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## RELIGIOUS ICON AND NATIONAL SYMBOL: THE TOMB OF AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI IN IRAN

The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini is a commemorative monument built to honor both the man buried in it and the revolution he inspired. In particular, it symbolizes the tensions between the disparate interpretations of the past and the future in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a place of pilgrimage, its form recalls earlier Shi'i shrines, as do many of the rituals that take place in it. As a state symbol, it necessarily participates in the propagandistic agenda of the republic. The traditionalism thus is not at the cost of its primary role as a civic monument.<sup>1</sup> Just as the idea of the nation is a recondite one, its representations are varied and complex. The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini is unique in the manner in which its design combines references to religion and to the modern nation-state, thereby securing its place within the wider discourse of architectural theory.

The duality of the tomb echoes that of posters and billboards sponsored by the Iranian Republic, which combine Shi'i iconography with the avant-garde visual language of other modern revolutions. For that reason, one of the most important sources for the analysis of the tomb is the government-sponsored art and literature of the revolution and its aftermath. The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini exemplifies the polyvalent nature of modern architecture—in Iran and elsewhere—that facilitates reference to historic and contemporary events. It is thus a reminder of the multiplicity of narratives embedded in public institutions, whose architectural manifestations are often a hybrid incorporating the lived and imagined histories of their patrons.

The first part of this essay situates the tomb in its political and cultural context within post-revolutionary Iran. By studying the visual propaganda—that is, posters and billboards—that preceded the construction of the tomb, I argue for a very significant link between them. In a sense, the tomb was conjured up in the workshops of the Office for the Propagation of Islam (*daftar-i tablighāt-i Islāmī*) years before Khomeini's

death. A complex iconography created by the propagandists, which separately invoked the shrines of Fatima al-Ma'suma in Iran and Imam Husayn in Iraq, drawing upon their historical and contemporary significance for Iranian citizens, was once again used in Khomeini's tomb. Interestingly, the holiest Shi'i shrine in Iran, that of Imam Reza in Mashhad, is not featured as prominently in the posters, indicating that religion is not the sole factor determining their imagery. Like the shrines illustrated in the posters, that of Ayatollah Khomeini functions as a sign indicating both religious and national identity. This manner of representation is akin to contemporary postmodern trends in architectural design, which place great emphasis on the overall image, often relying on historical models.<sup>2</sup> In the tomb as in such works, modernity and traditionalism merge to produce a singular, if by some standards outlandish, architectural solution.

The second part of the essay attempts to show how the building, in use and articulation, diverges from its image. The expectations associated with the tomb-sanctuary are complicated by the manner in which the architecture embraces both historical precedent and modern technology. The resulting collage points not only to the particularities of Iranian society at the end of the twentieth century but also to the nature of contemporary architecture itself. The tectonics of the tomb of Khomeini generate an image of shrine / national monument that is both familiar and diverse in its meaning and customary and propagandist in its use. Interpreted as a pastiche, the tomb raises an issue of parody in architecture that subverts its meanings and reception. It thus reveals the levity with which one must approach such a public building—a revelation that, I believe, contributes greatly to its effectiveness.<sup>3</sup>

The legitimacy of Ayatollah Khomeini as a political icon is constantly debated. Scholarly attempts at understanding the charismatic power of this leader point to the complex political and rhetorical devices

that were used in formulating his ideology and furthering the Iranian revolution. Khomeini mobilized his followers in a creative if at times contradictory manner that merged Third World ideology with his interpretation of Shi'i Islam.<sup>4</sup> All these characteristics are also evident in the tomb. Like the person in whose memory it was built, it has a varied audience: it is visited by diplomats, heads of state, and schoolchildren brought there on national holidays; and it is frequented by pilgrims on their way to the holy city of Qum, as well as by women whose sons and husbands died during the Iran-Iraq war and are buried in the nearby cemetery. It is both a civic monument and a popular pilgrimage site, both a symbol of the state and a religious edifice imbued with a highly charged mystical ethos emanating from the Shi'i belief in the Imam-ate.<sup>5</sup> For many Iranian intellectuals (in and outside Iran), it symbolizes the violent changes wrought upon their country and serves as a reminder of the Islamic regime's dogmatic approach to nationhood; to many architects it represents a reactionary spirit manifested in a retrograde architecture. For these and other reasons, it has not yet been given any scholarly attention. It is time to initiate a discussion of this monument, not only in terms of its significance to modern Iran, but also for its place in modern Islamic architecture.

