
The Martyr's Fading Body: Propaganda vs. Beautification in the Tehran Cityscape

ULRICH MARZOLPH

In 2008 a new mural was painted on the wall that borders the eastern side of Tehran's Najmiye Hospital courtyard, situated on the southern side of Jomhuri Avenue just west of where it crosses Hafez Avenue (fig. 8.1 and plate 17). The new mural replaces an old, fading image whose background depicted a blue sky poetically strewn with drifting clouds, framed on two sides by lines of poetry executed as an aesthetically appealing exercise in traditional calligraphy. The older mural's primary subject was a realistic portrait, set off against the background in a separate frame, of a man whose name was given as Doctor Mohammad-Ali Rahnamun. It was fairly obvious that this person had died as a "martyr"—a word that in the current terminology of the Islamic Republic of Iran denotes a man who has given his life to defend the country and, by extension, the country's ideological and political system. Since the martyr's death was a given fact, it was here only symbolically indicated by a red rose; moreover, a minaret of the mosque of Emam Hosein in Karbala served both to allude to the territory of Iraq (and thus the Iran-Iraq War) and to suggest the basic tenets of Shiism.

The new mural differs from the one it replaced in several respects. First, it is much larger. While the mural of Doctor Rahnamun had covered only about a third of the available space, notably the area closest to the neighboring street, the new mural covers the whole wall, even incorporating irregular extensions on the wall's top. The mural's dominant color is a light blue, particularly in its background of a clear blue sky scattered with a few white clouds. At first glance, the mural is fairly surrealistic. The image is dominated by a thin wall that covers about half of the space, to the lower right side. At second glance, however, viewers will notice that the wall obviously separates two worlds. The area to this side of the wall appears to be the world in which we live, as a spiral staircase starts at the bottom right side of the image, next to the courtyard, thereby directly linking the image with the "real" world. The staircase leads up and over the wall, where its steps gradually disintegrate and finally fade altogether. The area on the wall's other side is indicated on the mural's left side, where view-



FIGURE 8.1. Surrealistic Mural. Tehran, Jomhuri Avenue, Courtyard of the Najmiye Hospital. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2008.

ers are permitted a glimpse into a scenery of fertile fields and lush green trees. This area appears to be of a different nature and, in fact, one beyond human comprehension: while the elements of this world are depicted in a fairly realistic manner, the trees in the “otherworld” are floating in air and the scenery is upside down.

Without knowing the artist’s intention, if a viewer were to make sense of the two areas, the area on the wall’s other side immediately suggests paradise. This interpretation can be further validated by two symbols that for many years have commonly been used in the Tehran murals to indicate the martyr’s soul in heaven. On the right, the top of the fading staircase is crossed by a group of white doves heading toward the wall’s other side. On the left, a swaying fold of the wall generates a series of white bubbles

floating in the air. These cocoon-like balls, once matured, open, birthing white butterflies that fly up to the promised land.

In such a way this new mural replaces an older one. And yet it is much more than merely a replacement or renovation. While employing a colorful, modern style that is highly appealing in its abstraction—albeit somewhat enigmatic, as surrealistic images always are—the mural’s imagery can be seen as a direct continuation of previous practice, in which butterflies and white doves were often used to symbolize the martyr’s soul. Rather than simply replacing an old image with a new one (a change that may or may not imply an additional change of visual message), the new mural thus refers to and revalidates the previously propagated concepts of martyrdom by condensing them to a set of commonly accepted abstractions and symbols. In other words, the new mural retains the old mural’s essential message in an abstract and depersonalized manner while adapting it to modern requirements in terms of artistic representation and public appeal.

While paintings such as this one have become fairly common in recent years, the phenomenon of murals in Tehran is by no means new. To the contrary, murals have been present in the capital city of the Islamic Republic of Iran (and, to a lesser degree, in other Iranian cities) for quite some time. In many ways they constitute the logical successors to smaller items of visual propaganda, such as the posters, postcards, photographs, stamps, and coins discussed in Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi’s groundbreaking publication on the visual culture of post-revolutionary Iran.¹

On February 10, 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, commemorating the historical events that led to the definitive abolishment of monarchic rule in Iran and resulted in the establishment of a radically new political system. The celebrations were undergirded by the many centuries of competition between the political rulers and the Shiite clergy concerning the legitimacy of political rule in an Islamic country. Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran for the first time in modern history has put into practice a principle that is regarded as the only legitimate one by the dominant current of contemporary Shiite clergy. This principle was formulated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the charismatic founder of the Islamic Republic, as *velayat-e faqih*, implying political leadership by the commonly acknowledged superior religious scholar of Shiite Islam. In the current system of the Islamic Republic, this leader (*rahbar*) is the uncontested political and military authority. His supervision alone guarantees that in case of doubt or dispute, each and every action of the state and its various institutions will be consistent with the values and norms that are regarded as “Islamic.”

