



TITLE:

<Special Feature 1 "Islam as a Source of Contemporary Thought: New Advances and Outlooks">Embodying Islamic Thought through Karate: A Reconsideration of Modern Sports and Indigenization in Iran

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CITATION:

KURODA, Kenji. <Special Feature 1 "Islam as a Source of Contemporary Thought: New Advances and Outlooks">Embodying Islamic Thought through Karate: A Reconsideration of Modern Sports and Indigenization in Iran. イスラーム世界研究: Kyoto Bulletin of Islam ...

ISSUE DATE:

2021-03-19

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.14989/262492>

RIGHT:

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## **Embodying Islamic Thought through Karate: A Reconsideration of Modern Sports and Indigenization in Iran**

**KURODA Kenji\***

### **Abstract**

This paper has explored a contemporary development of Islamic thought embodied in everyday Muslim behavior by focusing on a karate school in Iranian society. Although sports in the Middle East and Muslim societies came to be a hot topic among the academia in recent years, the relationship between sports and Islam in the region has not usually been discussed in terms of the secular aspect of modern sport that enables participation in sports whatever a player's beliefs. Karate is a good example of a modern sport with a special interpretation as a sport influenced by *budō* philosophy, which insists on spiritual and physical cultivation as a search for spirituality over obtaining technique. According to my field research in a unique karate school in Iran, their karate practice embodied the Shiite Islamic world view, often influenced by the Iranian state on the one hand, while on the other hand, their practice still remained as a form of modern sport, which was compatible with their ideology. In addition they interpreted the meaning of the practice by themselves and their spiritual cultivation leads to a different way of Muslim life.

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Where can we find the final version of Islam? Marshall Hodgson has suggested the idea of a “venture of Islam” to grasp the long-term transformation of Islam as a civilization [Hodgson 1974: I, 33-37]. His idea, which manages to avoid the discussion of a rise or fall, has influenced a broad range of scholars, even in recent years (e.g. [Salvatore, Tottori and Rahimi, 2018]). Islam emerged in the seventh century in the Arab peninsula and underwent a process of transformation. Speculation by Muslims has always played important role in the venture. What is Islam? What is the will of God? What is Islamic and what should a person who is a Muslim do? The speculation has never ended and continues on different levels today.

This speculation has sometimes influenced their behavior. In this sense, it is possible to describe Islamic thought as a result of speculation about correct Muslim behavior. Since

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 26750266 and 18K18270.

the 1970s, an Islamic revival has occurred in Muslim societies and Islam has come to be objectified by ordinary Muslims. Some activists have even attempted to realize an “Islamic” political dimension — so-called Islamism. In a series of discussions on “post-Islamism,” for example by Asef Bayat [1996], Islam as a practiced faith came to be naturalized in daily life among persons described as Muslims, rather than objectified, as in the early stages of the Islamic revival, as Eickelman and Piscatori [1996] have discussed. Then how do ordinary Muslims practice Islam naturally?

This paper explores a contemporary development of Islamic thought embodied in everyday Muslim behavior by focusing on a karate school in Iranian society. This society has been a typical example of the Islamic revival since the Revolution in 1979, and of post-Islamism since the 1990s. A powerful ideological state took command of society after the Revolution and the eight-year war against Iraq. However, after the ceasefire and the emergence of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s reconstruction government, the Iranian state tended toward the creation of a less ideological society; this was for several reasons, including the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the succession by “Ayatollah” Khamenei. Although some backlash has occurred, a less ideological trend has influenced not only political affairs but also religious practice in Iran.

This paper discusses how Islamic thought has been naturalized in Muslim practice and how ideological aspects of Islam have emerged since the Revolution. This paper focuses on modern sports, especially karate, as a case study of the naturalization of the ideological approach in a post-Islamism situation.

### **1. Islam as a Discursive Tradition and Modern Sports as “Secularism”**

After its emergence in the early seventh century, Islam quickly spread across a broad area through conquest and commercial networks. In 2020, about 1.8 billion people follow the religion. Its fourteen centuries of history and wide geographical spread has led to a variety of Islamic practices and interpretations. G. E. von Grunebaum [1955] suggested “ISLAM” as the unity and “islams” as the variety; his idea has led to a series of discussions on unity and diversity/variety within Islam.