#### IMAGE AND IDEA

Construction on the tomb was begun soon after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989. The building was commissioned by the government of Iran and placed under the supervision of a committee headed by Khomeini's son, Ahmad Khomeini (d. 1995).<sup>6</sup> An architect, Muhammad Tehrani, was selected as its designer. Not much more information, such as the criteria for selecting the architect or the programmatic decisions that informed its design, is publicly available. Details of cost and land purchases are shrouded in mystery, and many rumors abound. Perhaps in an attempt to preserve the sanctity of the man buried there, the government closely guards the information. While greater documentation would certainly deepen knowledge about the tomb, the lacunae need not deter a semantic reading of this important architectural site.

The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini is located midway along the north-south highway connecting the capital, Tehran, and the city of Qum, which is home to the shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma. The finished struc-

ture of the tomb, with its four minarets and its golden dome raised on a drum, shimmers miragelike on the horizon, as a holy shrine should (fig. 1). Up close, a rather different reality is revealed: a vast, square structure with two U-shaped appendages extending from either side to create semi-enclosed courtyards (fig. 2). The primary entrance to the mausoleum is simple, utilitarian, and modern. In stark contrast is the entrance to the sanctuary through tall iwan portals that, with their tiled facades, appear to mimic older Iranian buildings. In the rear of the complex are extensive gardens, designed in the form of quartered *chahār-bāghs*, through which run vehicular pathways.<sup>7</sup>

The proximity of the tomb to Qum is significant, for it was at the famous shrine and madrasa of Fatima al-Ma'suma that Khomeini began his career and much of the popular revolt against the Pahlavi government was instigated.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, the tomb mirrors the old sanctuary: it gains prestige through association with this ancient Shi'i site, and it provides a contemporary pendant to it. The shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma is one of only two major Shi'i shrines in Iran (the other is that of Imam Reza in Mashhad) and has great religious appeal, since other shrines are less accessibly located in Iraq—at Karbala, Najaf, Kufa, Baghdad, and Samarra—and in Saudi Arabia. The buildings that constitute the Fatima shrine complex—a heterogeneous collection of courtyards, portal iwans, domes, and minarets—have their roots in the ninth century and continue to be amended in the present day. For the artists of post-revolutionary Iran, however, the architectural essence of the shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma was the golden dome fronted by a high *tālār-ñwān* flanked by two minarets.<sup>9</sup>

In the posters and billboards propagating the revolutionary message, the city of Qum and its shrine are used to represent both the secular and the religious aspirations of the Iranian people.<sup>10</sup> The importance of the shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma is illustrated in a poster reproduced in *The Graphic Art of the Islamic Republic*, a publication commemorating the sixth anniversary of the republic (fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> The image shows the silhouette of a man against a mostly green background. Above him is a similarly silhouetted flying dove with bleeding wings, on a background of red, orange, and yellow bands. In the foreground, the man's large cupped hands are raised in a gesture of prayer. From his bloodied wrist rises a tall red tulip, the flower of which conceals his face. Inscribed in the flower is "Allah" written in green, the emblem of the Islamic

