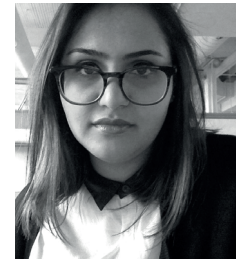


## ***L'uso della memoria collettiva al cimitero di Teheran Behesht-e Zahra come strumento di propaganda***

### ***The Use of Collective Memory in Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery as a Tool for Propaganda***

*Behesht-e Zahra, unico cimitero attivo di Teheran per i musulmani della città, è cresciuto rapidamente nei suoi soli quaranta anni di attività. Nonostante la sua distanza significativa dal tessuto urbano, è comunque presente nella vita di tutti gli iraniani che vedono il cimitero riflesso nei media come un luogo di grande importanza per la Repubblica Islamica. Ospitando sul proprio suolo i martiri del regime e la sepoltura di Khomeini, questo cimitero si è evoluto utilizzando le pratiche culturali preesistenti e le credenze per consentire la visione delle morti secolari attraverso una lente di religione politica. Questo documento racconta come il governo teocratico della Repubblica islamica utilizza le lunghe tradizioni di martirio e di pellegrinaggio a Behesht-e Zahra come pratica di governo, e le assimila nella vita moderna iraniana.*

*Behesht-e Zahra, Tehran's only active cemetery for Muslims of the city, has rapidly grown in its mere forty years of operation. Despite its significant distance to the urban fabric, it is nonetheless present in the lives of all Iranians who see the cemetery reflected in the media as a location of high importance to the Islamic Republic. By housing the martyrs of regime as well the burial of Ayatollah Khomeini on its grounds, this cemetery has evolved to use pre-existing cultural practices and beliefs to allow for the viewing of secular deaths through a lens of political religion. This paper chronicles how the theocratic government of the Islamic Republic uses the longstanding traditions of martyrdom and pilgrimage as government practice, assimilating them into the modern Iranian life at Behesht-e Zahra.*



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Parole chiave: **Memoria collettiva; Propaganda; Martirio; Islam sciita; Iran**

Keywords: **Collective Memory; Propaganda; Martyrdom; Shia Islam; Iran**

Every year, in the last weeks leading to *Norooz*<sup>1</sup> the roads extending south of Tehran become overwhelmed with a surge of cars. In the stand-still traffic that emerges, children with unwashed faces move in between the cars, selling bunches of flowers and jugs of rosewater<sup>2</sup> to the halted passengers en-route to the city cemetery. Situated over 30km outside of Tehran's centre, Behesht-e Zahra,<sup>3</sup> the city's only active cemetery for Muslims of the city, has grown to 424 hectares in its mere forty years of operation,<sup>4</sup> housing over 1.6 million graves today.<sup>5</sup> In addition to providing public graves and semi-private family mausoleums, the cemetery has designated plots for the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War,<sup>6</sup> as well as plots reserved for "certified" cultural figures.<sup>7</sup> The mausoleum of Ayatollah<sup>8</sup> Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 is also housed north of the main cemetery.

The traffic leading to the cemetery during the deadline imposed by the celebrations for each new year is only a glimpse of the high importance given to dead and the respect required for them in Iranian culture. Martyrdom is viewed as an admirable, timeless action responsible for the continuation of societal values and places of burial for revered historical figures act as sacred shrines in the Iranian discourse of

Shia Islam. These symbols play a big part in the Iranian societal psyche. In its short life, Behesht-e Zahra has transformed to become a museum of the events that have taken place since the Islamic Revolution. It has also evolved to use pre-existing cultural practices and beliefs embedded in the societal collective memory to allow for the viewing of secular deaths through a lens of political religion. This acts as a physical embodiment for the Islamic Republic's existential premise of a sacred government, and aids to evoke public reverence towards the dead as propaganda. Behesht-e Zahra has changed from a secular burial spot before the Revolution, to an organic place of gathering to mourn the dead during the Revolution, to officially becoming a destination for political use after the Revolution and during the War due to the martyr burials there. This has been strengthened further by the burial of the leader of the Islamic Revolution on its grounds combined with the ever-present yet separated spacial quality afforded to it due to its distance from the city, making it the true necropolis removed from the world of the living. Through an exploratory, chronological case study of how the resting places of the martyrs and later the leader of the Revolution have been treated at Behesht-e Zahra, this paper chronicles how the theocratic government of the Islamic Republic, which uses the validity of religion

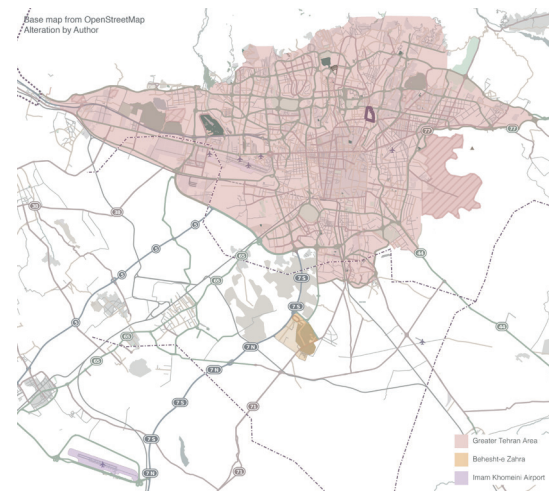
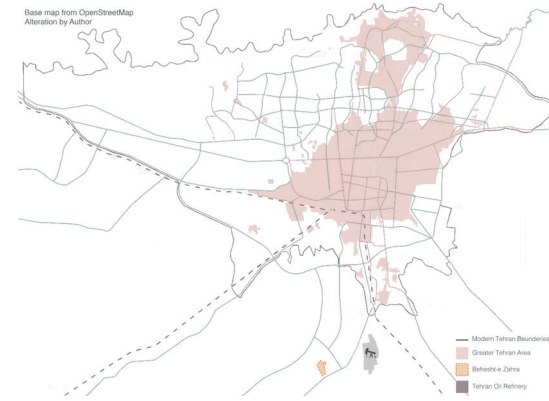


Fig. 1 Behesht-e Zahra within the context of Tehran at its inception (1966-70).

Fig. 2 Behesht-e Zahra within the context of modern day Tehran.

as its *raison d'être*,<sup>9</sup> uses the longstanding traditions of martyrdom and pilgrimage as government practice, assimilating them into the modern Iranian life in its use of Behesht-e Zahra.

This paper uses literature reviews (with a focus on texts written by historians, journalists, anthropologists, sociologists, and other scholars focusing on cultural studies in the region) which document historical events and ideological beliefs of the Iranian society. The textual material is supported by the author's formal analysis of the site through photographs, maps, and diagrams to support the argument of spatial exploitation of the dead. The literature sets the historical, religious, and social contextual framework for the analysis of the cemetery through architectural language and use. This research aims to act as an initial study for a more comprehensive study of the subject matter in a later, extended thesis project with additional primary sources gathered.