Talal Asad [1986], a cultural anthropologist and post-modern critic of religion, proposed the “discursive tradition” in the mid-1980s and influenced a variety of discussions about the relation between Muslims and morals in the field of anthropology in the 2000s and 2010s. Asad’s original idea was a critical approach to procedural anthropologists and sociologists on Islam, mainly Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner, and a kind of response to an Orientalist approach to Islam. He puts the emphasis on the perspective of Muslims themselves on Islam, and regards Islam as a discursive tradition:

*A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). [Asad 1986: 14]*

Although he proposed an important idea about Islam, he did not discuss his idea on the basis of an anthropological methodology. In short, he did not pursue ethnography through field research.

Some researchers have adopted an anthropological approach, contributing their ethnography to Asad's idea and discussing the moral relations between Muslims and Islam in the early 2000s (e.g. [Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006]). Asadians offer new theoretical contributions as well as a new controversy between religious morals and personal morality (e.g. [Schielke 2009]). Muslim morality in modern society consists of several ethical systems and does not only derive from Islam and Islamic morality; it sometimes relates to "leisure" or "joy" rather than strict "piety."

Islamic morality relating to "leisure" or "joy" — such as exercises in Zūrkhāne, traditional gymnasium in Persian society — was a feature of pre-modern Islamic society. Exercisers focused their faith toward Imam Ali, the first Shiite Imam, through the practice, and hung his portrait or banners with devotional words for/by him on the wall of the training facility. They also showed their devotion as interrupting their training by shouting Ṣalawāt, a common invocation of God's blessing upon the Prophet Muhammad "Allāhumma ṣalli 'alā Muḥammad wa āl Muḥammad" (Oh Allah, sanctify Muhammad and the family of Muhammad).

Although some modern sports were originally influenced by Christian ethics, such as exercises in traditional Zūrkhāne, secularism characterizes modern sport as a universality. Allen Guttman [1994], a sociologist of modern sports, defines modern sport using seven points relating to structure and form: equality, specialization, rationalization, bureaucratization, quantification, records, and secularism. It is possible for all contestants to compete under the same conditions in modern sport. This indicates that modern sport disregards race, ethnicity and religion, and what is required for personal belonging. This allows modern sport to overcome differences, at least in theory. However, modern sport has sometimes faced controversy as a result of this equality as well as secularism in the Middle East and Muslim societies.

Sports in the Middle East and Muslim societies came to be a hot topic given the unique social development following big sporting events in the Gulf countries, such as F1 Bahrain Grand Prix since 2004, the IAAF World Athletics Championships Doha 2019 and the 2020 FIFA World Cup in Doha. In the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 51(3), the roundtable discusses sports in the region as a new research frontier [Sorek 2019]. *Sport in the Middle East* was published in 2015 and *Soccer in the Middle East* was published in 2013 based on a special issue of *Soccer and Society* vol.13(5–6) in 2010.

Researchers on modern sport in the Middle East often focus on “politics” at different levels, such as politics in sport business, relations between nationalism and sport, relations between social movement and sport and gender politics (e.g. [Pfister and Jawad eds., 2012; Hong ed., 2014; Raab and Khalidi eds., 2015]). For example, Walseth and Fasting discuss interpretations of sport by female athletes in an Islamic context and some researchers explore the influence of FIFA’s revision of the hijab ban rule on female Muslim athletes [Walseth and Fasting 2003; Prouse 2015; Hamzeh 2017]. In research on gender politics and sport in the region, Islam occupies an important position and prompts a reconsideration of the widespread notion of modern sport mentioned above.

Islam and issues in modern sport indicate the plural globalizations of modern sport, as Bottenburg has discussed, rather than a simple line of expansion from origin or center toward periphery [van Bottenburg 2010]. Football culture in Brazil and rugby culture in Fiji indicate that the indigenization of modern sport remains compatible with the view of modern sport as a universality. At the same time, it indicates a possible nexus between modern sport and Islam after the Islamic revival.

This paper explores the Islamic turn in modern sport and discusses how modern sport sometimes mediates with or realizes a theoretical Islamic world. This paper then focuses on contemporary Iran as a society in post-Islamic turn, as mentioned above, and karate as a case of development of *budō*, originating with modern Japan.

