel's most surrealistic scenes. Despite Abkenar's statement that all the novel's scenes are true, its narrative is purposely repetitive and written in such a way that defies the possibility of a singular truth. The dream-like narration constantly shifts, moving from the first-person narrative of Morteza or Siavash, to a third-person narrator, and occasionally to the monologue of others, such as that of 'Ali above. The other characters, whom the narrative treats in passing, are given little description and generally say very little. Thus, readers are left with nightmarish impressions, such as of the large, silent MPs who, like grim reapers, silently beat and kill conscripts, or the bloodied driver of the shot-up dump truck who speaks sparsely, eyes glued to the road.

³¹Abkenar, *The Scorpion*, 7–8.

Other scenes are explicitly nightmares or states induced by opium or sleeplessness (or a combination of both), as when Morteza finds himself offering a cigarette to what appears to be a ghost.³² Or, when following what appears to be the death of Siavash for the first of multiple times, he disappears into a flooded foxhole for five days only to find himself in a nightmare in a later chapter.³³ In one scene narrated in the first-person, we read how the water in the pool, first clear, becomes muddy, melding into various colors, now disappearing, now reappearing. The Faulkneresque, punctuation-free paragraph leading up to the scene suddenly shifts: “then there was a sound it was loud like an explosion it was silent the sound reverberated the pool caught on fire yellow orange they screamed a scream echoed a ring of fire surrounded the pool fire and orange yellow fire the sound of screaming was everywhere everyone up in this and that direction they flew past me they fell into the water out of fear of the fire[.]”³⁴

This is the recurring mode of narration that gives *The Scorpion* its sense of instability and unreliability, calling into question everything that might (or might not) have happened at the war front. It is this mode of narration that largely characterizes Morteza’s experience with the war as well as his return to Tehran from it. Interestingly, however, once he boards the train and eventually returns home, the narrative switches to a second-person narrator who talks to Morteza reassuringly, in a way that confirms the nightmare of the front is over. He boards the train and we read the following:

The train conductor comes. He asks if you are a deserter. You say no. Show your release papers! They are in your pack. They are torn. That MP, ‘Abdol Khan tore them. The conductor is kind. He leaves . . . He comes again and says that before you reach Tehran, you must get off the train. The railway station is full of officers. They will think you are a deserter.

³²Abkenar, *The Scorpion*, 24–26.

³³Abkenar, *The Scorpion*, 41. The novel concludes with the death of another character who is also presumably Siavash at the hands of an MP.

³⁴Abkenar, *The Scorpion*, 62.

[. . .]

When you reach Tehran you run, faster and faster from the main street, to the alley, to the door of your house. Run! You're panting. When your mother hears the door open, her heart drops. She opens the door: Oh! Oh! She puts her head on your chest and weeps. You kiss her veil. Your father stands behind her, his pride not allowing him to cry.

[. . .]

The next day your father rushes home. He puts a box of fruit on the floor and turns on the radio. He says that cars are honking their horns. Their lights are on. People are passing out sweets in the streets. It is peacetime. Your mother cries in her chador. She says "Thank God! Thank God!" That night your father leans back against the wall and holds the radio up to his ear. Your mother spreads the mattress and sheets on the floor and you sleep.³⁵

The difference between the lines in this chapter and those in the remainder of the novel is clear. The stability of the home is associated with a mode of writing that is stable and well-defined. There is no doubt as to what happens in this scene, and it is clearly written outside the circular and winding narrative of the rest of the novel. The nightmare of the war front is over.

Yet *The Scorpion's* representation of the war front goes beyond what other literary works that challenge the official narrative offer, which is usually on the level of content. This is not to say that the novel does not put forth content-oriented challenges to the official representations of the war. As I, as well as other reviewers of the book, have indicated, it clearly does. Its representation of the war front and the senior officers in the Iranian military forces defies official cultural representations of the Sacred Defense. The novel depicts a war that is at once macabre and monotonous, a war whose only givens are constant uncertainty and self-doubt. In other words, the novel fundamentally relies on a

³⁵Abkenar, *The Scorpion*, 77–80.

narrative that constantly calls into question its own record of events, while simultaneously claiming that it is a truthful record.