### Conception

Plans to design a large necropolis in the outskirts of Tehran were first started in 1966. The aim was to put an end to the scattered nature of burials in the many shrines and mosques across the city and to organize the formalities associated with the burial procedure.<sup>10</sup> In the rural outskirts of southern Tehran, 314 hectares of land

were chosen for this purpose. The area had historically been a collection of settlements formed around agricultural practice, located at the base of the mountains that surround Tehran from the North-West to the East. At this time, industries had just started to move to the area following the population boom in Tehran. During the same year, for example, construction began for the First Tehran Oil Refinery buildings very near the location of the future Behesht-e Zahra cemetery.<sup>11</sup> These facilities have continued to grow in the years to come. As such, Behesht-e Zahra was introduced as the two worlds of agriculture and industry were merging in that region at the time. This location also fit the requirements of historical traditions to locate the necropolis outside city boundaries. In addition to this, the site was en-route to the holy city of Qom, where the burial shrine of the eighth Shia *imam's* sister has established it as one of the largest centres for Shia scholarship in the world, and a significant destination of pilgrimage.

The programmatic organization for the cemetery was established at this early stage, designed primarily for vehicular access. A main arterial road (Hazrat<sup>12</sup>-e Zahra Boulevard) allowed access to the cemetery with other streets branching off in a way very similar to a typical city grid. To this day, each "plot" (*gha'teh*) resembles a city block and each grave in each "plot" is numerically

assigned according to its row (*radeef*) - which acts like a street in the city block- and its numerical position (*shomareh*) in that row - which acts as the building number in this analogy. So to give the address of a particular grave, one must always remember the three numbers of: the plot, the row, and the grave number in the row (i.e: plot 49, row 10, grave #49). This systematic approach organizes the burial system and facilitates orientation. Today one can look up the location of any deceased buried at Behesht-e Zahra on the online data base. However, even with the systematic approach, one can argue that no planner would have expected the population growth that Tehran has gone through since 1966. The cemetery was opened in 1970, and while initially underused due to the number of other cemeteries available, it soon grew to become a popular burial destination suited to keep up with the population boom of the capital. What would change Behesht-e Zahra's image and function forever in years to follow was, however, the burial of those murdered in the conflicts leading to the change in government, later to be known as the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution, less than a decade since its opening.

### Pre-Revolution (Before 1978)

The qualification to be considered a martyr have gone through different phases through the history of Islam and differ between scholars. But in short, ultimately, what sets

a martyr apart is the intention behind self-sacrifice: the desire to seek unity with God, “not informed by profane considerations.”<sup>13</sup>

The act of determining one martyr would lie on religious (sometimes tied politically) agents who would study the remains and the circumstances of the death to determine the dead a martyr, leading to appropriate funeral acts to follow. Iran’s own long cultural history even from before Islam, is filled with folklore, stories, and traditions that elevate martyrdom. Yet, notable among these stories is the Shia story of the third *imam*. Imam Hussein and his seventy-two followers were martyred in the battle of Karbala by the troops of the Sunni Caliph, Yazid. The remembrance of their sacrificial acts through *tazieh* (passion plays) and story telling rituals such as *naghali* or *pardeh-khaani* have kept the memories of their sacrifices alive in the Iranian collective memory, making martyrdom a defining element of the Shia faith and Iranian way of thought.<sup>14</sup> Every year during the Arabic month of Muharram (during which the third *imam* and his entourage were murdered) the story of the Imam’s brutal murder by Yazid’s army is retold through speeches, passion plays, and processions of penance. The Shiites of Iran commemorate the ten days in which Imam Hussain defended his family and followers at the battle of Karbala. Men and boys beat their chests in mourning,

parade-like processions and food is passed around in remembrance.

In as early as his first calls to action against the Shah’s government in the early 1960’s, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to tap into this mystic desire of martyrdom through unification with God, already present in the memory of the Shia population. His words were further emphasized through the works of popular scholars such as Ali Shariati and their encouragement to go back to the cultural roots of the society.<sup>15</sup> Shariati believed that martyrdom allows for all of the sacredness of the ideals the martyr fights for, to be transferred into the existence of the martyr. He wrote, “true that his existence becomes a non-existence, but he has absorbed the whole value of that idea for which he negated himself. The martyr becomes sacredness itself. He had been an individual who had sacrificed himself for thought and now he is thought.”<sup>16</sup> In his historic sermon in Qom for Muharram in 1963, Khomeini used these thoughts to liken the oppression of the Iranian people under the Shah’s monarchy to Imam Hussein’s struggles with the Sunni Caliph, Yazid. When Khomeini’s opposition to the monarchy lead to his arrest and exile soon after this speech on June 5th, 1963, “men and women alike wrapped themselves in white funeral shrouds as symbols of their readiness to die

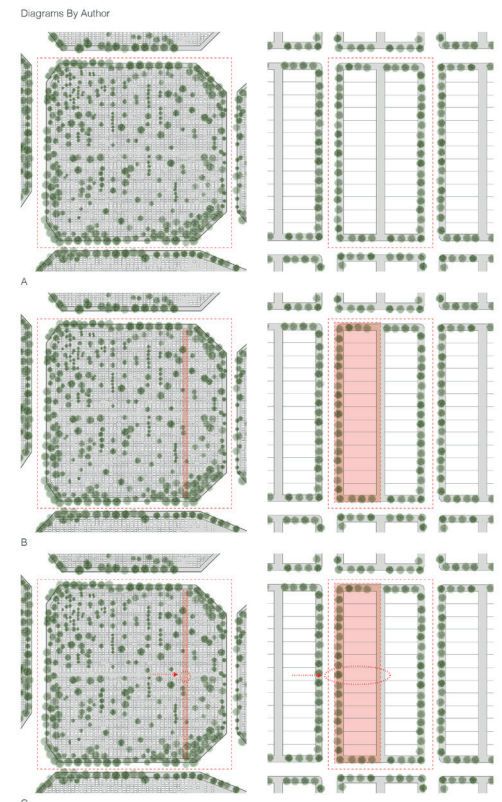


Fig. 3 A typical Behesht-e Zahra plot versus a typical NYC city block:  
A Each “plot” (gha’teh) resembles a city block.  
B Each grave in each “plot” is numerically assigned according to its row (radeef) - which acts like a street in the city block.  
C Each grave is also numerically assigned based on its numerical position (shomareh) in each row - which acts as the building number in this analogy.

for him.”<sup>17</sup> In the riots that followed around thirty-two men from Southern Tehran were killed.<sup>18</sup> At the time these dead were indeed labeled as martyrs of the struggle by many clerics but their burials were not much different than typical. The Revolution had not taken form yet. Also, the number of casualties were too small and belonged to a too specific group of low-income, devout families for the deaths to stand as symbols of opposition for the entire population. They were buried by their families in local cemeteries.