## **2. A Brief History of the Formation of Karate as a *Dō* (道) and Karate in Iran**

Karate is a martial art formed in modern Japan. It was originally a combat technique formed in Ryūkū, a chain of southern Japanese islands, with influence from Chinese martial arts. Thus, it was called karate (唐手), literally Chinese hand, even in the early Meiji period. Karate was also introduced to the main Japanese islands in the Meiji period, as demonstrated in the house of the Marquess Shō family, a descendent of Ryūkū royal family, in Tokyo. Around the late Meiji period, karate masters from Okinawa stayed on the main islands of Japan and demonstrated the art. Then it was still called karate (唐手) but Gichin Funakoshi adopted *kara* (空) instead of *kara* (唐) in 1929. *Kara* (空) derived from the *kū* (空) of Buddhism philosophy — literally, emptiness. In addition, later he did not mention karate-jutsu (唐手術), karate technique, but

*karate-dō* (道), the path of karate.

As Shun Inoue [2000: 69–103] has pointed out, *dō* (道) was idea and concept invented by Jigorō Kanō, the father of judo. He modernized *jū-jutsu* (柔術) to *jū-dō* (柔道) and emphasized the aspect of spiritual cultivation in the practice. *Dō* was a hybrid innovation of the Japanese spirit with Western learning in the dimension of the modernization of traditional sports, characterized as spiritual cultivation, and the persistence of the spiritual aspect over acquiring the technique. This concept formed the notion of *budō* (武道), the path of martial arts; this was connected to political ideologies such as Japanism and recognition centered around Japan's emperors under the Japanese war regime [Inoue 2000: 56–61, 103–105]. In consequence, *budō* as a modern innovation became a notion to correct westernized culture into an “inherent” national culture embodying “traditional” Japanese spirit from the 1930s [Inoue 2000: 105].

*Budō*, including karate, as influenced by militarism in Japan, was reconstructed and survived as a modern sport after WWII. Although some practitioners still pursue spirituality through *budō*, the modern sport has secular characteristics. Karate also spread across the broader world as a modern sport.

It is not too much to say that karate is the most popular modern sport, after soccer, in Iran. More than one million Iranians enjoy karate, with no regard to gender or age. In addition, Iranian national team members have had great success in international matches, such as the WKF Karate 1 Premier League. Despite this important position in the world of karate, there are few academic reports on karate in Iran, except for a research report by Masatoshi Ōshita [2009], published in Persian. Thus, there is little information about the social history of karate in Iran.

Since the early twentieth century, various Western-style physical practices, part of a process of modernization of the society, have been introduced to Iranian society by Iranians themselves and by foreigners. For example, football was introduced in the same period by British residents and American missionaries. Among modern sports in Iran, karate is a relatively new sport [Chehabi 2010; 2014].

The history of karate in Iran started with Master Farhād Vāraste (1937–2015). Although it is still unclear how and when this father of karate in Iran started his practice, he encountered the practice in high school in London. He was trained in Shōrinjiryū Kenkōkan Karate, traditional Okinawa-derived karate, including weapons practice, founded by Hisataka Kōri shortly after WWII, and reached the seventh dan. He established his school<sup>2</sup> of karate as Kanzen-ryū or Kanzenkai and opened the first karate dojo (training center) in Iran in 1966.<sup>3</sup>

2 The distinction regarding different levels of organization here is derived from the categories under the Iran Karate Federation. *Sabke* means a category based on the style of competition rules such as WKF rules, Kyokushin rules or Shin Kyokushin rules, and so on. *Gorūh* (group) means a category of groups sharing the same competition rules. In addition, I add schools under the category of *gorūh* for distinction.

3 Although Šafarī [1392: 9] told Master Vāraste he started his activity in Iran in 1963, this paper adopts the beginning as 1966, following Master Vāraste's explanation in an interview (e.g. <<http://shahrvand.com/archives/59022>> (last accessed February 7, 2018)).

Master Vāraste worked in the ministry of foreign affairs in Iran and worked as a combat advisor in the military service. He gradually expanded his karate practice and trained younger disciples.