The Islamic Republic of Iran's efforts in this respect cover all fields of cultural activities and are particularly visible in the large murals that adorn numerous buildings in Tehran.

The Tehran murals, many of which have been placed strategically so as to be visible from a far distance as well as to passing motorized traffic, constitute a fascinating facet of contemporary Iranian visual culture. The murals have been installed by order of the Tehran municipality, in particular its office for "beautification" (*ziba-sazi*), in an attempt to ease the monotony of the concrete habitat by adorning large walls (in particular those of highway bridges) with images of flowers, lush green meadows, or colorful ornaments. These murals often imitate nature, thus attempting to merge the walls with the surrounding greenery, or, conversely, to turn parts of the barren structures into virtual representations of a natural surrounding that is otherwise lacking.

The dominant theme of the Tehran murals, however, is the martyr (*shahid*), a term that almost exclusively implies men who have died in the course of promoting what is considered the just, "Islamic" cause. Many of the murals, particularly the more aggressive ones (such as the anti-American mural next to the flyover on Karim Khan Zand Avenue, which depicts a U.S. flag whose stripes turn into falling bombs),² have been used to illustrate numerous newspaper and journal reports about contemporary Iranian politics. In recent years, murals such as these also have received scholarly attention. One of the earliest studies to deal with the Tehran murals is Talinn Grigor's one-page paper in the August 2002 newsletter of the International Institute of Asian Studies,³ and the most recent contributions to the topic are those by Houshang Chehabi and Fotini Christia, Christiane Gruber, and Pamela Karimi, published in a special volume of *Persica*.⁴ The genesis of the murals, their overt and covert visual messages, and their development have been studied against the backdrop of both political motivations in Iran and visual culture on an international scale.

By drawing on photographic documentation covering more than a decade (1997–2009), the present contribution discusses and analyzes one particular aspect of the murals. My interpretation may or may not differ from that intended by the artists or the various institutions that ordered the murals. I read the murals according to my individual experience as a non-Iranian specialist in Iranian popular culture and folklore, while considering the backdrop of the changing political developments over the past few decades.

The aspect I have chosen for this study relates to the rhetoric of how the martyr's fate and body are represented, at times against the events that

led to this person's death, or "martyrdom." Special attention will be given to recent developments in the style of the murals, particularly the change in the iconography of martyrs from the graphic and rather gory realistic mode to the abstract and symbolic mode as depicted in the mural discussed at the outset of this essay. Having documented the Tehran murals for an extensive period, I find it fascinating to witness the development of and changes to both their overt style and their more covert messages. The most recent change has occurred since about 2008, when the realistic portraits of martyrs began to be replaced by surrealist images. Following a discussion of some older murals, the present paper will focus on the recent surrealist images and the ways they adjust the lasting message of martyrdom to modern requirements. A limited number of new murals will be used to demonstrate that this adjustment often involves a fading of the martyr's body, which used to serve as a direct visual allusion to his cruel fate, and the replacement of it with traditional, abstract symbols of martyrdom, whose decoding is possible through a particular kind of cultural literacy.

The contemporary Iranian veneration of the martyr as a person who has given his life serving the just cause of Islam relate to the very roots of the Islamic religion. Statements regarding martyrdom are found in the Qur'an and the *hadith*, the utterances of the Prophet Muhammad. The Islamic orientation to martyrdom is also mirrored in the murals. For example, the latter half of a Qur'anic verse from *surah 33 (The Confederates, verse 23)* forms part of the logo of the *Bonyad-e shahid*, the Foundation of Martyrs, itself responsible for the majority of the Tehran murals. The *Bonyad-e shahid* is a powerful and influential institution founded by Khomeini's personal decree at the very beginning of the revolution in 1979.⁵ The full text of the Qur'anic verse in its logo 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." These words, in the Qur'an placed after a passage discussing the historical Battle of the Trench in CE 627 and the necessity of armed defense, elevate martyrdom to a true believer's obligation toward God and the Islamic community. On another mural, an utterance of the Prophet Muhammad, albeit one whose canonical status is only acknowledged in Shiite tradition, lists three groups of persons whose intercession God will accept on the Day of Judgment: the prophets, the scholars, and the martyrs.⁶ It is against this backdrop that the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, formulated the dictum "martyrdom is the art of the men of God" (*shahadat honar-e mardan-e khoda-st*), which is frequently quoted on murals.