### Early Revolution (1978-79)

By the time the struggles of Islamic Revolution took official form in the late 1970's, however, Behesht-e Zahra had already been established as the principle burial ground for the capital. As with any civil uprising, the dead became symbols of the fight against the perceived oppressor and the reason to continue. “As one of the few public spaces in Tehran safe from attack by the security forces, [Behesht-e Zahra] became, in addition, a meeting place for opponents of the Shah.”<sup>19</sup> Their funerals became public affairs with public mourning ceremonies and popular chants like “my martyr brother, your way will continue”.<sup>20</sup> Thus this previously secular space allowed for religious rhetoric to mobilize the population into more action. These gatherings at the cemetery had a grass-roots nature, organically born out of the people’s frustration with the opposition

Diagrams By Author

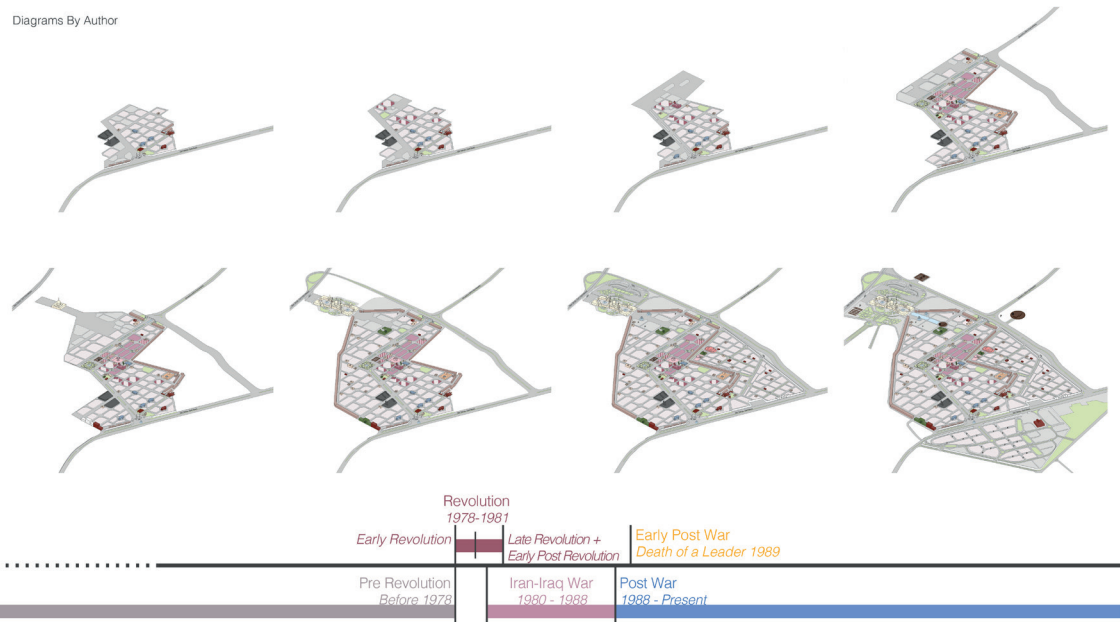


Fig. 4 Spatial evolution of Behesht-e Zahra from inception to present day.

they saw on the streets, without specific organization to them. Similar actions were being carried out in many cemeteries across the country. However, Behesht-e Zahra was turned into an iconic space due to its location in Tehran and the high numbers of casualties buried there.

Studying the graves of these early martyrs today, one will see how these burials were not intentionally curated in specific spots (something we will witness in future martyr graves). These early martyrs of the Revolution have been buried, scattered in six different plots (15, 17, 22, 23, 33, and 39), relatively close to each other. The locations were chosen by the victims' families based on availability at the time of burial, without special attention given to the circumstances of the deaths. Some of these tomb stones have since been refitted to indicate them as martyrs from specific riots and some have since been given flags or the early prototypes of the display glass cases later issued to the martyrs of the War. For the most part, however, their actual act of burial and graves were not mass-designed to emphasize a coherent message through location or image. Any perceived understanding of the group's cause of death as a whole can only be observed based on the proximity of the graves of victims from the same incident.

## Late Revolution / Early Post-Revolution (1979-1981)

The official transition of Behesht-e Zahra from a place for organic civilian opposition to an officially political space used for propaganda started with Ayatollah Khomeini's return from exile. His first move upon returning to Iran after fourteen years of exile on February 1, 1979 was to head to Behesht-e Zahra straight from the airport amidst the tumultuous welcome of his supporters, to give his (now historic) first speech on Iranian soil since the start of the Revolution. This choice in location for Khomeini's first speech gave legitimacy to all the dead and attributed the success of the Revolution to their sacrifices. In this speech, Khomeini laid down what became the foundation of the regime's attitude towards the martyrs. After giving his condolences to the martyrs' relatives and promising that their deaths would not be in vain, he legitimized the actions of his supporters and those who had died as "Islamic" and anyone opposed as "anti-Islamic".<sup>21</sup> It was soon after this that a centralized governmental agency - the 'Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs'<sup>22</sup> was established under Khomeini's direction to support the families of revolutionaries who had sacrificed their lives during the anti-Shah struggle.

With the bombings of the Islamic Republic

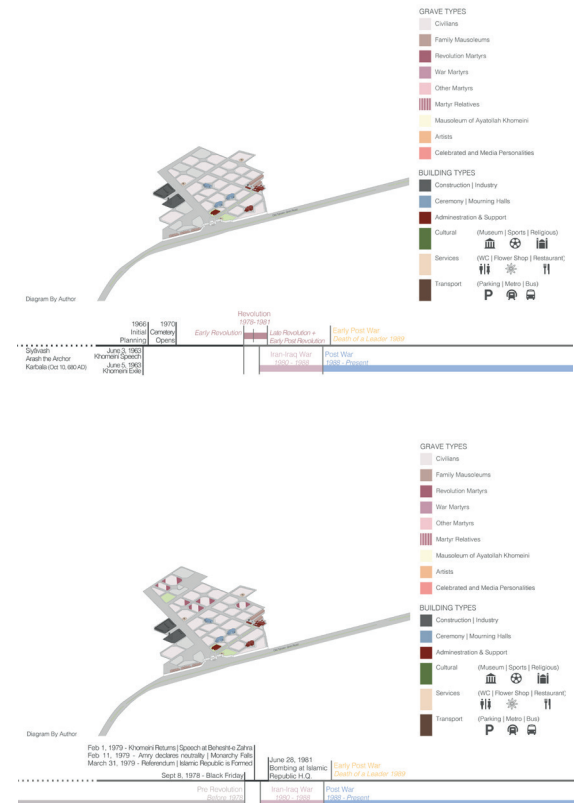


Fig. 5 Behesht-e Zahra, Pre-revolution (1970-1978)  
Fig. 6 Behesht-e Zahra, Early Revolution (1978-79)

Party Head Quarters on June 28, 1981, the martyr graves took an entirely new political meaning. Seventy-two (the fact that the number was identical to the dead in Karbala has been subject to much speculation) leading officials of the Islamic Republic were killed, as well as the country's Chief Justice. For the first time graves of the martyrs were highly curated in their new, designed resting places. It was also following this incident that the fountain of blood at this section of the cemetery was erected in honour of the sacrifices for the new regime. This was right at the beginning of the eight year War with Iraq. Thus, from this time forward, this area of the cemetery officially transformed into the martyrs' section and the graves of the young men buried in it took a whole new meaning. The secular deaths which had used cultural understandings to become religious icons, now used these religious affiliations for political gain. The dead gave legitimacy to the rulers, and their graves demanded cooperation from the population due to the respect the martyrs demanded.

### Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

The over one million casualties Iran suffered in the eight-year Iran-Iraq War produced even more martyrs to be buried. When the conflict started in September of 1980, just over a year after the Revolution, the myth of Imam Hussain's war in Karbala had already

been revived to rally the population during the Revolution. To go to battle for justice and to seek legitimization, to die for a cause and get closer to God as a result, were easily carried through from their revolutionary use into the battle-fields. As Roxanne Varzi puts it, "nation building became synonymous with martyrdom."<sup>23</sup> The War became a tool for the government to gather the society together behind the motifs already known to the people in a time when the political fracture following the Revolution was dividing the country, even signalling a potential civil war. The government had found the perfect "other" to which defer the violence to instead.<sup>24</sup>

The War became the battle between the righteous against the infidel and Saddam Hussain was dubbed Saadam-Yazid after the Sunni Caliph who killed the third *imam*.<sup>25</sup> The War became the country's rallying point and consolidated Ayatollah Khomeini's role as a religious leader. Khomeini declared the War a spiritual one, a "holy defence", fought by ordinary people, and not a professional army. This seemed to be Iran's only choice, since the new constitution was still being written and the army was in disarray.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the *Basij* (mobilized), army of devout volunteers, was born. Young men, even child-soldiers, with little to no formal training gladly went into battle to die for the cause, believing in these highly propagated

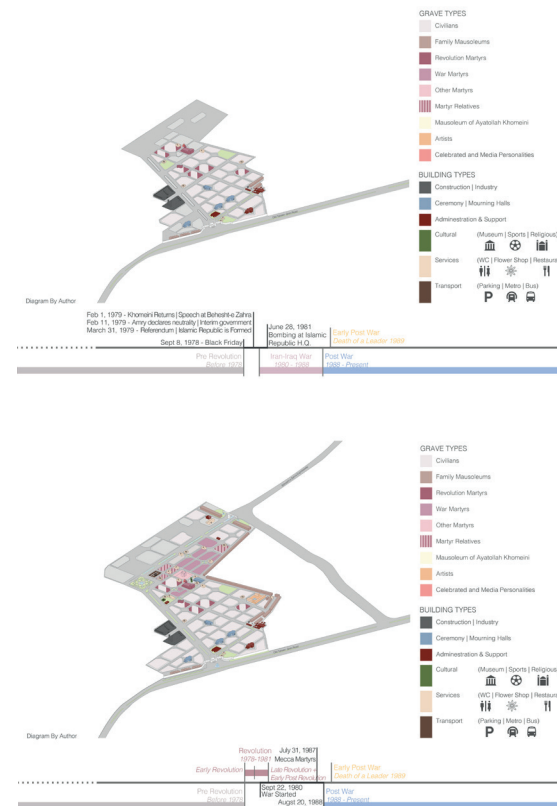


Fig. 7 Behesht-e Zahra, Late Revolution (1979-81)  
Fig. 8 Behesht-e Zahra, Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

verses of the Qur'an, "Do not think of those that have been slain in God's cause as dead. Nay, they are alive! With their Sustainer have they their sustenance."<sup>27</sup>

The lack of training is perhaps a significant contributor to the large number of casualties Iran suffered in this War.<sup>28</sup> In the nearly eight years of War, the wide Shohada (martyrs) and Hazrat-e Zahra Boulevards at Behesht-e Zahra got developed into parading grounds for funeral processions, perpetually clogged with mourners and military bands accompanying caskets. Trees were planted on their edges and pools of water in the middle transformed them into garden spaces. "Visiting the cemetery became a form of recreation, with extended families picnicking on the graves amid the evergreens and junipers and along the canals as they watched the spectacles"<sup>29</sup> of the frenzied mourners-for-hire, the funeral processions, the Mullas singing stories about martyrdom.

While all the martyrs of the War are buried in plots only designated to them, separated from the civilian graves, the early graves of the War martyrs in Behesht-e Zahra seem disorganized compared to the well-curated ones that would come later. The early graves have non-uniform tomb stones. Yet, many martyrs are treated as individuals in their burial places. These graves are provided

with glass cases for the martyrs' families to personalize with picture and personal belongings of the martyrs. The cases contain "both religious icons and intensely intimate mementos: Koranic texts, green banners bearing religious inscriptions, worry beads, and prayer stones, next to plastic childhood toys and figurines from wedding cakes."<sup>30</sup> Some even contain battered or blooded items of clothing the martyr wore at the time of his death. With more and more casualties pouring in, however, the need to curate the graves more uniformly became more evident.

As the War progressed and the deaths continued, the civilian plots continued to take form around the central martyr plots, locating them in the prime central location created between the two arterial boulevards. The designs for the martyr graves also became more defined. The martyrs would be buried in uniform graves of the same size, shape and lettering. This was partially due to the fact that large numbers of bodies would get sent back from the front and mass-producing the process for their burials was the easiest method. With time, the graves of the martyrs started to be mainly organized around specific events, (i.e. memorable battles, or means of death) "as if they [were] exhibits in a historical narrative of war."<sup>31</sup> Each group of martyrs has a different style of memorials and graves. This not only

legitimizes the "struggle against injustice and oppression through physical manifestation of the memories, but it also creates a unified narrative of these struggles, "where the martyrs' bodies continue to amplify their given historic roles."<sup>32</sup>

The visual symbolism of these struggles do not end at the graves, however. The images of these dead men are further echoed in large murals in every Iranian city. These murals can get very graphic, often showcasing the soldier bloodied from the battle, in the moment when he is about to die. For the martyrs of the War to be useful in their memorialization, these murals are needed. The government, through the 'Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs', has taken ownership of these images, depicting the "sacred defence". The murals are always painted, "this makes every mural unique, a work of art that will be looked at as if for the first time, in contemplation rather than habit (merely acknowledging something already seen)."<sup>33</sup> These painting are found everywhere in big cities where one might expect to see a billboard advertisement. They are fixed features of city life in Iran, frozen timelessly, in their location.

These images allow for cemeteries like Behesht-e Zahra to inhabit the cities metaphorically, connecting the cities and the cemeteries on a daily basis, serving as



a reminder of the sacrifices of the martyrs and their roles in building today's Iran. As Ravinder Kaur puts it, the distance of the cemetery from Tehran is negligible when discussing its effects on the society as "through the imagery of martyrs in public spaces and institutionalized through museums and exhibitions that narrate the biographies of martyrs."<sup>34</sup> The bodies of these martyrs are the most "sacred objects" in the hands of the 'Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs', as they can help re-narrates the story of the Iranian struggle since 1979 and legitimize the role the Islamic regime has played in helping these efforts.