In 1971, the Academy of Karate in Iran was established and sent the first national team of Iran to a WKF international match in Paris. As mentioned, Master Vāraste had practiced Shōrinjiryū Kenkōkan Karate, which adopted full-contact practice, and developed unique Kōshiki karate, a full-contact rule system with protective equipment. On the other hand, WKF, established in 1970 as the largest international governing body for karate, adopted a light or semi-contact competition rule system. Although there are also commonalities between Shōrinjiryū Kenkōkan Karate and the WKF rule system, such as *kata*, patterns of movements, there are technical differences between them. Master Vāraste and his colleagues adopted the major trend of karate.<sup>4</sup>

In 1974, the Iran Karate Federation was established and Master Vāraste was elected as the first president of the Federation. The Federation thrived under Master Vāraste. In the same year, a karate training center was founded in Shiraz as the first training center in a provincial city; these centers spread across other provincial cities. The 1976 European Karate Championships, the eleventh, was held in Tehran from May 5 to 7, 1976. In 1978, Shahriyār Shafiq, head of combat sports in Iran and a son of Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, twin sister of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was elected as the second president of the Karate Federation. The inauguration of a member of the House of Pahlavi to the head of the Karate Federation meant royal patronage for the Federation.

The Revolution occurred in 1979 and the golden age came to an end. Master Vāraste was put under house arrest after the Revolution. Although some members of the aristocracy were executed after the Revolution, he fortunately survived. He and his family moved to Paris in 1982 and later Toronto, a major Iranian migrant city in North America (after Los Angeles). He established a karate training center and trained top athletes in Canada. Some of his students were selected as national team members. His daughter, Nassīm Vāraste, was a member of the national team of Canada and reached second position in World Karate Championships in 2006 and 2008. She became a technical coach to the national team later.

After the Revolution and eight-year Iran-Iraq War, karate in Iran had to survive a short “winter.” The Federation of Karate was forced to dissolve and a new governing body for martial arts treated karate as similar to taekwondo and judo. However, unlike for other sports, including football, the most popular sport in Iran, where there was no participation in international competitions until the late 1980s, karate was able to return to the international

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<sup>4</sup> Until the late 1980s, schools of karate in Iran were only “traditional” schools which did not adopt the knock-out rule. Moḥammad ‘Alī Sharīfī, who practiced in Shōtōkan in Japan and was allowed to wear a black belt, opened his training center in 1972. In addition, Moḥammad Bāqer Āghamīrī, Karate-ka of Wadō ryū as well as a famous painter, started his school in 1973 [Safarī 1392: 11].

community. The national team was sent to the seventh World Karate Championship in Maastricht, in the Netherlands, in 1984. In the same year, the departments of karate, taekwondo and judo were independent from the martial arts association and a new Federation of Karate started. The Federation held a national competition for the selection of the national team and encouraged karate in the country.

In 1988, Iran and Iraq concluded a ceasefire and this meant there was an opportunity to reconstruct society. Although it was difficult for Iran to reengage with the international community fully, they could return to the international sports community. Karate, which had already returned to the international community, offered success for Iran in international matches, such as two Iranian gold-medal holders in the 8th Asian Pacific Karate Championships-APUKO in 1989. The Iranian national team succeeded in the 12th Asian Games in Hiroshima in 1994, where karate debuted for the first time. In addition to the success in the WKF-rules competition, Kyokushin full-contact-rules karate was officially introduced to Iran in early 1990 and Iranian karate-ka (karate practitioner or player) also succeeded in the international competition in this field.

Organizational support influenced this success. Each karate school had to register with the Islamic Republic of Iran Karate Federation, the new governing body of karate after the Revolution. The Federation approved 46 associations as traditional schools and 36 associations as Kyokushin-style full-contact schools.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the central office of the Federation, provincial branches of the Federation were also set up. Each branch has developed not only youth and senior karate players but also judges according to particular competition rules. In short, the Federation succeeded in installing a rational system to promote karate. There is a quite different organizational structure and development system in Japan, where each association is, in general, independent.<sup>6</sup>

The Federation has a unique department and is also different from Japan. The unique department is the cultural department. In the platform of the Federation, article 3.7 mentions promoting Islamic culture among karate players and those interested, and article 3.9 mentions memorizing the Quran and Quran recital gatherings.<sup>7</sup> In short, culture in the cultural department indicates “Islamic culture,” which the Islamic state after the Revolution has promoted to the nation, and the department has promoted Islamic culture in its karate activities.

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5 Yūsof Shīrẓād, who started his training from 1975 under the guidance of Master Masutatsu Ōyama, the founder of Kyokushin Karate, introduced full-contact karate [Frank 2012: 483]. After Ōyama’s death and the split in his organization, several groups of Kyokushin were founded in Iran, and I found during my fieldwork that the Matsushima group had influence in the Karate Federation.