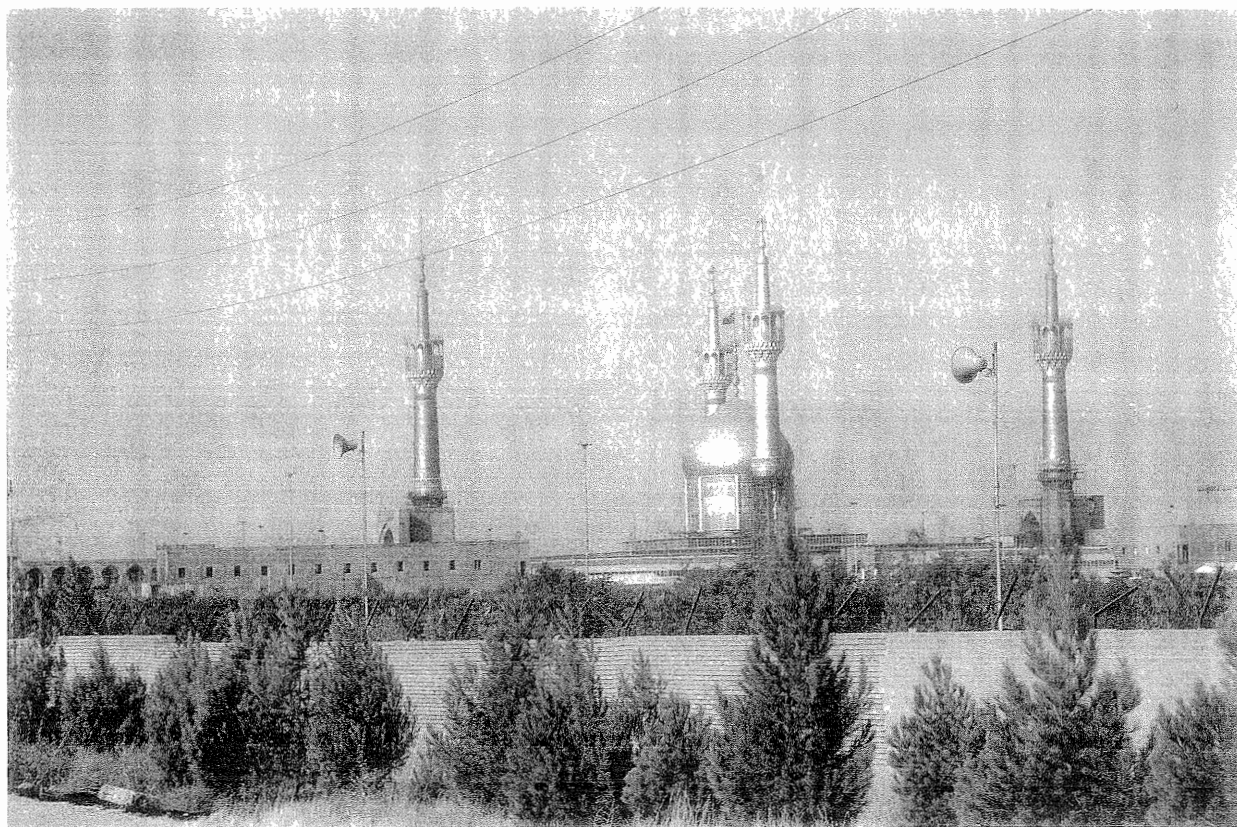


Fig. 1. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini, distant view.

Republic. The tulip and "Allah" represent the holy struggle of the faceless soldier; the bleeding dove is his martyrdom.<sup>12</sup>

The story of the struggle is narrated visually within the body of the soldier-martyr. On his right side is shown the tomb of Fatima, with its distinct *tālār-īwān* and golden dome, above which waves one large red banner inscribed with the *shahāda* (the attestation of faith, "There is no God but God"), another with the phrase "God is great," and a third with "Allah." On his left side are thousands of protesters carrying banners, one of which reads "Khomeini is the guide" (*Khumaynī rāhbar*). The images of protesting masses and the shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma both recall the popular uprisings in Qum that led up to the revolution. A portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini is situated where the soldier-martyr's heart would be, showing the ayatollah to be the inspiration for his sacrifice.

The caption below the image is a quotation from Khomeini: "Dear Nation, you gave all you had sincerely

for God, and you obtained this heavenly manna."<sup>13</sup> Although Khomeini's image has a central position in the painting, it is the faceless man who, as the true hero, occupies most of the composition.<sup>14</sup> This painting, visually and textually, addresses the heroic masses who are the strength of the Islamic revolution as well as its consumers. The message, rendered in bold and simple language, is easily understood. Though using traditional Qur'anic terms, the poster is clearly a contemporary document.

The melding of historical and mythic events was an important theme in the rhetoric of the Iranian revolution. Thus the shrine of Fatima depicted in the poster represented not only a sacred sanctuary but also a site of contemporary insurrection. The propagandists appropriated Shi'i martyrology to give legitimacy to the struggles of the people to free themselves of Western subjugation, a stance taken by many intellectuals and the clergy.<sup>15</sup> A year after the 1979 revolution that deposed the Pahlavi regime, this same strategy was

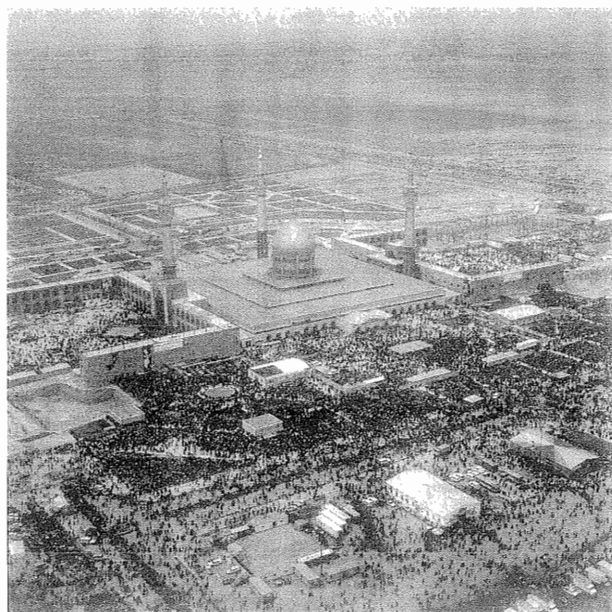


Fig. 2. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini, aerial view. (Photo after *Tīhrān dar yak nigāh* [Tehran, 1995])