The practical application of self-sacrifice in contemporary Iran ultimately relies on the pivotal martyrdom of Shiite Islam's third imam, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hosein, at Karbala in the year 680 CE.⁷ Today, it is above all present through the large number of casualties resulting from the so-called "Imposed War," when the country defended itself against the U.S.-backed Iraqi aggression in the years 1980–88. However, in a wider interpretation, each person whose violent death is linked to the service of ideals propagated by the Islamic Republic of Iran is regarded as a martyr. Martyrs commemorated on the Tehran murals include victims of planned assassinations, including supreme judge Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, President Mohammad-'Ali Raja'i, and Prime Minister Mohammad Javad Bahonar, all of whom were killed in 1981 during major explosions allegedly initiated by the opposition group Mojahedin-e khalq; the group of Iranian diplomats massacred by the Taliban in the Afghani city of Mazar-e Sharif in September 1998; precursors of the Islamic Republic's ideological foundations, including Seyyed Hasan Modarres, one of Khomeini's teachers, who died in prison in 1937; and members of Hezbollah, most of whom gave their lives in the course of what Iran regards as a legitimate armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Finally, the title of "martyr" is also applied to individuals such as Mostafa Mazeh, the Conakry-born Lebanese Shiite Muslim who died when priming a bomb in a London hotel room in August 1989, supposedly preparing to execute Khomeini's *fatwa* against novelist Salman Rushdie.

Almost all murals of martyrs in Tehran have traditionally presented a simple, straightforward, and realistic depiction of the martyr's face or upper body along with his name. At times, the images are enhanced by symbols such as a red rose or a red tulip, both of which indicate blood and signify, by extension, the martyr's violent death. Often there is also a butterfly or white dove, symbolizing the martyr's soul. Although they aim to depict specific individuals, these portraits bear few individual traits, and their constant repetition effectively turns the martyrs into a mass phenomenon. The victims depicted thus become rather interchangeable, and, as a consequence, relatively anonymous. Yet many murals aim to provide the background to a martyr's fate or even to tell a story. Some of these murals depict the complex narrative behind the martyr's death in the nutshell of a single illustration, at times employing powerful visual allusions instead of words to indicate the particular circumstances of his death and to enable recognition by the viewer. Even so, the interpretation of these murals presupposes a certain "literacy," or knowledge of the depicted person and events, access to which is bound to fade into memory

(or altogether) as time goes by and as younger generations emerge. In order to demonstrate this point, I wish to discuss a selection of murals in greater detail.

A mural depicting Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri appears on the wall of a building adjacent to the freeway bearing his name (fig. 8.2). Sponsored by the Foundation of the Martyrs, the image is dominated by the sheikh's life-like portrait against a light blue sky filled with scattered clouds. The lower edge of the image is filled by a field of red tulips, the single buds of which transform into what looks like a sea of flowers stretching to the horizon. The few words by Khomeini that have been added to the portrait express admiration for the sheikh's erudition and sincerity. The image turns into the visual representation of a story by virtue of a barely visible object to the left of the center, a gallows from which a single rose is hanging. This scene alludes to the fact that Nuri, a stout opponent of the constitutional movement, was hanged in 1909. Out of respect, the deceased person is portrayed as he would be remembered from life, and the humiliating scene of his having been hanged is posthumously turned into a heroic act, a red rose substituted for his dead body as a common symbol of blood and martyrdom.

Further, the mural commemorating the death of director Mortaza Avini, situated on the same freeway, used to depict what appeared to be a scene from one of his war documentaries (fig. 8.3). The dark silhouettes of three soldiers are set against a generic background of water and evening sky. The soldiers are waving their guns in an apparent celebration of victory. Avini's lifelike portrait on the right is matched by a hand holding a camera, filming the scene, on the left. The celebrated cinematographer was killed by a landmine on April 9, 1993, while making a documentary about the soldiers missing from the former war fronts of southwestern Iran. The mural praises him with the exceptional honorific title of *sayyed-e shahidan-e ahl-e qalam*, "the prince of the martyred intellectuals," a direct allusion to Hosein's qualification as *sayyed al-shohada'*, or "Prince of Martyrs." Still today, Avini is celebrated as a major figure among Iran's artistic and literary community, and an extensive website commemorates his work.⁸

Probably the old mural's slightly pretentious presentation was the reason that the painting was refurbished a few years ago. The new version of the mural depicts Avini differently (fig. 8.4). He appears in the center of the image, surrounded by a frame, part of whose upper end is covered by a stream of vapor that emanates from around his head and turns into a misty sky dominated by a slogan praising the martyrs as the backbone of humanity (*shohada' sham'-e mahfal-e bashariyat-and*). Avini's identification as a martyr is clearly indicated by the flowers framing his image on both



FIGURE 8.2. Mural of Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri. Tehran, Fazlollah Nuri Highway.
©Ulrich Marzolph, 2001.