### Post War, Death of a Leader (1989)

With the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Revolution just over a year after the end of the War, a new way to use the cemetery as a persuasive device was utilized: Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum, dressed as a Shia shrine, to indicate the government's theocratic claims. The ennoblement of the places of burial spans between secular and religious for revered historical figures in Iranian culture. Special attention, however, is reserved for the Shrines of Shia *imams*<sup>35</sup> and their descendants, the *imam-zadehs*. The Shia "revered their *imams* as specially blessed by God and immaculate from sin."<sup>36</sup> The martyrdom of these men in the hands of the Sunni rulers of their time has "extended the emotional ties to the *imams* in the form

of the attachment to the shrines that grew up above their tombs."<sup>37</sup> The sites of the mausoleums of the eleven deceased<sup>38</sup> *imams* of Twelver Shia Islam (only one of which is located in Iran<sup>39</sup> while the rest are in Iraq and Saudi-Arabia) and their descendants (many of whom can be found across Iran as they consistently fled the Sunni persecution) are highly valued locations of pilgrimage with the Shia population where it is believed *baraka*, or spiritual grace is plentiful and God is present in a special way, leading to one's *haajat* (heart's desire from God) being answered. One could argue that the pre-occupation to visit these shrines (known as *haram*<sup>40</sup>) sometimes extends beyond the desire for *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) for Shias.<sup>41</sup> The *harams* located in Iran and Iraq<sup>42</sup> are often highly monumental mosque structures with elaborated mirror and mosaic decorations.

At Behest-e Zahra, the prominent tomb of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, is being presented as a religious site, on par with any Shia shrine, to promote the religious practices of pilgrimage and miracle-seeking. He was initially buried humbly, with a distance from the main cemetery. But this was done with plans in mind for a major complex to be erected in the coming years. In the years since, the mausoleum has been named the *Haram-e Motahhar* (the Holy Shrine), as any *imam's* mausoleum would

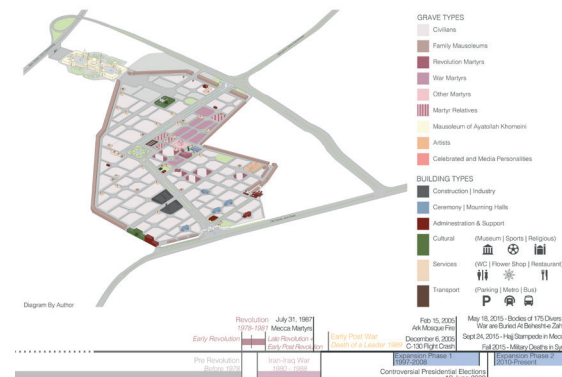
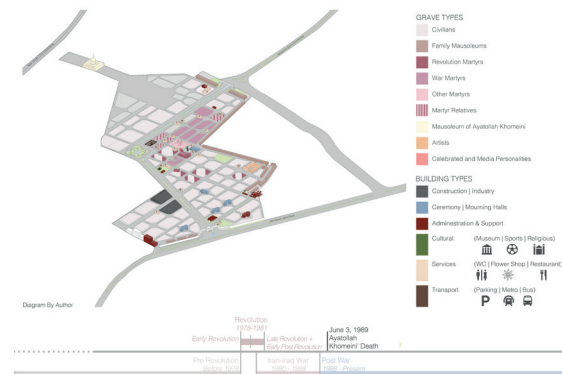


Fig.9 Behesht-e Zahra, Early Post War - Burial of Ayatollah Khomeini (1989)

Fig.10 Behesht-e Zahra, Post War Expansion (1989-1997)

be with groups of believers arriving there everyday for pilgrimage. The real influence and the final push towards the adaptation of Shia shrine norms in Khomeini's mausoleum, however, is through the use of monumental and iconographic language in its architectural form. The never-ending expansions to Khomeini's mausoleum, have resulted in a enormous building with one central dome flanked by two smaller ones and four *minarets* (each 91m tall to symbolize Khomeini's age at death<sup>43</sup>) bigger than of the Imam Hussein's mausoleum in Karbala, itself.

Upon completion, the complex (with the shrine in the centre) is to cover 5000 acres, housing a "cultural and tourist centre, a university for Islamic studies, a seminary, a shopping mall [introduced to speed the process of developing the area to a destination], and a 20,000-car parking lot."<sup>44</sup> The monumental structure is the first impactful sight one sees upon arrival in Tehran from the Imam Khomeini International Airport. This leaves the recent arrivals with the impression of the leader's presence and communicates with them the religious thesis of the society upon arrival. The entrance to the mausoleum complex from Behesht-e Zahra is a wide road diverging from the main Shohada (martyrs) Boulevard, with what is to become the largest water feature in the country flanked by a wide pedestrian path on either

side.<sup>45</sup> Inside, the tomb has also been given a *zarih*,<sup>46</sup> a gilded lattice work inscribed with Koranic verses, typically enclosing the tomb of an *imam* or *imam-zadeh* in a Shia *haram*. It is customary in Iran for pilgrims to drop bills in the tomb area through the *zarih* as donations to the haram during a visit. This practice has become the norm in this mausoleum, as well.<sup>47</sup> Once finished, the interior is also to benefit from the typical iconographical decorations of mirrored surfaces and colourful mosaics. In short, as Roxanne Varzi puts, "Khomeini is buried like any *imam*."<sup>48</sup> As such, through its monumental structure, adaptation of iconography and cultural practices, the regime has managed to turn the resting place of its leader into a Shia shrine, with followers who, to this day, pay pilgrimage to it everyday. Families are seen travelling there seeking close proximity to the leader of the Revolution, some even hoping for divine intervention.

### Post War, Today's Martyrs

Today, the importance of the martyrs is not any less significant from the government's point of view, even though it might be difficult to keep the momentum as swift without a war or revolution as a catalyst. The 'Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs' established in 1979 is now exclusively responsible for the official declaration of "martyr" status to the dead in Iran, as well as being responsible

for the welfare of the families of these martyrs.<sup>49</sup> While there is no war to supply the dead, there remains several means of obtaining designation as a martyr. Finding bodies of the missing from the War, the victims of accidents or tragedies perceived through a politically religious lens, the dead from military incidents, and the casualties of political or terrorist acts can often be declared martyrs, their funerals and graves used as rallying points with much fanfare. The reception of these modern martyrs are, however, not always consistent by the Iranian population.

While the government does put political emphasis on the newly found bodies of the martyrs from the War, the public is usually receptive of these martyrs regardless of their individual standing towards the government. For example, fossilized bodies of one hundred seventy-five divers who had been buried alive during the War were found in May 2015. The campaign to welcome their bodies took the country by storm. Posters were designed, not only by the 'Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs' and other government agencies, but also by the general public, to advertise their funeral procession.<sup>50</sup> The funeral was attended in high numbers by a large cross section of the society: from the most stout supporters of the regime, to the anti-revolutionaries and celebrities alike, everyone gathered to pay

homage to these men who were brutally killed. The bodies from findings like this one are often too difficult to identify and as such are usually buried in graves designed specifically for them in Behesht-e Zahra, the type of which we have seen in the graves of the unidentified martyrs.

In contrast to that, the act of designating martyrs out of secular deaths, as many would argue the contemporary declarations of martyrdom by the foundation are, is highly controversial. The martyrs declared from accidents are often viewed by many as tools used to benefit from tragedies. An example is in 2005, when a military plane carrying journalists and army officials crashed into an apartment building, resulting in one hundred sixteen deaths.<sup>51</sup> All the victims are now buried in the martyr section of the cemetery, in uniform graves, with crests on their tombs labelling them as members of either the military or the media. The Iranian victims of this year's Mina Hajj stampede also belong to this category. They were all declared martyrs and are being buried in plot 50 of Behesht-e Zahra, already reserved for Martyrs.<sup>52</sup> Depending on the specific circumstances, military deaths given the martyrdom classification can also be controversial. In the past few months, for example, there have been a number of military deaths in Syria. The designation of martyr status in these cases is perceived with

mixed emotions from the population as many feel conflicted about Iran's involvement in Syria. Finally, martyr declarations of political conflicts or terrorist attacks usually have the most mixed responses from the population, as the deaths involved are usually a reflection of the political standings of the regime. The Mecca riots during the *hajj* season in 1987 when the demonstration by a number of the Iranian pilgrims was stopped by Saudi Police resulting in two hundred seventy-five Iranians dead, are examples of these controversial political martyr designations. Those victims, too, are now buried in Behesht-e Zahra with a significant memorial structure designed for them.

