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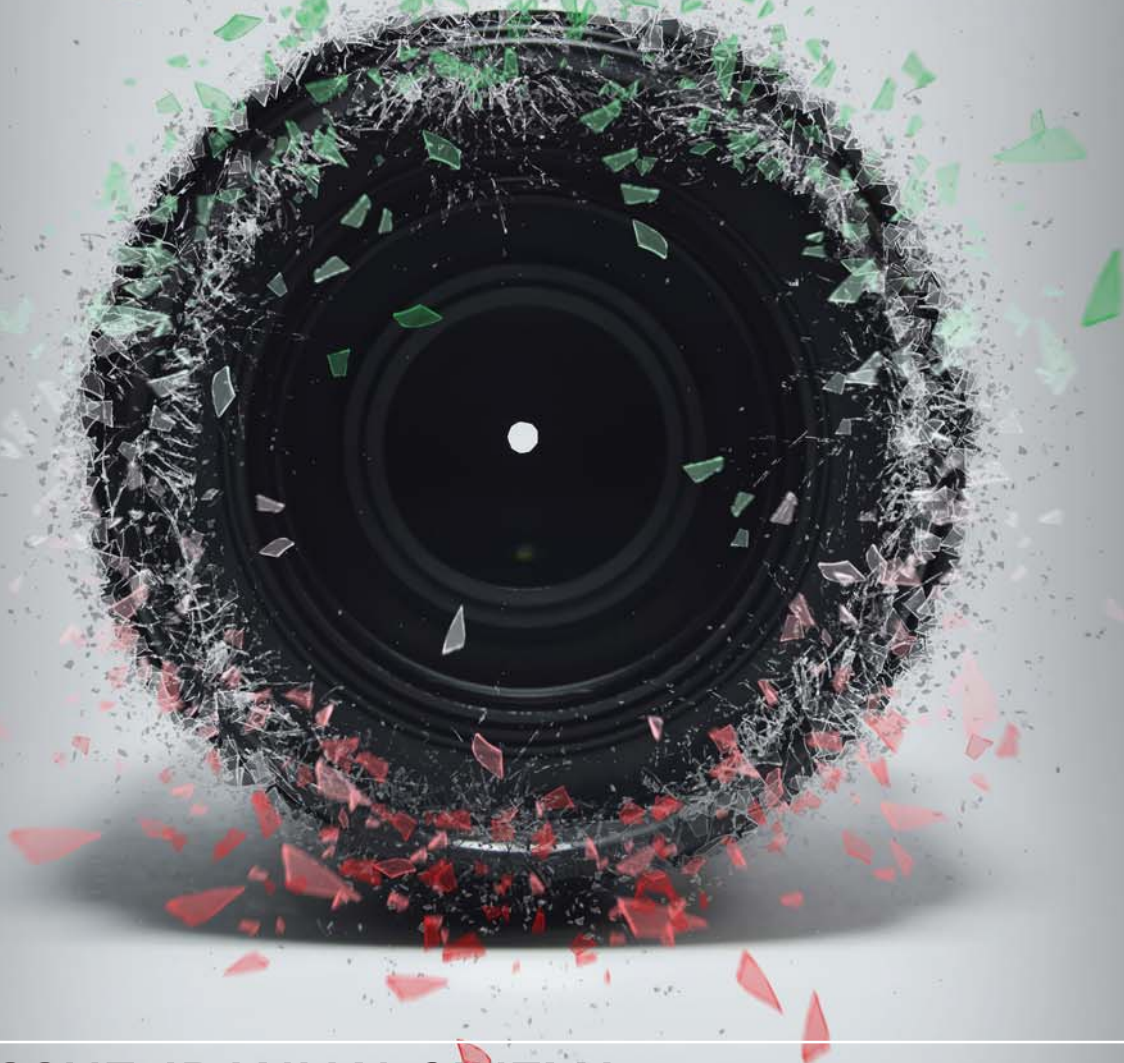
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The Middle East in London

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February - March 2019
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THIS ISSUE: IRANIAN CINEMA • Indian camera, Iranian heart • The literary and dramatic roots of the Iranian New Wave • Dystopic Tehran in 'Film Farsi' popular cinema • Parviz Sayyad: socio-political commentator dressed as village fool • The noir world of Masud Kimiai • The resurgence of Iranian 'Sacred Defence' Cinema • Asghar Farhadi's cinema • New diasporic visions of Iran • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



Sam Beklik, *The Eye*. Specially designed for the 'Iranian Cinema' issue of *The Middle East in London*
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Kaveh Abbasian contrasts the ideals of state-funded Sacred Defence Cinema with modern realities

Damascus Time:

the resurgence of Iranian 'Sacred Defence' Cinema



ISIS commander and captive Iranian pilot in Syria. Backstage photo from Ebrahim Hatamikia's *Damascus Time* (2018). Photograph by Owj Arts and Media Organisation

In 2018, Iranian media outlets associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) insisted that a film called *Damascus Time*, directed by Ebrahim Hatamikia, be submitted as the Iranian representative to the Oscars. Their bid, to their outrage, was unsuccessful and another film was submitted. But why is the IRGC suddenly interested in the Oscars? And why this specific film? To answer these questions, we need to go back to the 1980s when the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War gave rise to a new state-funded movement in Iranian cinema: the movement that came to be known as 'Iranian Sacred Defence Cinema'.

