

The Martyr's Way to Paradise

Shiite Mural Art in the Urban Context¹

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Ever since the political changes in Iran more than twenty years ago, ideological discussions have manifested themselves in various arenas of political and societal concern. Apart from the traditional means of propaganda such as print-media and modern mass communication, Iranian political institutions employ a large range of other media to propagate their intentions and ideas. Of these, representations in writing and illustration in public spaces deserve particular attention, since they combine traditional modes of artistic expression with intentions of contemporary concern for Shiite Iran.

In Tehran, walls on large buildings have been used for pictorial illustrations of moral and political standards pertaining to the presently propagated Shia ideals. Mural art serves various ends, such as glorifying the Shiite martyrs, reminding the people of the righteous leadership, and, more recently, substituting nature as a means to humanize the concrete habitat of modern cities. All of these ends aim to stabilize the present value-system by underlining its intention, outlining its basic values, or simply offering comfort in times of depression.

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Introduction

International visitors to Tehran, when traveling from the airport to the city center, cannot fail to notice a phenomenon that has spread across the megalopolis since the mid-1990s: the large, multistory, windowless exterior walls of residential and commercial buildings facing the highways and avenues are adorned with bright murals whose contours can be seen even from a distance of several miles away. These megamurals, while dominated by imagery, often also incorporate short texts. As public expression, they are utilized by different organizations to propagate their aims. Among others, municipal authorities have in recent years become aware of the medium as an inexpensive way to beautify the urban concrete habitat. In consequence, various public spaces have been adorned with ornaments or graphic designs meant to emulate nature. These designs are particularly noticeable on the concrete pillars of highway bridges.

The majority of Tehran murals have, however, been placed by political organizations that by

definition in today's Iran are religiously oriented. The dominant theme in those murals is that of the martyr, or *shahid* in Persian (and Arabic). In the given context, the term martyr refers exclusively to males who have given their lives in defending the Shiite Islamic creed, or in defending the nation of Iran that in turn is firmly rooted within that creed. The murals possess artistic and aesthetic value, and would certainly deserve an art historian's interpretation (see Ahmadi 2003) positing them within the context of, say, traditional Iranian imagery versus the influence of large scale Western painting. In terms of content, they propagate a normative remembrance by depicting those individuals who have engaged in an act of martyrdom endorsed by the state. The murals thus partake in the framework of the Iranian Shiite culture of remembrance (Marzolph 1998), itself a basic value of the theocratically legitimated Islamic Republic.

In the following, I document and analyze various levels of presentation and messages

implied in these murals, using data collected during several field trips to Iran between 2000 and 2002. In addition to analyzing the presentation forms they take and their ideological components, I also want to draw attention to the semiotic links between the scenes depicted in the murals and the historical events that constitute the basis of religious and political consciousness as it is defined by Iranian Shiite authorities themselves.

It may be useful, by way of introduction, to briefly recount Iranian political history since 1979 here, as well as describe some aspects of the portrayal of martyrs in Iranian art. When Shâh Rezâ Pahlavi left Iran in early 1979 for good, he was forced to do so in response to the actions taken by various opposition groups both inside and outside the country. These groups can be more or less differentiated as either nationalist, communist, or religious-Islamic (Chelkowski/Dabashi 1999: 22–29). In a relatively brief time, the religious group headed by the charismatic leader Ruhollâh Khomeini gained the upper hand and strengthened its supremacy by consciously employing a variety of media tools to promote its views. In doing so, the most effective strategy was to redefine what had been a pluralistically-oriented revolution as a decidedly “Islamic” revolution, and this interpretation has not changed since.