6 There have been also critical opinions, such as regarding the authoritarian structure. Although each association has an independent system of promotion until black belt, the federation can only allow the official system of promotion. Even though the central body of each association in Japan allows the holding of a black belt, it is necessary to get permission to hold such a belt from the federation.

7 <<http://www.ikf.ir/www/pdf/farhangi.pdf>> (last accessed February 7, 2018).



The promotion of Islamic culture in the sports federations, such as reciting the Quran, did not only happen in the Federation of Karate, but also in the Federation of taekwondo and judo. In short, those federations which could return to international sports communities at a relatively early stage after the Revolution have had a department of the promotion of Islamic culture.

### **3. The Islamization of Karate and the Alternative Tradition of Pursuing Spirituality**

Master Maḥmūd (pseudonym) had an important role in the department of Islamic affairs in the Federation for a long time and was a representative of the karate-ka of Iran after the Revolution.<sup>8</sup> He was a responsible person in the unique karate school, the activity base of which was always the mosque.<sup>9</sup> It should not be surprising that such mosque-based activities of karate and taekwondo enabled the promotion of both sports even in the early stages of post-revolutionary Iran as an exception to modern sports in the same period [Chehabi 2002: 390].

The headquarters training center was located in a symbolic place for the Revolution — the central city of Tehran, the capital of Iran. Next to the headquarters, there was the mosque in which Ayatollah Maḥmūd Tāleghānī (1911–1979) regularly preached that was not so far from Lālezār, a red-light district before the Revolution. In short, the area symbolized westernized “deterioration” and Islamic culture as tradition. The headquarters was a cinema theater before the Revolution and was controlled by the revolutionary committee after the Revolution. The symbol mark of the basīj (the paramilitary organization of the Revolutionary Guard) was drawn on the wall of the headquarters and indicated that the facility was related to revolutionary segment of the Iranian state.

There were three training classes by age during my fieldwork in 2016 and 2017; for juveniles, for adults and for elders. Here, I describe the training class for adults,<sup>10</sup> which was held from Saturday to Wednesday. Although each training class lasted an hour and a half through the year, the class started before or after the prayer time of Maghrib or ‘Ishā’, depending on the hours of sunlight in a day.<sup>11</sup> Although students’ backgrounds were quite different from each other in terms of age, education and job, students did not dislike the pro-state representation, as I will describe later.

Although the other instructor who held a black belt in this school taught karate to juveniles, Master Maḥmūd usually led the adult and elder classes. When he entered the

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8 The description here is my fieldwork (December 2015–January 2016, September 2016, December 2017–January 2018).

9 This paper focuses only on the headquarters of this school but there have been some branches, including a female facility. All branches were founded as part of a mosque.

10 Although most of participants were adults, some participants were juveniles and elders.

11 The Shia Muslims in Iran have five times for prayer the same as the Sunnis but they pray on three occasions. They commonly pray zuhr and ‘aṣr, and maghrib and ‘ishā’ in succession.

training hall, the assistant instructor or an elderly student called for students to give *Ṣalawāt* to the Master Maḥmūd. This intoning meant the beginning of the class. The *Ṣalawāt* is a common invocation of God's blessing upon the Prophet Muhammad — “*Allāhumma ṣalli ‘alā Muḥammad wa āl Muḥammad*” (Oh Allah, sanctify Muhammad and his family) — but there are some variations with additional phrases. The phrase “*‘ajjil faraja-hum*” (hasten their alleviation) is also a relatively common additional phrase but he and his students added “*wa ahlak a‘dā’ihum ajma‘īn bil-akhaṣṣ munāfiqīn wa kuffār, yā ‘Alī*” (eliminate his enemies, especially hypocrites and unbelievers, oh Ali). Their additional phrase indicated that they were pro-state supporters of the Islamic Republic.

Master Maḥmūd stood in front of the mihrab at the west corner of hall and turned to Mecca. His students followed and also turned to Qibla. He called for students to give *Ṣalawāt* to Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and his disciples did so. He recited the *Ṣūra al-‘Aṣr* (the declining day) of the Quran quickly and preached a short address related to current events or the unique episodes of the Imams. After his call to intone for the return of the Hidden Imam, he led their disciples into jogging and doing some stretches as a warmup.