Regardless of the reasoning behind one's martyrdom, one's relation to the government's cause becomes evident through the arrangement of the graves in Behesht-e Zahra. While martyr plots are named *golzars*<sup>53</sup> (flower-fields), are prominently located, and are regularly cleaned, tended to, decorated and visited, the graves of the anti-government activists who have been killed by the regime "are located in an abandoned part of the graveyard, unattended, uncovered, and surrounded by overgrown bushes",<sup>54</sup> and are rarely visited by anyone as any association with the anti-revolutionaries can lead to significant consequences. The martyr plots are usually comprised of uniformly shaped

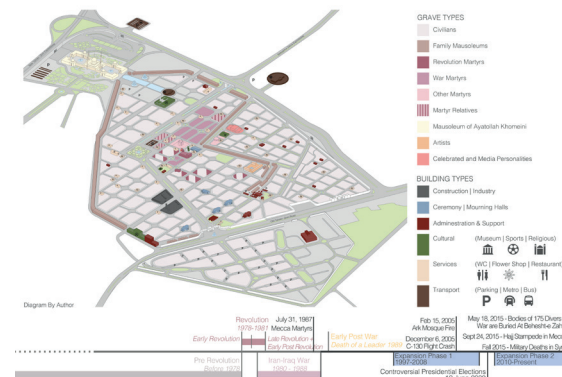
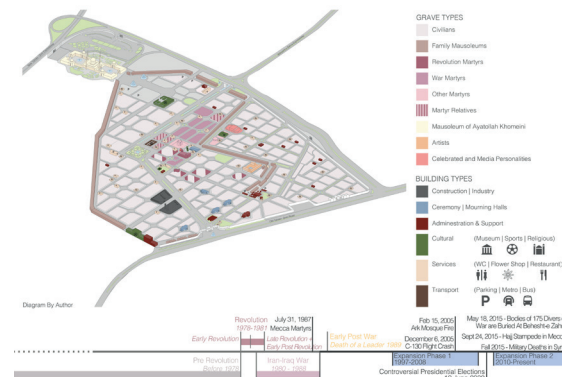


Fig.11 Behesht-e Zahra, Modern Expansion - Phase 1 (1997-2008)  
Fig.12 Behesht-e Zahra, Modern Expansion - Phase 2 (2008-Present)

and sized graves,<sup>55</sup> creating the most rhythmic and organized sections of the cemetery. In fact, some cemeteries across the country have taken it upon themselves to “homogenize” further the graves of the martyrs, to backlash from the families of the martyrs in some cases.<sup>56</sup> All this attention to the martyr graves is because, as it stands, the ‘Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs’s’ most important task remains their upkeep of the martyr plots, specially those in the public domain at Behesht-e-Zahra. The high importance placed on the martyr sections of the cemetery applies the public’s understanding of martyrdom as means for ideological survival to the regime’s prevailing existence, thus evoking public sympathy for the regime through the use of the dead. Behesht-e-Zahra, being the place where the biggest and most public array of martyrs are buried, makes it the perfect target for the many events annually organized to “renew the pledge with sacred ideals” of the Revolution and Imam Khomeini. Officials working for different levels of government are often required to participate. The Islamic Republic’s ritualistic celebration of its martyrs obscures the logistics of the conflicts that created the martyrs: the Revolution changed from a popular movement to what is today a theocracy governed by the country’s clergy and the War was fought with “remarkable disadvantages, as it lacked reliable allies, a

dependable,<sup>55</sup> supply of arms, and superpower goodwill.”<sup>57</sup>

### Present-day Expansion and Image

The cemetery has continued to grow in the years following the War. The population of Tehran has gone from 2,719,30 in 1966 to 8,154,051 in 2011.<sup>58</sup> As such, after two expansion project, the cemetery stands at 424 hectares with 164 plots of graves overall, 12 hectares (14 plots) of which are exclusively used for the Revolution, War, and post War martyrs. While the cemetery exists outside of any municipal boundaries, it is nonetheless undeniably and permanently present in not only the collective memory of inhabitants of Tehran who have relatives buried there, but also in the memories of all Iranians who see the cemetery reflected in the media as a location of high importance to the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khamenei (the current Supreme Leader of Iran) is quoted as having said, “The martyrs are *imam-zadehs* of love and their tombs are shrines of the believers.”,<sup>59</sup> thus giving Behesht-e Zahra and its demised inhabitants the timeless legitimacy of the *imams*’ descendants. Continuous representation of the cemetery within the context of the martyrs and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini in television and radio features of remembrance events held there, and the murals and billboards in the city, echoing

the images of the deceased buried there connect the cemetery to the urban fabric, negating the distance in between. In fact, being located outside the city has allowed for the cemetery to continuously grow without conforming to any standards. It has made it constantly present in Tehrani life as the only burial site, a true necropolis separated by space and thus unaffected by time.

Behesht-e Zahra’s ability to incapsulate all of its messages in a fashion unaffected by time and societal changes has thus been crucial by the regime. When talking about the importance of care for the dead in this context, time is erased. As Halbwachs outlines in *The Collective Memory*, historical or “lived” time is not always equal to the perception of time through collective memory and this is evident in the mentioned cultural acts of remembrance with a very time-less approach to the actual events.<sup>60</sup> Mourning ceremonies for Imam Hussain take place every year as though his death happened days prior and not centuries, for example. The sacrifices of the past are directly linked to the idea of what Islam is and how it survives. Ayatollah Khomeini is often quoted as having said the following about Imam Hussain’s martyrdom, “Keep Karbala alive, keep the *mubarak* (blessed) name of Hazrat Shah- e Shuhada<sup>61</sup> alive, because keeping this alive means that Islam

is kept alive.”<sup>62</sup> In this thinking process, no thought is given to other factors that might have affected the series of historical events leading to the modern Shia Islam practiced in Iran today. The same timeless quality is embedded at Behesht-e Zahra. It is simply an ever-present city of the martyrs, forever echoing the collective sacrifices, removed from the world of the living. It is a relic of the country's struggles and existential legitimacy, unaffected by implications of time.