The internal turmoil also encouraged Iraq, Iran’s neighbor to the west, to judge the country weakened and impaired. With the military and political support of the United States, Iraq, with the pretence of claiming contested territory alongside the common border, began a war with Iran. The Iran-Iraq War lasted until 1988 and ended with Iran successfully defending itself, albeit at considerable material and human loss. When Khomeini died soon after, he was succeeded as leader (*rahbar*) of the Islamic revolution by Âyatollâh Khâmene’i, who still holds the office today. Though post-revolutionary Iran was constituted as a presidential republic, the *rahbar* is the supreme political and military authority in Iran. The *rahbar* is permitted to influence, revise, or even contradict decisions taken by any other legal body in Iran, including those of the government or the head of state, both through his sheer authority and by virtue

of his leadership role in various influential bodies. The rationale is that the *rahbar* oversees whether rules and actions in and by the state correspond to “Islamic” laws and rules, and the authority of his office is incontestable. While the *rahbar* is elected for life, he remains subordinate only to Khomeini and cannot question Khomeini’s decisions or will.

Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi’s *The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (1999) has meticulously documented and analyzed the campaign to define the Iranian Revolution as “Islamic,” and details the manner in which visual media were instrumentalized to propagate this ideological aim. The array of media employed ranged from what has been seen in the aftermath of other ideologically-based revolutions – photographs, film, wall paintings, posters, banknotes, stamps, and schoolbook illustrations – to rather less common media, including children’s drawings, chewing-gum wrappers, and graffiti. While the large-sized murals of the 1990s derive from the media studied by Chelkowski and Dabashi, they were beyond the scope of their publication and have only quite recently gained scholarly attention (see Grigor 2002).

Chelkowski and Dabashi contend that political posters existed in Iran prior to the revolution of 1978/79, but argue that their conscious use for propaganda purposes only started with the revolution (see also Balaghi/Gumpert 2002). Technically, posters are illustrations with an accompanying text printed on large-sized paper. In Iran, that illustration was often composed of artistic renderings of realistic scenes that were supplemented by symbolic components alien to the event itself. For a number of years, such posters remained the key media expression of the revolution, and though not as spontaneous as the revolutionary graffiti that covered the walls initially (particularly in southern Tehran; see *Divâr neveshtehâ-ye enqelâb* 1982; Rota 1989; Yavari d’Hellencourt 1990), posters were later institutionalized.

By the mid-1990s, the themes and topics of the posters began to appear on the murals. Yet such murals are not simply much larger versions of the earlier posters. Given their size, they are devised with a specific agenda in mind that

aims to convey its message in touching images and clear messages. Moreover, the murals' very size and omnipresence render the topics they illustrate unavoidable and obtrusive. These characteristics make the mural topics themselves into inescapable constituents of daily life in Tehran, thereby firmly anchoring the propagated ideology in popular consciousness if not sub-consciousness.

The Murals: An Overview

The dominant subject of most murals are individual males who lost their lives in the so-called First Gulf War (the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88), though there are some who are memorialized for their participation in the armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Some murals depict two individuals, but it is rare to see small groups of three or five or more persons shown. The largest group of martyrs portrayed shows the nine Iranian journalists assassinated by the Taliban regime in Mazar-e Sharif in Afghanistan.

The texts accompanying the murals tend to convey short and straightforward messages. These messages are of two kinds. One explains

the basic facts that enable the spectator to identify the mural's subject, such as the name of the dead person(s) and the place or event at which he lost his life. The other kind prescribes how the mural should be interpreted. Such a text might be a programmatic statement from the diary or last will of the dead person, a quote from the Koran, or a quote from the *rahbar*. Thus, the image of Dr. Mostafâ Chemrân is accompanied by his exclamation: "Great God, I thank you for having opened up to me the path of martyrdom!" In the case of Mohammad-'Ali Ganjizâde, the mural includes a sentence from his last will reading: "I wish that everyone treat each other with sincerity. Do not forget to follow the right path and keep away from the evil path. This should be regarded as more important than the affection of one's family." Commander Nâser Kâzemi's depiction bears the quote: "The only way of liberating the oppressed from their oppressors is the revolutionary way of Islam" [fig. 1]. Frequently one sees the Koran quote "and by stars they will be led the right way" (16,16) or utterances by either Khomeini or Khâmene'i. Quite often, the murals include a statement of Khomeini's that has almost gained a proverbial status: *Shahâdat honar-e mardân-*



1. Tehran, Kordestân Highway.

e khodâ-st (“Martyrdom is the art of the men of God”).