deployed in propaganda for the ensuing Iran-Iraq war. The sacrifices of the Iranian people were now equated to those of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and of Husayn's followers who died on the battlefields of Karbala, in modern Iraq.<sup>16</sup> The Shi'i story of Imam Husayn was illustrated in the revolutionary posters that commemorated his martyrdom, an event reenacted every year with great fervor by Shi'is worldwide.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of Karbala as both a political and a religious battlefield is illustrated on a roadside billboard in Khuzestan (fig. 4).<sup>18</sup> In the foreground of the composition, a man stares into the distance. He is carrying a rolled Iranian flag and has tied a handkerchief around his forehead, suggesting that he may be a wounded Iranian soldier. Over the horizon appear a golden dome and two minarets, the destination of the soldier. On his back is written, "Either pilgrimage or martyrdom" (*yā ziyārat yā shahādāt*), referring to the sacred journey on which he has embarked, to the holy site or to his death. Below the painting, a horizontal caption reads, "The promised site of the Party of God (*ḥizb Allāh*) is the courtyard of Husayn's shrine (*ṣaḥn-i abā 'abd Allāh*)." The man is at once a pious pilgrim and a soldier willing to die for the Islamic nation in order to (re)gain the metaphoric and the real Karbala.

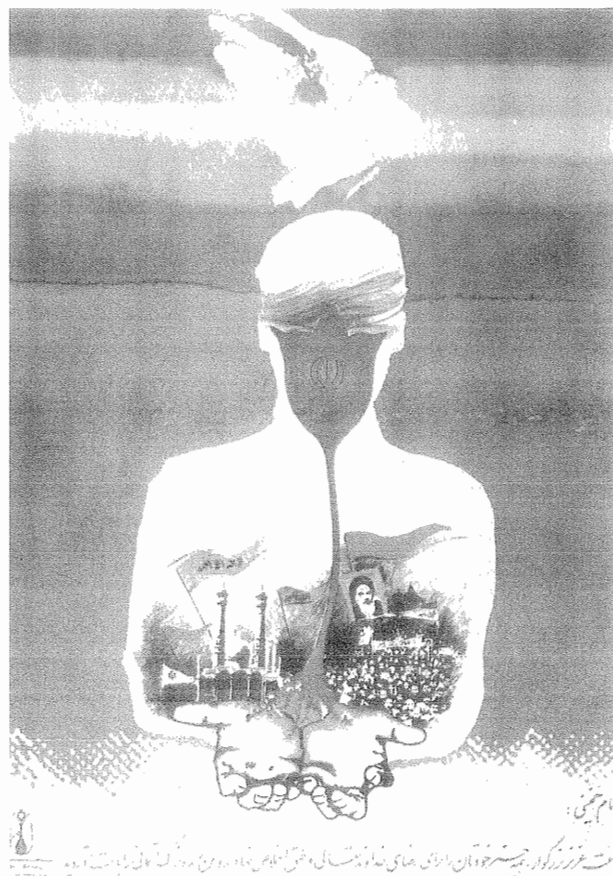


Fig. 3. Poster. (From *The Graphic Art of the Islamic Republic*)

The importance of this site is asserted by its location in the center of the composition and is reinforced by the attention given to it by the soldier, as well as by the winding path that leads to it from the base of the composition. By this diminishing path the observer is drawn into the painting, one step behind the soldier, and shares his point of view. The photographer of the billboard has attempted to give it added immediacy by aligning its painted horizon with the horizon of the surrounding landscape.<sup>19</sup>

The shrine of Imam Husayn is a recurrent topic on billboards painted during the Iran-Iraq war. Often references are also made to Ayatollah Khomeini who, like Husayn, stood against a powerful enemy.<sup>20</sup> The pictorial conflation of these two personalities occurs on a billboard (fig. 5), whose center is occupied by a faceless horseman wearing a black turban and a green cape. A yellow glow emanates from behind him and





Fig. 4. Billboard. (From *Profiles of the Revolutionary Art*)