The practical session seemed to be a training scene in a typical karate school, except for several points. First, they adopted a unique training method. They not only adopted karate methods such as a basic series of actions and but also judo methods, such as falling techniques. It is usual in karate schools, such as Daidōjuku full-contact karate schools, to adopt the grappling rule as in some traditional Okinawa-style karate schools in Japan. Thus, though the purposes were different, this practical method was present not only in this school.

However, the second point was unique for this school. They usual shout some faithful phrases in the training or inter-training session. For example, they jog and shout “*Labbayka yā ‘Alī*” (Oh Ali, here am I), indicating their devotion to Imam Ali. When he turned direction while jogging, they changed names and object of devotion, such as the Imam Hussain, the eighth Imam, the Hidden Imam and Fatima, the daughter of prophet Muhammad and wife of the Imam Ali. In addition, when they practiced basic action with punching and kicking, they shouted “1, 2, 3, ... 7, 8, 9” after their master counted the number. When the counting reached ten, they loudly shout “*Yā ‘Alī*” (Oh Ali) as an indication of devotion for Imam Ali. They also gave the *Ṣalawāt* intersection of the actions. The most unusual moment came with the last session of the training — knuckle push-ups. They prepared in circle and started knuckle the push-ups by shouting “*Yā Ḥoseyn*”

It was possible to find other unique points in the facility and training practice. The training hall was the size of a large tennis court and the wall was decorated with devotional ornaments, such as a large banner with name of Imam Ali or other Imams, a painting of Ayatollah Beheshṭī and banners with religious slogans. In the green wall of the entrance of

the hall, “Disciples shall follow Imam Ali (peace upon him).” When disciples, even juveniles, entered to the hall, they had to shout “Yā Ḥoseyn” and raise their right hand at the entrance.

They wore a unique training outfit: white, woodland camouflage pattern, olive and dessert camouflage pattern. The school did not define usual training wear and ordinal disciples up to second dan wore the white training wear of karate or taekwondo, or sportswear. Those who held first dan (brown belt) and black belt could wear woodland camouflage pattern training wear. Those who had higher than fifth dan of black belt could wear olive color training wear. Master Maḥmūd wore only dessert camouflage pattern training wear.<sup>12</sup>

Like a military army adopting camouflage pattern for their combat suits, their training camouflage pattern wear also meant permission to join an “army.” This army meant the army of the Hidden Imam rather than the Baṣīj. According to Shiite tradition, the Hidden Imam will reappear and fight against a group of dajjāl, or evil figures, in a final apocalyptic battle before the resurgence. In short, practitioners in the school trained themselves to join to the army of the Hidden Imam to fight against the group of dajjāl.

In this school, practitioners cultivated the physical and spiritual aspects of the Muslim. Master Maḥmūd told me that it was necessary for a soldier of the army to be a sufficient Muslim in terms of physical and spiritual aspects. In addition, he explained to me that codes of behavior derived from Quran and Islamic law cultivated the spiritual aspect of a Muslim, while karate cultivated the physical aspects of a Muslim soldier. Before or after the adult class, depending on the season, they held a gathering to study matters of the code of behavior by using a collection of Islamic codes published by several Grand Ayatollahs. They also pray before or after the class in the training wear in the mosque next to the training center. Shouting Ṣalawāt and the names of Imams and relatives in the training sessions, as I describe above, indicates a continuous connection of a cultivation between physical and spiritual aspects.

This school originally started its activity in 1981 as a localized Wadō-ryū karate, one of the major traditional karate schools. Master Maḥmūd also trained in the Wadō-ryū school in 1979 and even received guidance from Tatsuo Suzuki (1928–2011), an eighth dan Japanese karate-ka instrumental in spreading the martial art of Wadō-ryū karate around the world, especially Europe and U.S. Later, Master Maḥmūd reached seventh dan in 1999 and indicated his school still derived from Wadō-ryū karate in one aspect. Thus, his disciples could participate in the kata competition in WKF rule. From another aspect, his school derived from pro-wrestling, which Master Maḥmūd had started to practice in 1956, and the originality of the school as karate was Wadō-ryū karate mixed with pro-wrestling.