The portrait of the deceased person is usually of an almost photographic exactitude, while the backgrounds remain rather imprecise, with blue and white tones suggesting sky and clouds. Supplementing this, either alone or together, are two other elements. One is symbolic, a red tulip or a red rose to symbolize martyrdom, or the depiction of the blood that has been shed itself. The other is a portrait of Khomeini, or the likenesses of both Khomeini and Khâmene’i together. One never, however, sees Khâmene’i depicted without his predecessor.

As the signatures on the murals document, most have been installed at the orders of political groups and institutions. One relatively rarely sees the names of such institutions as the Tehran municipal authority, the Hezbollah, the Foundation of the Guards (*bonyâd-e pâsdârân*), or the Foundation of the Oppressed (*bonyâd-e mostaz’afân*). Instead, the vast majority of the murals have been installed by order of the large and influential Foundation of Martyrs (*bonyâd-e shahid*). This institution was founded by Khomeini’s personal decree in 1979, at the very beginning of the revolution. Since then, it has developed into a powerful national institution, its income having more than tripled from March 1994 to September 1999, comprising some \$15 million for the said period (*Bonyâd-e shahid* 1999:270). The official mandate of the foundation is to care for martyrs, invalids, and their families, as well as to keep their memory alive in society (Rahimiyân 2001). It is this latter goal that has given rise to the institutionalized public memory of martyrs by way of murals. According to the data published the foundation itself, by 1999, more than 600 of them, covering a total of 24,834 square meters, had been installed (*Bonyâd-e shahid* 1999: 90f.).

The logo of the *Bonyâd-e shahid* is a cleverly contrived combination of symbols that are essential for the contemporary interpretation of martyrdom in the Shiite context. It contains the Koran, a red tulip (which shows a striking similarity to a soldier’s helmet) and a white dove in flight (symbolizing the soul) in front of an abstraction of the globe. A red border that frames the logo contains part of a Koranic

utterance (33,23) whose complete form reads: “Within the believers there are men who have carried out the deeds they have promised to God. Some of them have already passed away while others still have to wait. And they have falsified nothing.” With these words, martyrdom in the service of religious faith is elevated to the level of being a true believer’s obligation. The key difference between a martyr and other believers is not the degree of intensity or the sincerity of belief, but rather the fact that the martyr has already fulfilled his obligation toward God by losing his life.

Martyrdom in the Context of Shiite Islamic History

This active propagation of martyrdom is alien to Western secular observers, and consequently generates a set of questions. The recent intense discussion of phenomena that are called terrorism or suicide-bombing (see Israeli 1997), or the equally recent division of the world’s civilizations into the Good and the Bad on the part of various world politicians, require that one address, in its proper historical context, the pressing questions surrounding the phenomenon of martyrdom and the position it occupies in contemporary Iran (Khosrokhavar 1995; Kohlberg 1997; Butel 2002; Khosrokhavar 2003: 115–172).

At first, one might be inclined to regard the contemporary relevance of martyrdom as a result of the large number of deaths caused by the 1978/79 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. To memorialize these casualties means to honor those who gave their lives to help construct and safeguard today’s Iran. The sheer numbers of these martyrs would seem sufficient grounds to show enduring gratitude to their heroic deeds, and acknowledge their devotion. This conclusion is as obvious as it is not exactly wrong.

Yet the historical dimension of martyrdom in Shiite Iranian thought needs also to be taken into account and placed in its appropriate context. The Shiite creed of Islam (Halm 1988) was elevated to the position of dominant creed, or to what we would call an official state religion today, by the founder of the Safavid dynasty in 1501, though most Iranians at that time would

likely still have adhered to the Sunni creed. The difference between Sunni and Shiite creeds is manifested in the large number of details of both dogma and theology that have in turn generated an equally large variety of popular customs, beliefs, and practices (see Massé 1938: vol. 1, 119–169; Donaldson 1938).

Historically, the schism in the Islamic community resulted from a simple controversy over the proper succession to the prophet Mohammad (d. 632). As this controversy bears on the basis for the legitimacy of leadership in Islam, it has had wide-reaching consequences ever since. Mohammed did not leave a male descendant as heir, nor had he appointed a successor (though this last statement is not endorsed by the Shiite community). Mohammed's only surviving male descendants resulted from the marriage of his daughter Fâtima with a cousin of Mohammad, Ali.