What creates an interesting future projection is the lack of remaining space at the cemetery. Estimations say that burial space will run out in three years' time, even with the new mandatory transformation of all the remaining graves into triple layered burial sites,<sup>63</sup> jokingly referred to by Tehranis as “final apartments”. In the past few months, the city has announced laxer laws about burials in other smaller shrines in the city since the authorities are now visibly worried about the over-flow at Behesht-e Zahra. Graves are no longer being sold in advance, a practice with long standing tradition in Iran. One can only guarantee a burial spot upon death, with incredibly high prices: from over \$10,000 USD in the older, well-established plots, to the cheapest graves at around \$500 USD in the last phase of the cemetery.<sup>64</sup> According to the Tehran municipality,

there are two potential sites in mind for a new burial location but they have yet to be announced. It will be interesting to see how the move to a new necropolis will play out, will new martyrs continue to get buried at Behesht-e Zahra, making it a true museum of symbolic deaths while civilians will all be buried at the new cemetery?

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (Mayor of Tehran) has said that “Behesht-e Zahra is the country's biggest cultural pole.”<sup>65</sup> Many would not agree with or even quite understand this sentiment, but the undeniable fact is that since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Behesht-e Zahra has played a consistent and important cultural role in the Iranian society. Even before the revolution of 1979, the idea of self-sacrifice for the good of society had been established through folklore, literature, and the Shia religion. Early in the Revolution, these pre-existing ideas started to get used to mobilize crowds and resulted in an organic use of the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery as a place of gathering for the movement against the monarchy. Thus a secular movement to change the government used the religious connotations of martyrdom to provoke the country. With the return of Ayatollah Khomeini, these religious ideas that had organically been used officially took a political meaning. With the eight year War, dubbed a “sacred defence”, viewing the deaths of the

martyrs through a religious lens for political gain was fully established. The cemetery's martyr plots became locations of official government-run, political programming. The burial of Ayatollah Khomeini so close to the martyr graves worked to strengthen the political religion used at the cemetery by allowing for his large mausoleum to act as a Shia shrine worthy of an *imam*. Today, the use of secular deaths as means for political gain continues with the addition of new martyrs and the continuation of emphasis on the graves of the existing martyrs. The extent of this influence is reflected in the fact that today, the travel guides to Iran list the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini and the martyr graves as tourist destinations, which can often be seen captured through images and description on western travel blogs.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the propaganda initially intended for Iranians is now extending outside of the country, becoming Iran's international identity; especially since Iran has been culturally disconnected from the world since the 1979 revolution.

While this religiously political role of the cemetery will endure in the future as people of all political beliefs will continue to have sympathy for the fallen during the War and the revolution (even if they don't subscribe to viewing the Ayatollah's mausoleum as a shrine), other views of the cemetery are

slowly emerging. After the highly contested presidential election results of 2009 and the *Green Movement* protests that broke in its wake, a graphic novel called *Zahra's Paradise* was published. This novel depicts the story of Zahra, a mother who has lost her son in the post-election mayhem. Throughout the story she finds herself in search of her missing son only to discover that he had been one of the many tortured to death and buried in a nameless grave at a corner of Behesht-e Zahra.<sup>67</sup> The first volume of the graphic novel ends at Behesht-e Zahra, with Zahra looking into the distance, demanding an answer for her son's death at the hands of the regime, hoping to change the discourse of what is to be the future of the country. This new perspective shifts the government's prescribed notion of Behesht-e Zahra and brings to light another dimension of the regime. Perhaps looking at the two narratives side-by-side one can begin to understand the truth from the persuasive facades and thus shine some light on the last thirty six years of Islamic rule in Iran.

1. Persian New Year, celebrated each Spring equinox (March 20 or 21st)
2. In Persian tradition, one washes the graves of loved ones first with water, then with fragrant rosewater before placing flowers on it
3. Behesht (بهشت) in Persian means paradise or heaven, so the name of the cemetery means Zahra's Paradise. Zahra is a popular title given to Fatimah, prophet Muhammad's daughter. This implies that the holy saint is watching over the dead, giving it immediate religious connotations
4. Behesht-e Zahra Organization. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://beheshtzahra.tehran.ir/>.
5. Thomas Erdbrink, "In Tehran's Main Cemetery, Space for the Dead Dwindling", in *Washington Post*. Accessed October 12, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-tehrans-main-cemetery-space-for-the-dead-is-dwindling/2011/07/21/gIQAcpuRel\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-tehrans-main-cemetery-space-for-the-dead-is-dwindling/2011/07/21/gIQAcpuRel_story.html).
6. The War went on from 22 September 1980 – 20 August 1988 and resulted in over a million dead for Iran. The War went on from 22 September 1980 – 20 August 1988 and resulted in over a million dead for Iran. (Black, Ian. "Iran and Iraq Remember War That Cost More than a Million Lives." *The Guardian*. September 23, 2010. Accessed August 5, 2015.)
7. The figures range from artists to athletes and members of the media
8. Ayatollah is a high-ranking title given to Usuli Twelver Shia clerics
9. Iran has a syncretic political system which combines elements of a modern Islamic theocracy with democracy. The constitution established after the 1979 Revolution vests sovereignty in God while mandating popular elections for the presidency and the parliament. Yet, all democratic procedures and rights are subordinate to the non-elected members of the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader who assure the government's course is Islamic
10. Behesht-e Zahra Organization. Accessed June 22, 2015. <http://beheshtzahra.tehran.ir/>
11. Tehran Oil Refinery. Accessed September 29, 2015. <http://www.tehranrefinery.ir/AboutUs.aspx>
12. Hazrat is a title reserved for Holy figures (including Imams) in Islam. In loose terms, it can be translated to "his/her holiness". The boulevard is named after the prophet's daughter, the namesake of the cemetery.
13. Ravinder Kaur, "Sacralising Bodies On Martyrdom, Government and Accident in Iran", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 20(4), pp. 446 doi:10.1017/S135618631000026X

14. Niloufar Talebi, "Memory of a Phoenix Feather: Iranian Storytelling Traditions and Contemporary Theater", in *World Literature Today*, University of Oklahoma, 2009, 83(4), pp. 49-53 Accessed July 10, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20621658>
15. Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran*, Kindle File ed, Duke University Press, Durham 2006, Location 810
16. Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, Mizan Press, Berkeley 1980, pp. 180
17. Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*, Kindle File ed, Free Press, New York 2000, Location 3068
18. Higher numbers have been reported by the Islamic government at different times. The thirty-two casualties reported here are based on the research by Emad al-Dib Baghi who was hired as a researcher and editor for the *Bonyad-i-Shahid va Isaargaran* (the 'Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs') magazine "Yad Yaran" (Remembering our Comrades). Accessed at the following: Cyrus Kadivar, "A Question of Numbers" Emad Baghi: English. Accessed September 28, 2015. <http://www.emadbaghi.com/en/archives/000592.php#more>
19. Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*, Kindle File ed, Free Press, New York 2000, Location 3081
20. Persian: "فرداد همدانا تبار، میوهش درآید." - "*Baradar e Shahidam, yadat edameh darad.*" This chant was so popular and well-known that today it lives on as part of the common memory of the Iranian society from the days of the Revolution
21. The transcript to a portion of speech in English can be found at <http://www.wefightcensorship.org/censored/irony-iran-ayatollah-khomeini-censored-his-own-followershtml.html>. The video of the portion addressed to the families of the dead can be found here, with English subtitles: <http://www.aparat.com/v/yk0gi>. And the full video of the speech (in Persian) here: [http://www.shiatv.net/view\\_video.php?viewkey=87ca7b7d9b2d2b997135](http://www.shiatv.net/view_video.php?viewkey=87ca7b7d9b2d2b997135)
22. Persian: بازگشتی و میوهش دایم - *Bonyad-i-Shahid va Isaargaran*.
23. Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran*, Kindle File ed, Duke University Press, Durham 2006, Location 177
24. Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran*, Kindle File ed, Duke University Press, Durham 2006, Location 793-799
25. Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran*, Kindle File ed, Duke University Press, Durham 2006, Location 895
26. Many high ranking military officials had been purged following

the Revolution. Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran*, Kindle File ed, Duke University Press, Durham 2006, Location 892