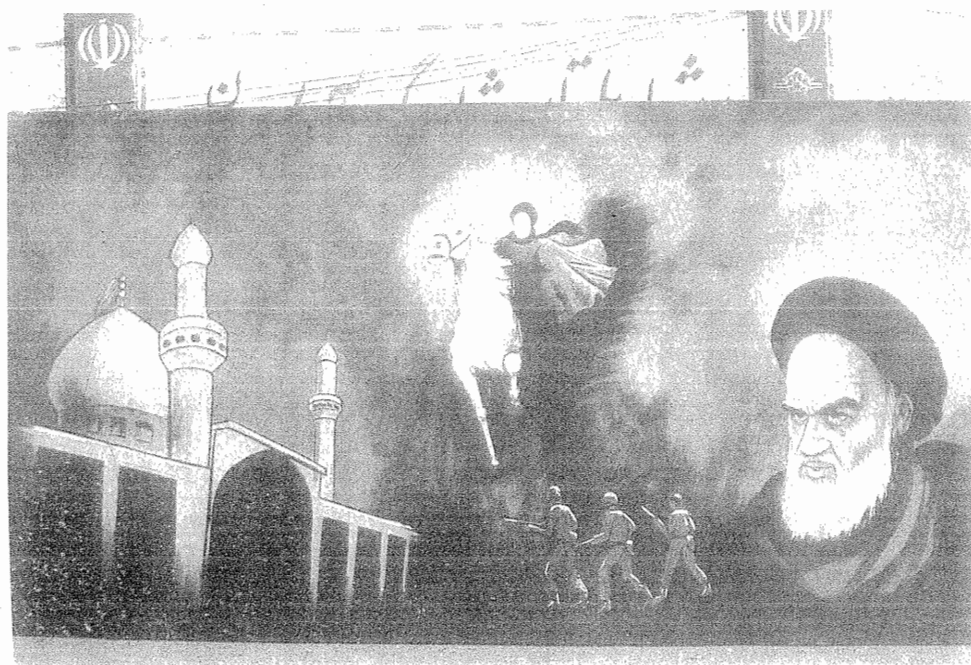


Fig. 5. Billboard. (From *Profiles of the Revolutionary Art*)

dynamically propels him almost out of the picture plane. Directly below his horse stand three soldiers, forming the base of a triangular black composition with the horseman at its apex. On one side, in the direction in which the soldiers move, is a shrine with a golden dome and minarets rising from a portal iwan; this is meant to be the shrine of Husayn in Karbala. On the other side of the horseman is the face of Ayatollah Khomeini, whose gaze seems to be concentrated on the shrine. The faceless horseman is meant to represent Imam Husayn, moving toward his final resting place. He is garbed as an Iranian cleric to connect him to Khomeini, who in turn is turbaned in black to indicate his direct descent from the family of Muhammad (and Husayn). The shrine, although placed asymmetrically on the billboard, is the central goal of all the human subjects: the soldiers, Khomeini, and Imam Husayn.

Although the shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma had meaning as the birthplace of the Iranian revolution, it was this other, more distant, shrine of Imam Husayn that sustained its radical zeal. In the revolutionary rhetoric of the time, the latter was an emblem of the righteous war against Iraq, being fought to regain the Shi'i holy cities from the villainous Saddam Hussein. With its image plastered on billboards and banners all over the country, this building signified martyrdom and sacrifice. Because Qum and Karbala came to represent the true aspirations of the revolution, it is not surprising that the design for the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini likewise assumed the form of a Shi'i shrine, drawing for inspiration on myriad associations, including at least two architectural sites. The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini thereby recalls simultaneously the legendary battlefield of Karbala, the 1978 uprisings at the Qum madrasa, and the Iran-Iraq war. Through association and articulation, it captures the nationalist ethos and procures for itself the role of a monument of state.

In the preface to their catalogue of Iranian revolutionary posters, *Profiles of the Revolutionary Art*, the editors celebrate the "revolutionary artists, most of whom do not even possess the official title of artist [and] can never be separated from the masses who are their real spectators."<sup>21</sup> This is reminiscent of the rhetoric of Western revolutionary movements of the early twentieth century, in which the artist was subsumed by his cause.<sup>22</sup> The editors add, "The language of art is the most powerful and effective form of expression. [It] is a popular language understood by all

classes of people. This...art is...applied effectively by our people to promote and further the pious objectives of our revolution. We can, therefore, view this kind of art as a comprehensive history of our revolution and its true values as well as its relation to the people."<sup>23</sup> The goal of this propagandist art was to document the historic moments of the Islamic Republic and augment its legitimacy. Its audience was the people of Iran, as well as those outside to whom the Iranian revolution was to be exported. The paintings and billboards used different representational styles, ranging from the twentieth-century political documentary style typical of revolutionary posters to narrative murals reminiscent of Iranian coffeehouse painting.<sup>24</sup> We see a similar merging of modern and historical references in the design of Ayatollah Khomeini's tomb. Nationalist image-making is by necessity controlled and homogenous. Nonetheless, the reality, as seen through the diversity of the tomb's audience and the complexity of its architecture, is much more complicated.

#### HYBRIDITY OF THE NEW ARCHITECTURE

The entrance to the building complex, with the mausoleum at its center, is through a vast parking lot reserved for the many buses that bring visitors to the site (fig. 6). Between the lot and the mausoleum is a string of single-story sheds built of brick and metal sheeting, which serve commercial functions from selling kebabs and cold drinks to disseminating tapes of Khomeini's speeches. Loudspeakers blare music and sermons from these kiosks, where pictures of Khomeini and his tomb, as well as of the Shi'i imams, are sold. The icons and slogans are part of the consumerist ethos surrounding the tomb of Khomeini and point to the fact that the edifice appeals to a variety of people, and for a variety of reasons.