FIGURE 8.3. Mural of director Morteza Avini. Tehran, Fazlollah Nuri Highway, old version. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2001.

sides, while for those viewers who might not remember his profession so many years after his death the image's outer edges on both sides allude to a roll of film or cinematic frame. Furthermore, whether indicative of political change or not, it is interesting that the new mural does not include, as did its previous version, the portraits of both Khomeini and Khamenei. Their portraits could be read as an official endorsement of the martyred director's activities, as well as an act of claiming them for the interests of the Islamic Republic. The mural's new version, without the portraits of the former and present *rahbar*, suggests a stronger emphasis on Avini as an individual, while the added dictum—which is both much shorter than the previous one and more legible in its large graphic mode—suggests Avini's fate as an individual human condition rather than an affair of state.

Murals such as these depict the few individuals whose fate is well known to the average Iranian, having been widely discussed in the media. The visual exegesis of the murals has been prepared by a considerable amount of propaganda, which far exceeded the attention given to the hundreds of thousands of nameless martyrs. The common characteristic of these murals is the exemplification of martyrdom and self-sacrifice in the service of the Islamic Republic. This obvious interpretation is underlined time and again by the fact that the images are accompanied either by verbatim quotations of the former or the current leader of the Islamic Republic or by their portraits.

And yet the story of the innumerable casualties caused by the war is not a pleasant one, and aside from the relatively few individuals celebrated as heroes, the fate of most martyrs is either unknown or not told in detail. Their constant, and, in fact, overwhelming presence in the murals rather serves to remind society of their sacrifice, without which the Islamic Republic might not exist in its present form. The Tehran murals constitute a claim that, due to its visual nature, remains to a certain extent virtual. Meanwhile, President Ahmadinezhad's failed initiative (in early 2006) to exhume martyrs and rebury their bodies in the public sphere (such as in the large squares or even the university campuses in Tehran) can be read as a physically documented extension to the manner in which the murals already claim specific readings of society in public space.⁹

Moreover, the murals do not simply commemorate events or heroes of the past. By projecting historical events into the present, the murals refer to the past as the foundation of identity, a notion that is valid for the religion of Islam in general (and, as a matter of fact, probably constitutes a truism for each and every religion).¹⁰ In Shiite Islam, for which the guilt of not having prevented Hosein's death at Karbala constitutes an everlasting theme,



FIGURE 8.4. Mural of director Morteza Avini. Tehran, Fazlollah Nuri Highway, new version. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2003.

this notion has been particularly strong. The murals negotiate the relation to the past not in redefining changing attitudes toward the Islamic faith, as exemplified in Yasemin Gencer's contribution to this volume. They rather underline and reaffirm a specific interpretation of the past that regards the martyrs and their sacrifice as essential for the present. Since today's present is nothing but tomorrow's remembered past, the murals also are designed to perpetuate the martyrs' lives and ideals into the future as a valid interpretation of the past and, thus, as a truly lasting foundational value. In this respect, one might add a fourth category of "history projected" to the three concepts of "history remembered, recovered, and invented" that Stefan Heidemann quotes from Bernard Lewis in introducing his discussion of the political iconography of history in the present volume.

Yet a survey of Tehran murals from the past decade demonstrates that there is no single coherent message to the images and, hence, no single coherent interpretation. Rather, the Tehran cityscape preserves a variety of murals. In fact, there are simultaneously extant examples from various periods that are fairly wide apart. Even a few of the early specimens of a socialist and/or anti-imperialist import of the late 1980s still exist—such as Iraj Eskandari's anti-American mural placed on a wall adjacent to the Felastin Square. The highly artistic murals by Firuze Golmohammadi, such

as the one on the eastern side of the Vali-'Asr Square, will probably soon be replaced due to their poor state of preservation.¹¹