In the Shiite view, Ali was the only legitimate successor to Mohammed. This position is expressed by their denomination, as the Arabic expression *shī'at 'Alī* literally means the "party of Ali". There were other reasons to prefer Ali, because from the very beginning, he had been a close associate and intimate friend of Mohammed's. Shiites even claim that when he returned from his last pilgrimage to Mecca, Mohammed explicitly appointed Ali as his successor. Besides, Ali was also a prominent representative of the established religious aristocracy of the original Islamic community.

But this was not the majority view, for in the discussion of Mohammed's succession, there were those who said that kinship or personal acquaintance with the prophet should be weighed against choosing a suitable or deserving person. In the end, the first and second caliphs (the Arabic term *khalīfa* literally means deputy), Abū Bakr (632–634) and Omar (634–644), were elected by decision of a board of elders. While the Shiite party already opposed these decisions, the election of the third caliph Osman (644–656) produced an open discord. After Osman was assassinated and Ali (656–661) finally became caliph, the rift between the various factions was irreparable, and Ali, too, was murdered. The developments led on the one hand to the establishment of the (Sunni)

Omayyad dynasty; on the other, it resulted in the institutionalizing, within the 'Party of Ali', of the claim that Ali's direct descendants – and thus the chain of Shiite *imāms* – were the rightful and hereditary leaders of the Islamic community.

This schism did not occur without armed struggle, and it is in this early history that the tradition of Shiite martyrdom is rooted. Initially, after Ali's death in 661, Shiites claimed that his legitimate successor was Fâtima's eldest son Hasan. Hasan, however, officially declined and paid public homage to the Omayyad caliph Mu'âwiya. Hasan's death (670 or 678), as well as the succession of Mu'âwiya by his son Yazîd in 680, again raised the question of succession, and it was Hosein, Hasan's younger brother, who claimed this right.

That year, Hosein, accompanied by a small troop of warriors who supported him, crossed the desert from Mecca in the direction of Kufa, whose Arabic inhabitants he believed endorsed his claim. However, the inhabitants of Kufa, even though they sympathized with Hosein, did not support him in military terms. On the plains near Karbalâ', in Iraq, Hosein and his small troop were slaughtered and mutilated by the caliph's army, who vastly outnumbered them on Moharram 10, 61, or October 10, 680. When the battle was over, the severed heads of the males of Hosein's clan, together with the women and children, were sent to the caliph's residence in Damascus. Hosein's only surviving male descendant was his son Ali, called "Zayn al-'âbidîn" (or "Adornment of the servants of God"), who had not participated in the battle because he was ill. This Ali, and his descendants, then continued the direct succession of Shiite *imāms* that in the Iranian Shiite view lasted until the twelfth *imām*, Mohammad al-Mahdi, who went into concealment in the year 941 and who will only return on Doomsday.

Hosein's Martyrdom and Collective Remembrance

Hosein's death during the battle of Karbalâ' in 680 constitutes the pivotal martyrdom, the central traumatic experience, of the Shiite creed. No other event has had an equal impact on both

the learned and popular cultures of Shiite Iran. In particular, Hosein's death continues to exercise a tremendous effect not so much through itself and its immediate consequences, but rather by being remembered and memorized in the hearts of people. The anniversary of Hosein's death on Moharram 10 is celebrated as the highest Shiite religious holiday, and Hosein's martyrdom is remembered every year during the month of Muharram, in both public and private ceremonies and dramatic re-enactments.

Once the Shiite creed was established as Iran's "state religion" in the sixteenth century, and again during the Qajar dynasty in the nineteenth century, the collective remembrance of Hosein's martyrdom brought forth a richly documented literary genre, popularly known as *rouze-khvâni* (see Marzolph 2001: 25f.), but sometimes also called *marsiye* (lament) or *maqal* ([narrative about a] scene of combat). This genre, which embellishes the tragic events with numerous real as well as a growing number of fantastic details, derives its name from the public performance of the popular work *Rouzat al-shohadâ'* ("Garden of the martyrs") compiled by Hosein b. Vâ'ez Kâshefi (d. 1504).