Of course, the most outstanding point of this karate school was the principle of connectivity between physical activity and the faith among the Shiite Muslims. Such character

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12 Master Maḥmūd always wore desert camouflage pattern wear in the public events but he sometimes wore olive color training wear in the training center.

was also common with bodily training in traditional Zūrkhāne, as I mentioned above.

In the 20th century, Iranian society introduced modern sports and modern physical education as part of the modernization of the society. Zūrkhāne rapidly changed its role in the secularizing society. *Koshṭī*, Persian wrestling, was one of the core physical activities in the Zūrkhāne but came to be independent from the Zūrkhāne and protected in the early 20th century. Physical activities remained in the activities in Zūrkhāne and were also encouraged as *varzesh-e bāstānī* or *varzesh-e pahlavānī* (“ancient sport”) in Zūrkhāne by connecting it to ancient Iran before the Islamic era. In other words, the activities of Zūrkhāne dissolved the physical and spiritual connection relating to Islam and emphasized the connectivity to Iranian nationalism under the Pahlavi monarch. After the Revolution, the activities of Zūrkhāne emphasized the connectivity to Islam again and continued to represent traditional culture. In recent years, physical activities in Zūrkhāne have been also introduced as modern sport and international competition matches have occurred [Krawietz 2013: 156–158]. Instead of the re-secularization of activities of Zūrkhāne, the karate school described above has tried to continue the connectivity.

Master Maḥmūd and his students were once involved in the Iran-Iraq War and some of his students were killed in it. Portraits of students who died — martyred students in ideological representation — still hang on the wall of the entrance. A couple of years ago, one of his students went to war as a voluntary soldier in Syria and was martyred. Master Maḥmūd spoke about his faithful devotion in a memorial event. However, this indicates their students were not always to engage in military service; Younes Saramifar [2018] discussed the complicated relationship between Shiite commemorative rituals for martyred Imams and the motivation of Iranian voluntary soldiers who fought outside Iran. In short, the cultivation of a moral self through their practices has not always lead the practitioner to be a pro-state voluntary soldier.

## Conclusion

This paper explores how Islamic thought has been naturalized in Muslim practice and how ideological aspects of Islam have emerged in contemporary Iran by focusing on karate, as a case study of the naturalization of the ideological approach of the situation of post-Islamism.

Islamic values were promoted by the state after the Revolution and sport federations, including the Karate Federation, have responded to this demand. Although some groups in society have obeyed this demand, some groups have actively absorbed it and attempted to embody Islam in their practice. Karate and taekwondo activities in mosques after the Revolution were good examples and have formed the Iranian Islamic version of *karate-dō*.

Karate practiced in the school of Master Maḥmūd invented a *karate-dō* in post-revolutionary Iran, which combined spiritual and physical cultivation in the Shiite Islamic context with Islamic ideology. As Inoue [2000: 69–103] has pointed out, the modern version of

*budō* was influenced by Jigorō Kanō's invention of *dō* (way), instead of *jutsu* (technique) and the emphasis on spirituality. In other words, *budō* was a hybrid culture between modernization and a tradition of martial arts, which insisted on spiritual and physical cultivation as a search for spirituality over obtaining technique. In short, it was a kind of Japanese spirit with Western learnings. This modern invention came ideologically to be characterized as unique ethnic culture embodying the traditional "Japanese spirit" or discipline which could "correct" Western culture. It was then connected with Japanism and imperialism [Inoue 2000: 56–61, 103–105].

In the school of Master Maḥmūd, they combined Islam, the "Japanese spirit," and the modern sport karate as a "Western learning." At the same time, their interpretation of Islam had a strong affinity with Islamism as state ideology, as their additional phrase in Ṣalawāt and the salutation to the Supreme Leader indicated. Their karate as *dō* was to seek a way which combined Islamic ideology with spiritual cultivation.

However, it is still unclear what moral self their cultivation leads to as a result. As Schielke [2009] has pointed out as well as Saramifar [2018], spiritual cultivation or spiritual initiation through religious rituals do not always contribute to forming a single moral self. Most of students in the karate school discussed here traced a similar path. The master and some students were once typical volunteers for the revolutionary state, as well as some students even in recent years who found the results of spiritual cultivation through their karate practice. However, most of the students did not choose to engage as military volunteers. Thus, they interpreted the meaning of the practice by themselves and their spiritual cultivation leads to a different way of Muslim life.

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