One of the most moving martyr murals from the 1990s was replaced in 2002 (fig. 8.5).¹² This mural had been painted adjacent to one of the heavily traveled city freeways heading north. It showed a little girl covered with a black *chador* and holding a red rose in her hand, mourning her dead father, placed in front of her, with the words *Baba-ye shahidam—hich goli khoshbutar az yad-e to nist*, “My martyr father—no rose smells sweeter than your memory!” The mural’s Tehran version did not specify the martyr’s name, and it was only by chance that I discovered essentially the same image (probably taken from a photograph) in the city of Sirjan. Here, the martyr’s name is given as Jamshid-e Zardosht. In a recent essay, Alice Bombardier has identified the mural’s earlier versions and its artist as Gholam-'Ali Taheri, who executed the mural’s first version, no longer extant, in 1981.¹³ The lack of specificity in the mural’s Tehran version was probably not coincidental, since the mural’s composition elevates the martyr’s fate to an abstraction whose appeal arises from its general applicability. The image was furthermore supplied with a number of stars containing invocations addressed at a group of five persons who represent the holy family revered by Shiite Islam: Mohammed, his daughter Fatima (implied in her epithet *Zahra'*), Ali, and their sons Hasan and Hosein; to this group was added the denomination of the hidden twelfth imam, al-Mahdi, the world’s only rightful ruler. The upper-right corner contained what looked like a crack in the sky, allowing a glimpse of paradise, the future residence of all martyrs. The writing on the left side of the mural once offered comfort to the martyrs by telling them that the community will never forget their victory. In its particular composition, the mural raised the anonymous martyr’s individual fate to a true Shiite believer’s obligation, and the little girl’s individual mourning became a general appeal to share in the martyr’s fate.

The mural of Jamshid-e Zardosht was a powerful and emotionally moving celebration of martyrdom within the Shiite experience and worldview. And yet, it had to give way due to an obviously changing political agenda on the part of the Bonyad-e shahid. First, in 2003 the Bonyad had the original mural whitewashed and replaced by a mural expressing solidarity with the Palestinians (fig. 8.6). Picturing the Dome of the Rock in the middle, the image was framed on the left by the portraits of Khomeini and Khamenei and on the right by the head of an anonymous Palestinian man obviously crying out in anger and pain. The image’s caption—probably one of the first in the Tehran murals to be given in both Persian and English, thus also communicating their written message to a non-Iranian audience—reproduced a



FIGURE 8.5. Mural of Jamshid-e Zardosht. Tehran, Modarres Highway. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2001.

quote from the leader of the revolution, whose English version reads: “the Islamic ummah [nation] will forever stand by the side of the Palestinians, and against their enemies.” Already by 2004, the mural had been changed again, this time, however, preserving the previous subject matter. The obvious reason for the repeated change must have been the execution of Sheikh Ahmad Yasin by the Israeli army on March 22, 2004, since the Palestinian leader’s portrait now figures prominently in the mural’s center (fig. 8.7). It is revealing that, although Sheikh Yasin certainly fits the qualification of “martyr” as defined by the Iranian authorities, the mural does not include any of the symbols usually related to martyrdom. Instead, the mural’s center is dominated by a set of three buildings representing the Iranian vision of Islam: the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Kaaba in Mecca, and the mosque of Imam Hosein in Karbala. It is also interesting to note that the towering figures of the leaders of the revolution have now been relegated to a fairly small ornamental frame on the image’s right side.

The three different versions of this mural demonstrate a gradual fading of the martyr’s body, from the image of a named individual via that of an unnamed Palestinian to a mere photographic portrait overshadowed by towering architectural symbols of Shiite Islam. Other, more recent murals go even further in that the martyr’s body disintegrates into vague allusions and highly charged symbols.



FIGURE 8.6. Mural of an anonymous Palestinian martyr. Tehran, Modarres Highway. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2003.



FIGURE 8.7. Mural of Sheikh Ahmad Yasin. Tehran, Modarres Highway. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2008.