Hosein's martyrdom, together with the sense of remorse at not having been able to prevent this tragedy, is individually re-lived by men castigating and publicly flagellating themselves in mourning processions during the month of Moharram. It is also re-enacted in the dramatic genre of *ta'ziye*, often labeled the "Shiite passion play" (Chelkowski 1979), as well as being recounted in narrative performances to a broader public by professional story-tellers. These story-tellers – and here we have another thematic and representational connection to posters and murals – in turn sometimes employed large oil canvasses (*parde*) to illustrate their stories (Seif 1990). Furthermore, images of Hosein's martyrdom are in evidence in numerous other forms of pictorial illustration such as the tile-work that used to adorn the Hoseiniye-ye Moshir, a nineteenth-century commemorative building in Shirâz (Homâyuni 1992), or the single-sheet lithographic prints that were sold or distributed at Shiite places of worship such as the Shrines of Karbalâ' (Vinchon 1925; Marzolph 2001: fig. 90).

Contexts and Examples

Today's Tehran murals are linked in many ways with these events, both past and present, that lie at the core of Shiite self-perception, though some links are more obvious than others. In some murals, past and present may be linked by including the image of Ali as an ideal and exemplary human being, or by portraying the righteous martyr Hosein. Other members of the Islamic "holy family" (*ahl-e beit*), such as Hosein's mother Fâtima, may also appear.

Besides the depiction of the martyr's blood, often embodied by a red tulip, the other recurrent symbol is water. This is not just a reference to water as fundamental to life, for Shiites immediately associate water with the martyrdom of Hosein and his troops. Though Hosein had been quite close to the river Euphrates, the caliph's troops would not allow him to fetch water for his thirsty men, and Hosein's standard-bearer and water-carrier Abol-Fazl was sadistically mutilated when he attempted to reach the river. Water therefore carries a semiotic charge linked to the image of the tragedy that lies at the core of belief for each member of the Shiite community.

Though the memorialization of the recent death of Iranian soldiers in the Iran-Iraq War may, through the symbols and imagery included, be explicitly linked to Shiite views of the past, the murals are also part of the present since both Khomeini and Khâmene'i, the recent leaders of the Islamic revolution, are often portrayed together with the martyrs. This bracketing not only legitimates the present, presenting it as a direct result of the past. It also presents contemporary events as normative for the future. To elaborate this point, a few murals will be examined in greater detail.

A mural on the wall of a building standing adjacent to the Foundation of Martyrs headquarters in central Tehran depicts a soldier who died in battle. Revived in the hereafter, he has put his machine-gun on the ground and humbly stands at the entrance to paradise – paradise being the reward each martyr expects immediately after death (Garthwaite 1991: 29). The incorporated text reads *Shahid avval kasi-st ke be behest vâred mishavad* ("The martyr is the



2. Tehran, Golhâ Square South.

first to enter paradise”), and the artistic style is reminiscent of classical Persian miniatures.

Paradise as the martyr’s ultimate goal is also pictured in another mural that cleverly combines various layers of reality and fiction. The anonymous martyr, identified by his red ribbon, is set as a barely recognizable silhouette against a blue and cloudy sky. The viewers’ gaze is drawn to two butterflies, one of which has liberated itself from the background, leaving a blank space, while the other is still struggling to do so. Besides the dove, the butterfly is a popular symbol for the martyr’s soul. The butterfly’s goal is an area set into a realistic landscape of mountains and seashore that is differentiated from the background by its horizontal perspective. The setting sun streaming from this area indicates its character as the promised land, one which the butterfly’s shadow is about to enter [fig. 2]. The wording on the mural’s left side, by Khomeini, praises active fighting (*basi*) as a “school of love” and as the natural way all those nameless martyrs who gave their lives serving its cause take.