In this way, I propose a reading of *The Scorpion* that is guided by Brian McHale's definition of a post-modernist historical novel, which he calls "revisionist" in two ways. Firstly, he states that this type of writing "revises the *content* of the historical record, reinterpreting [. . . and], often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Secondly, it revises, [. . . and] transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself."³⁶ According to McHale,

The two meanings of revisionism converge especially in the postmodernist strategy of apocryphal or alternative history. Apocryphal history contradicts the official version in one of two ways: either it supplements the historical record, claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed; or it displaces official history altogether. In the first of these cases, apocryphal history operates in the "dark areas" of history, apparently in conformity to the norms of "classic" historical fiction but in fact parodying them. In the second case, apocryphal history spectacularly violates the "dark areas" constraint. In both cases, the effect is to juxtapose the officially-accepted version of what happened and the way things were, with another, often radically dissimilar version of the world. The tension between these two versions induces a form of ontological flicker between the two worlds: one moment, the official version seems to be eclipsed by the apocryphal version; the next moment, it is the apocryphal version that seems mirage-like, the official version appearing solid, irrefutable.³⁷

This describes well *The Scorpion's* narrative of the war. The novel approaches the war not only in a radically different manner from the works of Sacred Defense fiction but also in a way that is distinct from other works of subversive fiction dealing with the Iran–Iraq War, such as the novels and short stories of writers like Habib Ahmadzadeh, Hasan

³⁶Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 90.

³⁷Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 90.

Bani-Ameri, Ahmad Dehqan, or Ahmad Gholami. These authors, whose works are often hailed as straying from the state narrative of the conflict despite sometimes having published their books with the primary state publishing house, Sureh-ye Mehr (Ahmadzadeh and Dehqan), write war stories that operate solely in the dark areas of the official narrative. In so doing, their texts, such as Dehqan's *Journey to Heading 270 Degrees* or Ahmadzadeh's *Chess with the Doomsday Machine*, do not seek to displace the sanctioned, "official-accepted" historical record; rather, they work within it, in the manner of an exposé or with the intention of deromanticizing or challenging aspects of that narrative.³⁸ Herein lies the importance of Abkenar's novel. On the level of content, it attacks the assumed heroism of the Iranian military and is totally devoid of the ideological language of the official narrative. At one point, when Morteza finds himself in the coffeehouse with the truck driver, it even takes a clear stab at the highest levels of governmental leadership of the war. It does so through the depiction of a bumbling "beardless sheikh" on television—a barely concealed epithet for Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of Iran's leading politicians and during the war, de facto commander in chief—struggling to explain Iran's losses near the end of the conflict.³⁹ However, beyond the cruel MPs and misery of the trenches, the novel's dystopic vision of the front attacks the war itself, not simply its negative consequences, as the works of Dehqan and others do. By contrast, Abkenar's novel refuses to even engage with the way in which the war is depicted within Sacred Defense literature. Formally, *The Scorpion's* fragmented and repetitive narrative and constant questioning of events cast doubt on the self-assured narrative of victory promoted in Sacred Defense literature. It iconoclastically erodes the collective heroism of the Iranian soldiers, the heroic view of the war front soldiers, and, ultimately, the monopolistic claim to truth to which the official narrative asserts.

³⁸I have published two articles related to this topic: "Dark Corners and the Limits of Ahmad Dehqan's War Front Fiction," *Middle East Critique*, no. 1 (February 2017): 45–59, and "How to Write Death: Disenchanting Martyrdom in Two Novels of the Iran-Iraq War," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 35 (2015): 9–31. The articles demonstrate how Ahmad Dehqan's fiction bears the hallmark of rebellion but does not outright challenge the official record formally or ideologically.

³⁹Abkenar, *The Scorpion*, 31–32.

Conclusion

Fiction dealing with the Iran–Iraq War continues to be produced in Iran. Although as a genre it is not produced or promoted as prolifically as the comparable genre of war memoirs, war fiction has provided a venue for stories that are far more diverse in terms of both content and form. The examples of Abkenar’s war writings, the most well-known being his novel *The Scorpion*, provide ample evidence of the way in which fiction has provided an outlet for writers, not only to express alternative viewpoints on the war and the ideology behind it, but also to critique the war and its narrative of the conflict being defined as the Sacred Defense.

Abkenar’s war writings contest the state narrative’s monopoly on truth during the conflict through various literary strategies that attempt to create a narrative of the war *outside* the terms set by the state. The works discussed in this article engage with issues related to war front soldiering, heroism, and the representation of enemy soldiers—pillars of the official war narratives—but do so by granting voice to elements that the official narrative has silenced: enemies and undedicated soldiers. The short story and novel elevate the dystopian nature of war front combat at the expense of the utopian vision of the war propagated by most works of Sacred Defense literature. Abkenar’s two texts, both of which are banned in Iran today, sully an otherwise sanitized history of war front heroism and righteousness presented by state-sponsored, official narratives of the Iran–Iraq War.