In 1989 after watching Hatamikia's third film *The Immigrant*, Morteza Avini, an iconic filmmaker/writer of Sacred Defence Cinema wrote, 'Hatamikia blows his whole existence into the frames, and each time he sets himself on fire so that his flames can shed a light, and each time like a phoenix, he gains life from that fire'. With this film Avini had found a new hope in the capabilities of fiction films in showing what he called 'the truth of the war' and the 'ideals of the Islamic

Revolution'. He started to believe that creating a new Islamic inspired form of cinema 'freed from the shackles of the dominant Western cinema' was possible.

In 1993, while shooting a documentary about the war, Avini was killed by a landmine. He did not live long enough to witness the later films and the downfall of his 'phoenix'. In 1998, Hatamikia made his eighth Sacred Defence film: *The Glass Agency*. Despite the long-standing claim of creating a truly independent

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cinema, *The Glass Agency* was an obvious adaptation of *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), a Hollywood production! A similar fate awaited other Sacred Defence filmmakers. With the growing national disinterest in the topic of the war, many of them – including Hatamikia – stopped making war films. For a while it seemed like the ‘sacred defence’ had given up its claim on cinema.

This phase came to an end with Iran’s involvement in recent wars in the Middle East. After 23 years of not making a war film, Hatamikia went back to his roots with the 2014 release of *Che*, which was about the war in the 1980s. He followed that with *Bodyguard* (2016), a story about a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War and his struggle to protect the son of his old ‘martyred’ comrade, who is now a nuclear scientist in danger of being assassinated by foreign powers. And eventually in 2018 he released *Damascus Time*, a film about the involvement of Iranian pilots in ‘humanitarian activities’ in the Syrian civil war.

Hatamikia is not alone in this new wave of Sacred Defence films; many others, including a new generation of filmmakers, have joined the wave too. Iran’s Fajr film festival has also been paying special attention to these films and awards have been directed towards them. This New Sacred Defence Cinema is particularly significant when understood as part of the current policies of the Islamic Republic regarding the political situation in the Middle East. As part of its internal policy, the state presents its territory as an ‘island of stability’ in a turbulent region. This ‘island of stability’ is depicted as being under ‘foreign threat’ and ‘heroes’ – such as the three main characters in Hatamikia’s last three films – are presented as the saviours. Considering this political affiliation, it doesn’t come as a surprise that *Bodyguard*, *Damascus Time* and several other recent Sacred Defence films are produced by the IRGC-funded Owj Arts and Media Organisation, which was founded in 2011. In this year’s festival two war films produced by the Owj organisation took home nine out of sixteen Crystal Simorghs. *The Lost Strait* (directed by Bahram Tavakkoli) was awarded six Simorghs, including Best Picture; *Damascus Time* received three, including Best Director.

While Sacred Defence Cinema has now expanded its definition to include films

While the Sacred Defence Cinema has now expanded its definition to include films about the involvement of the Islamic Republic in current wars, this new wave has strayed further from its early ideals

about the involvement of the Islamic Republic in current wars, this new wave has strayed further from the early ideals of Sacred Defence Cinema theorised by the likes of Avini. Western methods of story development and character building are ever more present in these new films, and the action scenes are clearly planned under the heavy shadow of Hollywood cinema. Hatamikia’s last two films, *Bodyguard* and *Damascus Time*, are good examples of this Western influence. He decided to shoot these two films based on storyboards. For this purpose, he employed Soheil Danesh Eshraghi, a young artist known for his Western-styled comic characters. The result is a surreal combination of Western comic-book aesthetics and Islamic ‘heroes’ who try to ‘save Iran from the West’!

In *Damascus Time* the mixture of these comic-book elements along with exaggerated character make-up and excessive use of relatively poor CGI (computer-generated imagery) creates a situation where the film looks more like an out-of-date video game rather than the reality of the Syrian civil war and the proclaimed ‘sacrifices’ of the Iranian pilots. This was the film that IRGC-affiliated media outlets championed; they started a campaign to try and persuade officials to send it to the Oscars. Perhaps by doing so they hoped the film would reach a larger international audience, ultimately achieving what it was meant

to achieve: justifying Iran’s presence and criticising Western involvement in the Syrian civil war. But those officials proved to be more pragmatic and chose another film: *No Date, No Signature*, a film with dark social content reminiscent of Iran’s past successful bids for the academy award.

What is clear now is that Sacred Defence filmmakers have quietly given up their claim of creating a ‘new form of cinema’. But the need to make war films in order to propagate Iran’s ruling ideology still remains, and large amounts of state funds continue to flow towards those filmmakers closest to the centres of power. In the middle of all these state-sponsored war propaganda films, and in an atmosphere dominated by calls for war, one is tempted to ask ‘where is Iranian anti-war cinema?’ With only a handful of attempts at making anti-war films, in a system where censorship is an omnipresent aspect of filmmaking, anti-war cinema is the forgotten part of Iranian Cinema. Perhaps, with the emergence of accessible methods of filmmaking, the Iranian anti-war cinema will consist of films that will be watched not on the large screens of mainstream cinema venues but on the small-yet-inspiring screens of underground film collectives.



Kaveh Abbasian is a filmmaker and lecturer in Film and Television Studies at the University of Roehampton, London. He is a former fellow of John W. Kluge Centre at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C. His PhD thesis is titled The Chronicle of Triumph: Iranian National Identity and Revolutionary Shi’ism in Morteza Avini’s Sacred Defence Documentaries