Another mural, also placed on the wall of a government building, links Ali’s exemplary character and impeccability with the element of

water. Though a Western observer might be reminded of Niagara Falls, water here incorporates a dual symbol: the implicit expression of Hosein’s suffering and the source of life. The quintessential expression of water in Islam, after all, is the river al-Kauthar in paradise. The water’s originates from a green cloth on the left side of the image that is arranged in the form of a head-dress clothing an unidentified figure. As the green color indicates a member of the prophet Mohammed’s family, there is not doubt that this figure is meant to be Ali, the exemplary and impeccable human being whose example serves as the source of life. The quotation added to the illustration underlines this interpretation. It is an admonition of Khomeini’s reading: *Shomâ varzeshkârân bâyard be-Ali eqtedâ’ konid*, “Sportsmen, take Ali as your example!” [fig. 3]

Another mural neatly combines several of the aforementioned elements by showing the portraits of three martyrs who are set as stars in front of a field of tulips. They are framed by the two leaders of the revolution, with the name of Ali placed in the upper middle and emanating light like the sun. The motto is again Khomeini’s: “Martyrdom is the art of the men of God!” It is



3. Tehran, Vesâl-e Shirâzi Street, Corner of Beheshti Ave.



4. Tehran, Golhâ Square West.



5. Tehran, Modarres Highway.

worth noting that this mural is on a wall in front of large faucets from which the tanker trucks hired by the municipal authorities fill up the water sprayed on the numerous lawns and green areas in the city [fig. 4].

Probably the most emotionally moving poster in Tehran has been installed next to one of the more heavily frequented city highways that heads north [fig. 5]. It shows a little girl holding a red rose in her hand, mourning her dead father, who lies in front of her, with the words: *Bâbâ-ye shahidam – hich goli khoshbutar az yâd-e to nist* (“My martyr father – no rose smells sweeter than your memory!”). This mural includes a number of stars that contain invocations addressed to the full set of characters most revered by Shiite Islam: Mohammed, his daughter Fâtima (implied in her cognomen Zahrâ’), Ali, his sons Hasan and Hosein, and the twelfth *imâm* al-Mahdi, who watches the world’s fate from his place of concealment. The upper right-hand corner shows what appears to be a crack in the sky, permitting a glimpse of paradise, the future residence of all martyrs and the ultimate goal their way will lead them to. The writing on the left side comforts the martyrs by assuring them that the community will never forget

their victory. A separate plate, placed next to the mural at a later date, adds both Khomeini’s image and his interpretation. The founder of the Islamic Republic is placed before a wall adorned with an ornament representing the stylized name of Ali, pointing out that Ali serves as a constant model to all true Shiite believers, “in piety, faith, and support for the suppressed” (*shî’e bâyard moshâyê’at konad ‘Ali-râ [...] be zohd, be taqvâ, be residegi be mazlum ...*). It is worth noting that this mural, for as yet unknown reasons, was whitewashed in early 2003.

Finally, another powerful mural is affixed to the wall of a building immediately adjacent to the “Square of the Revolution” (Meidân-e enqelâb), the most frequented public space in Tehran where hundreds of thousands pass by and see the mural every day [fig. 6]. The city campus of the University of Tehran lies in the vicinity, a location that even before the revolution had often been the scene of civilian intellectual protests, and that since then has been used as the arena for the programmatic Friday prayers. This mural’s center is occupied by a young soldier who is flanked by masses of soldiers ready for war. The young man’s red ribbon signals his readiness to die as a martyr. On the



6. Tehran, Enqelâb Square East.

right side, to the rear of the martyr, stands Khomeini, depicted in about the same size and looking in the same direction, while stretching out his right arm in a gesture of blessing and protection for which he was famous during his lifetime. At the mural's left side, in front of the martyr, the artist has placed the smiling (if somewhat inward-looking) head of Khâmene'i, who faces the future with an air suggesting confidence. The mural's lower edge is shown dripping with blood, while the upper edge is dominated by green, the prophet Mohammed's color. That green gradually melts into the black turban that indicates Khâmene'i (and Khomeini) are *seyyid*, thus among Mohammed's descendants. The space in between these two colored edges is dominated by white that gradually turns into the revered grey of Khâmene'i's beard. Taken together, the three colors represent the Iranian national flag. The writing, centered in the image's upper half, reads: *Parvaresh-e javânân-e khodâ-juy basiji-ye fath ol-fotuh-e emâm ast* ("Educating the God-seeking youth means mobilization for the final battle of the *imâm*"). The rectangular mural has ingeniously been placed on a wall whose left side is lower than the right, thus visually

suggesting an emphasis to the left that signifies the future.