Adjacent to the tomb complex, connected to it by both vehicular and pedestrian thoroughfares, is a vast cemetery, the Bihisht-i Zahra ("Zahra's paradise"), where revolutionaries and soldiers from the Iran-Iraq war are buried. The cemetery accounts for a large proportion of the tomb's clientele, many of whom come to pray at the gravesites of relatives.<sup>25</sup> It is named after the mother of Imam Husayn, Fatima al-Zahra, in whose paradisaical garden her martyred offspring was laid to rest. On the side opposite the tomb, at the eastern end of the cemetery, is a large memorial to the cleric Ayatollah Dr. Muhammad Beheshti and to

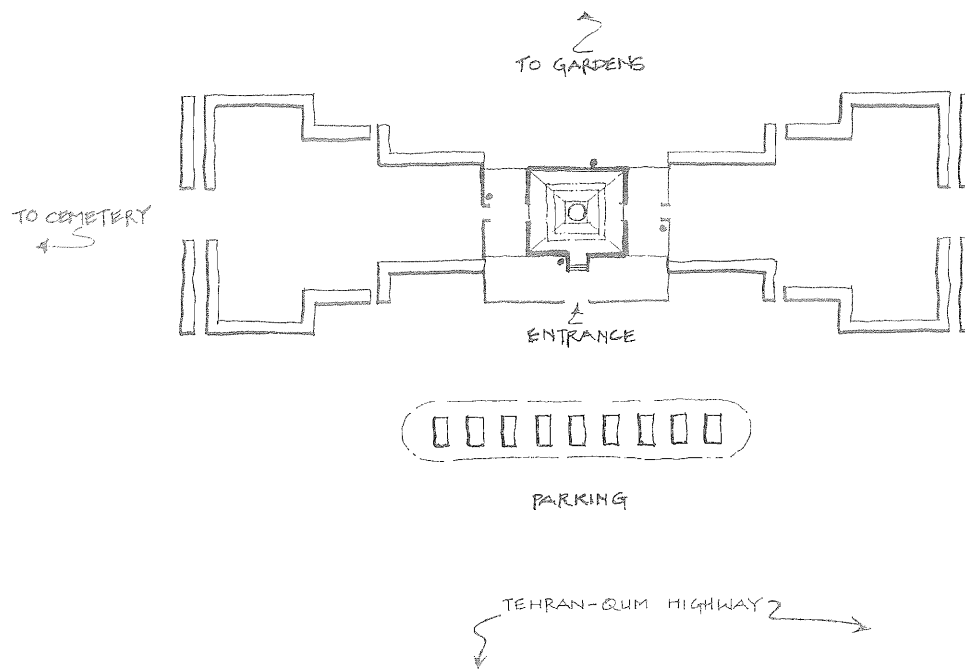


Fig. 6. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini. Schematic site plan (not to scale).

seventy-two others who were killed with him in a bomb blast on June 28, 1981.<sup>26</sup> Known collectively as the "Martyrs of June 28" (*shuhadā-yi haftum tār*), their number mimics the seventy-two dead on the battlefield of Karbala. The memorial is composed of reinforced concrete columns and a ceiling of prefabricated concrete half-domes. Those buried in the Bihishti Zahra, famous and anonymous alike, are regarded in the Iranian media as martyrs who died in the name of Islam, and whose spirits are blessed in paradise.

Building Ayatollah Khomeini's tomb adjacent to the Bihishti Zahra furthers its association with Husayn and the battlefield of Karbala. It had been Khomeini's wish to be buried in the Bihishti Zahra alongside his compatriots, but in order to preserve the privacy of the cemetery, the committee decided instead to build the mausoleum on a separate site nearby. The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini is nevertheless an integral part of the cemetery, especially in its reference to precedent, although this reference is inverted. Commonly, the sacred aura surrounding a shrine encouraged others to bury their dead near it, resulting in the development of a cemetery. Here the sequence is

reversed: the cemetery preceded the tomb and is the reason why the tomb was built there.

Khomeini's burial place is at the center of a large development that, in addition to shops, will eventually house a madrasa, a library, rest houses, and a bazaar. This overall scheme again has precedents, although the development of older shrine complexes took centuries, whereas this one will be completed in a few years. The goal of the authorities is to replicate not just the image of the shrine complex but also many of its functions.<sup>27</sup>

The mausoleum itself is a long, single-story, shed-like structure, with a tightly controlled entrance foyer (where shoes are checked and security personnel keep surveillance over the visitors) tacked onto the front. The main façade is pierced by twenty-four doors, each leading into the tomb chamber, suggesting a freely accessible space. The simplicity of the walls, which are clad in light brown brick, contrasts with the elaborate gold sheathing that covers the four minarets and the dome. The tall drum (also clad in gold) on which the dome is raised sits directly on the roof, without any transitional massing between horizontal and vertical volumes.