A mural on the wall of the courtyard that borders the headquarters of the Foundation of Martyrs in Tehran's central Taleqani Avenue used to depict an anonymous martyr who, after taking off his boots and putting aside his machine-gun, was humbly dressed in a white shroud, standing at the entrance to paradise (fig. 8.8). The depersonalized image was supplied with Khomeini's dictum reading *shahid avval kasi-st ke be-behest vared misha-vad*, "the martyr is the first one to enter paradise." Originally executed in a style reminiscent of traditional miniature painting, the mural was replaced some years ago using bright, modern colors (fig. 8.9). While essentially depicting the same scene, the new image removes the martyr's individuality even further by more or less reducing the martyr to a pair of boots standing in front of a field of red tulips. Only an attentive viewer will notice that the martyr's body is still there. His nude feet are dangling below his swaying white shroud, which is enveloped by a pair of large white wings. Likewise, his head is vaguely discernible in the center of the image, where one hand holds it while a second loosens the red ribbon that qualifies him as a martyr ready to sacrifice his life. In this mural the martyr's body is still present, but its visibility has faded in favor of a complex design that once more draws on a common pool of symbols. If this change in the mural's style were to be seen as aiming at the larger applicability of its martyrial theme, the newly added quotation from the *maqam-e mo'azzam-e rahbari*, the Leader of the Islamic Republic, stressing the fact that society will never forget the martyrs, can also be understood to underline this fact.

The few existing interviews with viewers of the murals in Tehran have made it fairly clear that the younger generation in particular does not—to put it mildly—respond positively to the "traditional" murals that allude to the martyr's fate simply by showing portraits of the deceased.¹⁴ Since additional data is not available, it remains unclear whether any of the sponsoring institutions ever considered taking into account the public's response, or whether the obvious propagandistic mission was deemed insufficient reason for the execution of the murals. Some of the young people Camilla Cuomo and Annaliza Voza interviewed for their documentary *Factory of Martyrs* (2008) thought that most of the murals are badly executed and lack artistic qualities, while others admit to not even consciously noticing the murals at all. Additionally, Christiane Gruber has pondered the "expiration date" of the murals, since the "revolutionary and wartime murals [exist] in a socio-political time capsule" that apparently does not correspond to the present needs of the younger generation.¹⁵ Of the various possibilities that Gruber envisions for future development, recent murals appear to opt for a reclaiming of the traditional core values of martyrdom while at the



FIGURE 8.8. Mural of an anonymous martyr. Tehran, Headquarters of the *Bonyad-e Shahid*, old version. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2000.

same time aiming to take into account the longing of contemporary society for a less graphic representation and a greater aesthetic appeal. These changes are particularly visible in the murals designed by young artists such as Mahdi Qadiyanlu.¹⁶ His murals replace a number of old murals of martyrs with new ones painted in bright colors, adding to their visibility and appeal. Second, the realistic mode of representation has been replaced by a surrealist or pseudo-realistic mode in which the images are often merged with the shape or background of their surroundings, to the extent that at times they are hardly discernible as images. And yet, while some of the new murals appear to distance themselves from the traditional theme of martyrdom, many others essentially redeploy and reemphasize martyrial messages through visual abstractions and clues.

In her recent essay on Tehran's post-Iran-Iraq War murals, Pamela Karimi mentions a mural on the west side of Ferdousi Avenue, north of



FIGURE 8.9. Mural of an anonymous martyr. Tehran, Headquarters of the *Bonyad-e Shahid*, new version. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2003.

Ferdousi Square (today called Qarani Avenue), that depicts a war veteran with an amputated leg alongside a caption: “The value of you, the veteran, is more than that of the martyrs (fig. 8.10).¹⁷ This mural was repainted in early 2009 and replaced by a mural in an updated style (fig. 8.11). The new mural, while retaining the portraits of venerated individuals on its left side, has replaced the somewhat gruesome, realistic depiction of the wartime veteran with a scene in the *trompe l’œil* mode that is currently popular. Here, a mother and her son bid farewell to their martyred husband and father. While previous murals, such as the ones discussed above, had already paved the way for the fading of the martyr’s body, in this mural the body has completely disappeared. Since younger generations in Iran find it difficult to relate directly to a war that is long past, and tend to be “allergic” to, alienated by, or at best bored with the direct visualization of physical disability caused by the war, the new mural has obviously opted for a “hygienic”

representation. This new version presents a synecdochal representation of the wounded veteran by simply depicting his wheelchair. Since the martyr's body has completely disappeared, one might also wonder whether the veteran is supposed to have died in the meantime, but the symbol of the white dove flying high up in the air—after so many years of having been employed in murals of martyrs—leaves no doubt of the image's message: the martyr's body has undergone a metamorphosis resulting in the white dove, a common symbol for the martyr's soul. Considered together with the image of the staircase, the fact that the dove is flying into a *trompe l'œil* oculus might also indicate an ascension of the soul and the ultimate elevation of the martyr to his promised abode in paradise.