27. The Qur'an, Surah Al-Imran (The Family of Imran) 3:169

28. Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*, Kindle File ed, Free Press, New York 2000, Location 3143

29. Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*, Kindle File ed, Free Press, New York 2000, Location 3090

30. Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*, Kindle File ed, Free Press, New York 2000, Location 3097

31. Ravinder Kaur, "Sacralising Bodies On Martyrdom, Government and Accident in Iran", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 20(4), pp. 452 doi:10.1017/ S135618631000026X

32. Ravinder Kaur, "Sacralising Bodies On Martyrdom, Government and Accident in Iran", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 20(4), pp. 452 doi:10.1017/ S135618631000026X

33. Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran*, Kindle File ed, Duke University Press, Durham 2006, Location 1030

34. Ravinder Kaur, "Sacralising Bodies On Martyrdom, Government and Accident in Iran", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 20(4), pp. 447 doi:10.1017/ S135618631000026X

35. Not to be confused with regular prayer leaders. The Shia imams are spiritual and political leaders of Shia Islam, directly descended from Prophet Muhammad

36. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Norton, New York 2006. pp. 53

37. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Norton, New York 2006. pp. 54

38. The twelfth and the last Imam is the Hidden Imam, believed to be alive.

39. Of all the *imams*, only the Shrine of Imam Reza (the eighth Imam) is in Mashhad, Iran. According to the Iranian Tourism Agency, Mashhad attracts 20 million tourists and pilgrims every year who go to pay homage to the eighth Shia imam. While the Hajj remains the single most attended pilgrimage event in the world, the numbers of visitors to Mecca only ever reach about 15 million annually ( "Mecca versus Las Vegas; A Saudi Tower.(A New Tower in Mecca).", in *The Economist*, June 26, 2010), with about 2 million there during the days of Hajj. Today Astan Quds Razavi (the foundation in charge of the complex in Mashhad), offers virtual pilgrimage trips through

their 24/7 coverage of the shrine on their website due to popular demand.

40. Not to be mistaken with haraam (حرام - acts that are prohibited in Islam). Haram (حرم) roughly means holy sanctuary, and is what the shrines of Shia *imams* and their descendants are referred to as

41. Diane Morgan, *Essential Islam a Comprehensive Guide to Belief and Practice*, Praeger/ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara - Calif. 2010, pp. 227

42. Since the majority of Saudi Arabia practices Wahhabism (an orthodox branch of Sunni Islam) in which any elaborate memorial to the dead can be considered as an "idol" and thus blasphemous, such structures have never been allowed to be built at the tombs of the Imams buried in the Kingdom. Many Wahhabists also don't consider Shias "true Muslims" which adds to the negative sentiments towards their *imams*

43. Andrew Burke, Mark Elliott, *Iran. 5th ed.*, Lonely Planet, Footscray, Vic., 2008, pp. 130

44. The official website of the shrine, Haram-e Motahar. Accessed July 10, 2015. <http://www.harammotahar.ir/>

45. Behesht-e Zahra Organization. Accessed August 4, 2015. <http://beheshtezahra.tehran.ir/>

46. Persian: حوض

47. Andrew Burke, Mark Elliott, *Iran. 5th ed.*, Lonely Planet, Footscray, Vic., 2008, pp. 130

48. Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-revolution Iran*, Kindle File ed, Duke University Press, Durham 2006, Location 654

49. Aid is given through various provisions such as "employment, pensions, legal services, higher education, interest-free bank loans and exemption from military service." (Ravinder Kaur, 2010)

50. یادش، و شمع هب هک ییاهجرط "ریواصرت دش هدیشک «صاوع یادش» و شمع هب هک ییاهجرط". [Accessed October 17, 2015. http://dana.ir/News/339650.html](http://dana.ir/News/339650.html)

51. Ravinder Kaur, "Sacralising Bodies On Martyrdom, Government and Accident in Iran", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 20(4), pp. 446 doi:10.1017/ S135618631000026X

52. "The Burial of those killed in Mina at Behesht-e Zahra's plot 50/350 galvanized coffins were sent to Mecca." رد ام ناکتخاسناج نیفدت. " [دش هداتسرف هکم هب هزیارواک تویبات ۳۵۰ (س)رهز تشهب یادش ۵۰ موعطق ازکی] in IQNA [Accessed October 13, 2015. http://www.iqna.ir/fa/News/3377903](http://www.iqna.ir/fa/News/3377903)

53. "زارک", in Persian, it is a play on "زارک", meaning flower field

54. Ravinder Kaur, "Sacralising Bodies On Martyrdom, Government

and Accident in Iran", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 20(4), pp. 452 doi:10.1017/ S135618631000026X

55. Ravinder Kaur, "Sacralising Bodies On Martyrdom, Government and Accident in Iran", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 20(4), pp. 452 doi:10.1017/ S135618631000026X

56. "Behesht-e Reza." [افرد تشهب], Forsat [انصريف], Accessed September 29, 2015. <http://forsat1.blogfa.com/tag/افرد-تشهب>

57. Ray Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment", in *The Middle East Journal*, Middle East Institute, 2010, 64(3), pp. 365 doi:10.3751/64.3.1

58. Statistical Centre of Iran, 2011

59. "Virtual Tour of Behesht-e Zahra", Behesht-e Zahra Organization, Accessed August 3, 2015. <http://www.menha.ir/behesht/>

60. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, Harper & Row, New York 1980, pp. 98-106

61. Shah - i Shuhada, meaning the king of martyrs, is one of the third Imam's most popularly used titles

62. "Virtual Tour of Behesht-e Zahra", Behesht-e Zahra Organization, Accessed August 3, 2015. <http://www.menha.ir/behesht/>

63. Thomas Erdbrink, "In Tehran's Main Cemetery, Space for the Dead Dwindling", in *Washington Post*. Accessed October 12, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-tehrans-main-cemetery-space-for-the-dead-is-dwindling/2011/07/21/gIQAcpuRel\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/in-tehrans-main-cemetery-space-for-the-dead-is-dwindling/2011/07/21/gIQAcpuRel_story.html)

64. Majaleh Khabari (آرخب و لجم), Iranian Channel 1. May 26, 2015

65. "Virtual Tour of Behesht-e Zahra", Behesht-e Zahra Organization, Accessed August 3, 2015. <http://www.menha.ir/behesht/>

66. Andrew Burke, Mark Elliott, *Iran. 5th ed.*, Lonely Planet, Footscray, Vic., 2008, pp. 130

67. Amir and Khalil, *Zahra's Paradise*, 1st ed. Vol. 1, First Second, New York 2011