All the minarets are detached from the building; one is in the primary courtyard. Circumscribing each minaret is a Qur'anic verse from sura *al-Baqara* (The Cow), which refers to "true guidance" and tolerance of those who are not Muslim and is frequently inscribed on Islamic monuments, particularly funerary ones: "There shall be no compulsion in religion. True guidance is now distinct from error. He that renounces idol worship and puts his faith in Allah shall grasp a firm handle that will never break. Allah hears all and knows all."<sup>28</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini's relationship to the government was ambiguous: he seldom used the word "Iran" but instead stressed Islam and the universal state. In so doing, he emphasized the mission of his revolution as the spreading of Islam beyond national boundaries. Reference to a common Islam was part of the revolutionary agenda that sought to create links with other non-Western countries. By utilizing common Qur'anic verses and traditional components like dome and minarets, the tomb itself balances architectural symbols of the Iranian and the Islamic past and present.

The choice of a traditional shrine mausoleum to mark Ayatollah Khomeini's grave connects him to earlier religious leaders and claims immortality for his message. The timelessness of his image is also represented in portraits, where he is always shown wearing his traditional clerical garb. The impression is one of stability and constancy, a moral statement about the uprightness of Khomeini's character and guidance. With its golden dome and minarets, the tomb analogously gives the impression of being a traditional institution, although its simple title, *āramgāh* (resting place), distinguishes it from previous religious sanctuaries and underscores the more secular dimensions of Ayatollah Khomeini's authority.<sup>29</sup> This distinction is important, since Khomeini—although popularly referred to as an imam—was not a religious figure but rather a scholar and the ideologue of the Islamic revolution; his power ultimately lay in the profane arena of politics.<sup>30</sup>

The radical aspects of the design of the tomb are best understood through comparison with an important predecessor, the memorial to Reza Shah Pahlavi in Rayy (fig. 7). (Although the present leaders of Iran may disagree with this comparison on the grounds that Khomeini was not a king but a cleric, the fact that he is seen as the father of the Islamic Republic and the leader of the revolution bestows on him a status similar to that of the Pahlavi shah who ushered Iran into

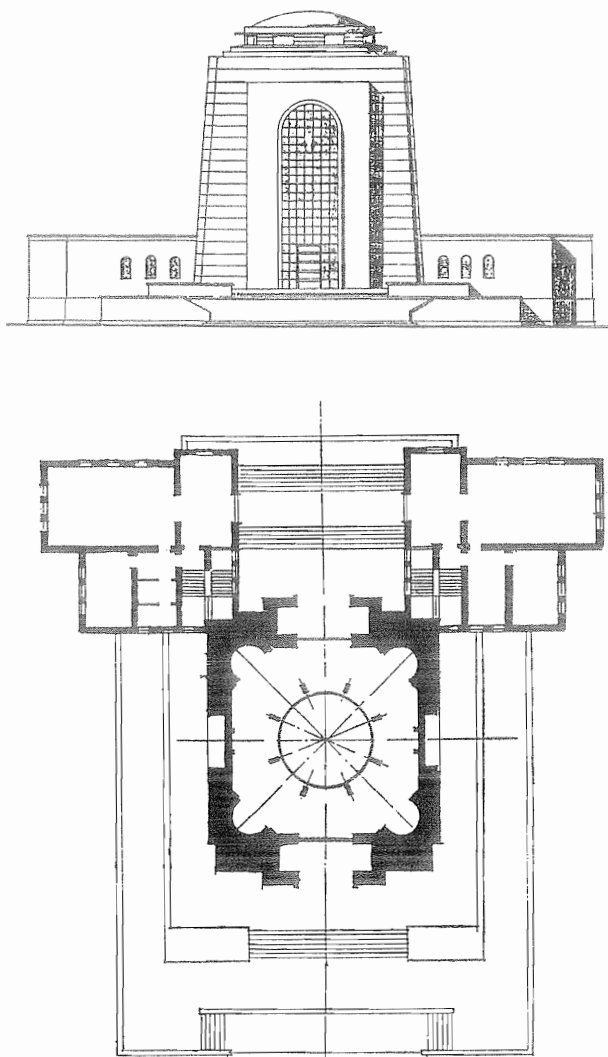


Fig. 7. Memorial to Reza Shah, plan and elevation. (After C. Adle, ed., *Téhéran: Capitale Bicentenaire* [Paris, 1992])

the twentieth century.) A collaboration by three young Iranian architects—Ali Sadeq, Mohsen Foroughi, and Keykbad Zafar—Reza Shah's memorial was completed in 1950. It was in the shape of a tall, tapering cube, capped by a flat domical roof. Its façade was austere but expensively clad in white marble slabs, with the entrance through a so-called Pahlavi arch (fig. 8) into the simple square space of its interior, within which lay the catafalque of Reza Shah. The severity and abstraction of its design related the mausoleum to the memorials of other twentieth-century political leaders, such as Reza Shah's contemporaries Kemal Atatürk