A mural placed on the western side of a building on Tehran's busy Enqelab Avenue again tells a well-known story (fig. 8.12 and plate 19). The image used to show a burning Iraqi tank placed in front of the upper body of a young boy rising from scenery that was filled with additional approaching enemy tanks. A sad and melancholic Khomeini, looking at the boy from above, was towering in the background, while the top of the image bore a caption quoting Khomeini's historical utterance: "Our leader is that 12-year-old boy who . . . threw himself under an enemy tank, blew it up and drank the beverage of martyrdom." The boy is Hosein Fahmide, whose suicide bombing in 1982 made him an icon of the Iran-Iraq War and an Iranian national hero.¹⁸ He was subsequently celebrated by a monument on the outskirts of Tehran and commemorated by a postage stamp issued in 1986. The fact that a statement on the mural attributed to the present leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei, used the term *hamase*, "epic," to characterize the event, added an almost mythical dimension to Hosein Fahmide's exemplary act of self-sacrifice.

The mural's new version, installed in the summer of 2009 (fig. 8.13 and plate 20), revalidates previous ideals to quite unprecedented levels. Fahmide, whose "heroic" deed is so well known in present-day Iran that it does not need an explicit illustration, is now depicted on what looks like a postcard portrait placed on a large bookshelf. The only explicit allusion to his fate as a martyr is a hand grenade placed on the shelf below. The grenade is framed by several candles whose flames are blowing in the wind, and the shelf itself is covered by a ribbon in red and white. The red on the ribbon alludes to the martyr's blood, and—together with a number of lush green cypress trees on the image's upper left that supposedly would indicate paradise—the three colors represent the colors of the Iranian national flag. The martyr's body has thus faded into a stand-in object that has been placed into a commemorative setting. The original contextual informa-



LEFT: FIGURE 8.10. Mural of a disabled war veteran. Tehran, Qarani Avenue, old version. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2003.



RIGHT: FIGURE 8.11. Mural of a disabled war veteran. Tehran, Qarani Avenue, new version. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2009.

tion now relies on the presupposed common knowledge of this particular martyr's deeds.

Even more fascinating than the new mode of representing the martyr is the absolutely stunning fact that the portrait of Khomeini, originally towering in the image's background, has now completely disappeared. This portrait, together with the leader's related utterance, used to suggest the image's intended interpretation in linking the martyr's individual fate with larger issues of state and religion. Whatever the vanishing of Khomeini's image implies, it is certainly unlikely to be coincidental. Without going into much speculation, it must be noted that the elimination of Khomeini's image in this mural diminishes his visual presence in the public domain. Only time will tell whether it constitutes a first step in restricting Khomeini's unquestioned authority, in a possible attempt to transfer this authority to the present *rahbar*.

The new symbolic revalidation of the concept of martyrdom is further visible in a number of other murals, such as the one on the northern side of Fatemi Square, where an oculus in the wall links to the image of a lush green area, the home of white doves (fig. 8.14 and plate 18). Without the long history of martyr murals, viewers might see this realistic depiction and assimilation to the urban surrounding as a wishful projection of real



LEFT: FIGURE 8.12. Mural of Hosein Fahmide. Tehran, Enqelab Avenue, old version. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2004.



RIGHT: FIGURE 8.13. Mural of Hosein Fahmide. Tehran, Enqelab Avenue, new version. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2009.

life. This suggestion is further validated by the fact that the mural previously placed on this wall was an artistic image of birds and calligraphic exercises painted many years ago by students of the Faculty of Arts at Tehran University. And yet once again, against the backdrop of antecedent martyr murals, the white doves, the oculus, and the lush green area beyond can be seen as symbolic codes that represent the quest of the martyr's soul for paradise. Considering the new surrealistic trend in the Tehran murals, the images appear to opt for an ideal combination of the "traditional" martyr mural that used to focus on the portrait and body of the actual individual and more modern artistic approaches designed to communicate with a younger audience. On the one hand, they retain the older symbols of martyrial imagery, such as clouds, white doves, and allusions to paradise. On the other, they relegate these symbols to levels of culturally encoded "literacy" that by now might rightly be presumed to be firmly anchored in Iranian viewers' subconscious by way of the hundreds of "traditional" images that have been present for several decades.

The new mode of symbolic representation reaches its apogee in a mural recently painted on top of a building bordering the southwestern side of the crossing of Kargar and Fatemi Avenues to the northwest of



FIGURE 8.14. Mural of a green countryside with doves. Tehran, Meidan-e Fatemi.
©Ulrich Marzolph, 2009.