Conclusion

The Tehran murals, whether regarded individually or as a collective phenomenon, are strong evidence for the popularization of martyrdom as a constitutive element of the Shiite creed in today's Iranian interpretation. In combining current events with references to Hosein or Ali, they rely on the past as a foundation for contemporary identity while also aiming to perpetuate this interpretation into the future. Martyrs, though depicted as named individuals, are turned into de-personalized stereotypical models by their enormous size and omnipresence, and the symbols included make clear that their individual fate is subordinate not just to the public interest but to the pivotal importance of martyrdom as a constitutive element of Shiite Islam. A mural underlining this interpretation shows various martyrs who are explicitly labeled as adhering to creeds and religious communities other than Islam, including an Armenian, a Syrian Christian, a Jew, and a Zoroastrian. In this way, the mural

claims universal validity for the concept of martyrdom as serving a just cause.

Further research is needed to illuminate the ideological motivations of the institutions and organizations that use murals. While the murals are installed at a time when Iranian politics is showing signs of becoming more liberal, the murals themselves are indicative of a conservative trend aimed at propagating and firmly rooting specific religious values and interpretations in the population both now and in the future. In this respect, the Tehran murals illustrate a phenomenon Werner Schiffauer (2001), in his recent essay on Kurdish martyr imagery, has called the "esthetic evidence."

By using a particular set of symbols and imagery in a visually attractive form, the Tehran murals aim to both create and solidify identity. The identity they propagate is not an individual and isolated one; it is highly complex and draws on religious and national elements, while using the past to project its values into the future. Furthermore, by combining a set of commonly acknowledged and unquestioned Shiite values together with more recent manifestations, such as the rise and position of the leaders of the Islamic revolution, along with the suggestion of death in the service of patriotic defense, the murals aim to create an aura of legitimacy for revolutionary politics and for self-defense as much as for martyrdom and sacrifice in the name of the faith.

It remains to be seen whether the murals should be taken to indicate a strong self-consciousness on the part of the conservative elements in Iranian politics. The active promotion of the heroics of past martyrs could also mean a sign of weakness towards a young population that appears increasingly indifferent towards religious values, as they conflict with their notions of modern life. The conditions of production, along with the reception of the murals by the surrounding society, require further examination. While the Foundation of Martyrs actively admits to pursuing propagandistic aims, empirical research among the Tehran population would have to be undertaken to establish what effect the murals have among either sympathizers or opponents of the ideological system portrayed.

Iranian society continues to be in transition, and those who judge phenomena they encounter in Iran from a Western or non-Muslim background may feel disoriented if not alienated. At the same time, in light of recent political and societal events, it is vitally important not to jump to rash conclusions. In this respect, studying the particular art-form of the Tehran murals affords us a chance to engage in a more refined or more adequate evaluation of the Iranian, and, in the broader context, of the Islamic Other.

Notes

1. This paper is the first published version of a presentation that has been given orally at various occasions.

German versions were presented at the September 2001 meeting of the Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft Vorderer Orient (DAVO) in Göttingen ("Schiitische Wandmalerei als politische Propaganda") and in the context of the Ringvorlesung of the "Sonderforschungsbereich Erinnerungskulturen" in Gießen in January 2002 ("Der Märtyrer und das Paradies: Schiitische Megaposter als Ausdruck des normativen Gedenkens").

English versions were presented at various occasions in Rochester, N. Y., Osaka, Tokyo and Cambridge. I would like to thank the respective audiences for their comments and criticism. Also, I am grateful to Shahnaz Nadjmabadi and Yuriko Yamanaka for supplying information and references that would otherwise have remained inaccessible to me.

The reproduced photographs have been taken by the author in September 2001.

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