Tehran's Lale Park area (fig. 8.15). This mural discloses its powerful meaning only against the backdrop of several decades of martyr murals. At first sight, it innocently depicts a flying white dove against a sky so blue that, considering Tehran's pollution, the sky itself seems almost surrealistic. Besides the bird's tremendous size, the only element that enables viewers to distinguish the mural as a painting from afar is a rectangular area in the dove's back, vaguely signaling another world beyond. Considering the history of symbolic cues embedded in dozens of murals in Tehran, this particular one offers itself to be read as a martyrial simile in visual form, as a corporate stand-in for the martyr's soul as couched in the image of the flying white dove.

Research into the murals of Tehran has repeatedly stressed their "significant documentary value for modern Iranian visual culture."¹⁹ Their study allows a glimpse into the development of contemporary representations of social and religious values that are propagated as essential for an "Islamic" identity as defined in today's Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, their long-term examination also permits us to study changing attitudes in a society that—considering the impact of recent transitions—constitutes a fascinating and quickly evolving field of research.



FIGURE 8.15. Mural of a white dove. Tehran, Kargar, north of Lale Park. ©Ulrich Marzolph, 2009.

The recent murals discussed in this essay combine surrealistic representations and the *trompe l'œil* mode to produce attractive, eye-catching visuals. Floating trees and flying objects create an atmosphere of surprise, arousing viewers' curiosity. Fertile meadows and lush green trees, as the suggested continuation of a rather dismal, gray urban setting, present stark contrasts to a daily routine. These juxtapositions are certainly unexpected, yet they are probably appreciated all the more because they constitute the ultimate expression of a city dweller's potential longing for greener pastures. Meanwhile, considering the political and ideological climate in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it would be surprising if the surrealistic murals were just another "simple" attempt to beautify the urban habitat, and it appears unlikely that they were designed as "innocent"—that is, as being devoid of a specific message. The interpretation offered in the present contribution thus suggests that they are a direct and logical continuation of previous martyr murals, although at first sight the martyr himself appears to have faded away. The murals' primary message has, however, not changed in essence, as the martyr makes an implicit appearance in clues, most commonly in the symbol of the white dove that signals the martyr's soul on its way to paradise.

If this interpretation holds true, the surrealistic murals with their inherent martyrial messages would constitute an even stronger medium than previous murals with direct messages. Previous martyr murals invited viewers to commemorate the martyrs and celebrate their sacrifices—an invitation that, depending on the circumstances, may or may not result in the viewers' outright rejection. The new murals, on the contrary, employ the surrealistic mode as a more subtle means of driving home their messages. By taking recourse to topics and subjects that are both visually appealing and in accordance with the viewers' inherent desire for more urban beauty, such murals veil their essentially unchanged martyrial message, which is retained through the rhetoric of symbolic expression.

NOTES

1. Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*.
2. Gruber, "The Message Is on the Wall," 23, fig. 5.
3. Grigor, "(Re)Claiming Space," 37.
4. Chehabi and Christia, "The Art of State Persuasion"; Gruber, "The Message Is on the Wall"; Karimi, "Imaging Warfare, Imagining Welfare"; and Marzolph, "The Martyr's Way to Paradise."
5. See Rahimiyan, *Dar harim-e laleha*.
6. Quoted from a (no longer extant) mural on the freeway bridge leading to Tehran's *shahrak-e Qods*. The reference on the mural was given as Majlesi's *Bihâr al-anvâr*, vol. 97.
7. For recent studies of the visual aspects of martyrdom in present-day Iran, with special reference to the martyrdom of Hosein, see Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala*; Varzi, *Warring Souls*; Newid, *Der schiitische Islam in Bildern*; and Flaskerud, *Visualising Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism*.
8. See <http://www.aviny.com/>; and Khosronejad, "Introduction."
9. See Esfandiari, "Iran."
10. See, e.g., Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims*.
11. Karimi, "Imaging Warfare, Imagining Welfare," 52, fig. 2.
12. Marzolph, "The Martyr's Way to Paradise," 95, fig. 5.
13. Bombardier, "La peinture murale iranienne"; see also Coyne, "Iran under the Ayatollahs," 110.
14. For a mural viewer's negative reaction, see Gruber, "The Message Is on the Wall," 45.
15. *Ibid.*, 46.
16. Karimi, "Imaging Warfare, Imagining Welfare," 44–46.
17. *Ibid.*, 49.
18. See Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 132–34; Gruber, "The Message Is on the Wall," 31, fig. 8.
19. Gruber, "The Message Is on the Wall," 46.