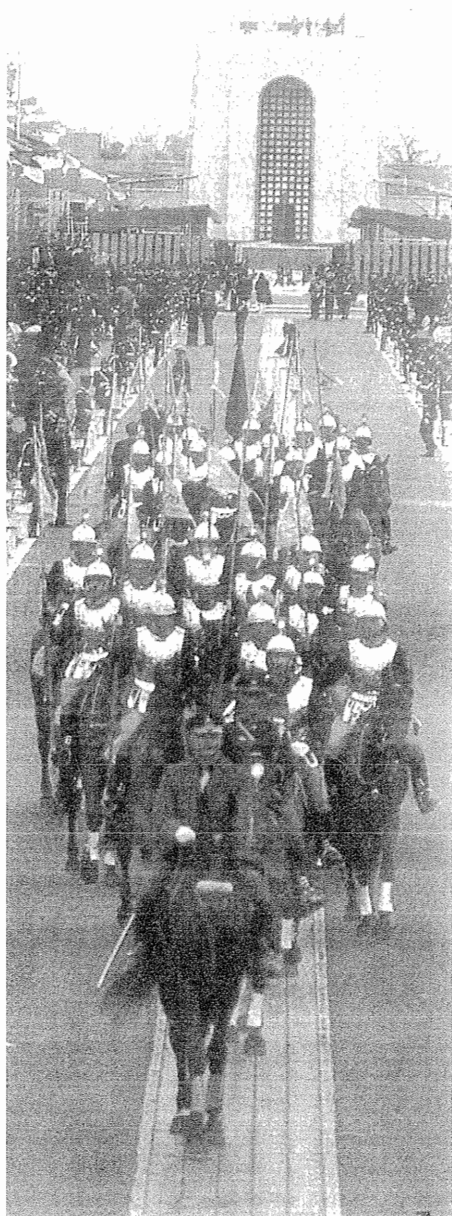


Fig. 8. Memorial to Reza Shah. (After R. Beny, *Iran, Elements of Destiny* [London, 1978])

in Turkey and Muhammad Ali Jinnah in Pakistan. Atatürk's mausoleum refers to Hittite architecture; Jinnah's incorporates Sultanate architecture of the Indian subcontinent in its design. The tomb of Reza Shah, with its oblique references to Sasanian arches and square plan of Seljuk tomb towers, falls somewhere in between the other two. It was demolished in 1979 and, as the locale for state ceremonial and public gatherings on official holidays, has been replaced in function by the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>31</sup>

The tomb of Khomeini stands in opposition to the mausoleum of Reza Shah—one a newborn institution, the other a fading memory. Khomeini's memorial does not refer to an ancient historical entity such as Sasanian Persia or Hittite Turkey.<sup>32</sup> Its inspiration is in Shi'ite martyrology, but also in the more recent past—in the lived experience of modern Iranians.<sup>33</sup> Most of the people who come to it frequent holy sites and recognize the building as a shrine type. This familiarity of type is exploited by the architecture of the tomb, which is a space simultaneously for religious performance and for the dissemination of nationalist ideology.

In photographs of the Reza Shah memorial, the public is invisible, overshadowed by the grandiose pageantry accompanying the royal family. In contrast, photographs of the tomb of Khomeini in government publications show it thronged by people (fig. 9). Although supreme authority is bestowed on the clergy, in the political ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran, political and social agency is given to the masses, who are seen as the soul of the revolution. In posters, groups of revolutionary men and women fill entire compositions with dynamic and potent images of protest, and in photographs the tomb of Khomeini is shown as a magnet around which the people crowd. Although its grandiose scale and ambitious programmatic requirements are appropriate for a building honoring the leader of the Islamic republic, its apparent openness and easy accessibility mark it as a public space belonging to the Iranian people.

In its form, the design of the tomb employs a creative, if parodic, counterpoint in which the architecture displays a critical relationship to its ancestry that goes beyond imitation. Symbols literally appropriated from other contexts include the golden minaret modeled after that of Imam Husayn's shrine, and the dome from Fatima al-Ma'suma's shrine in Qum. In contrast, the concrete and steel infrastructure of the dome and minarets, with prefabricated metal sheets bolted

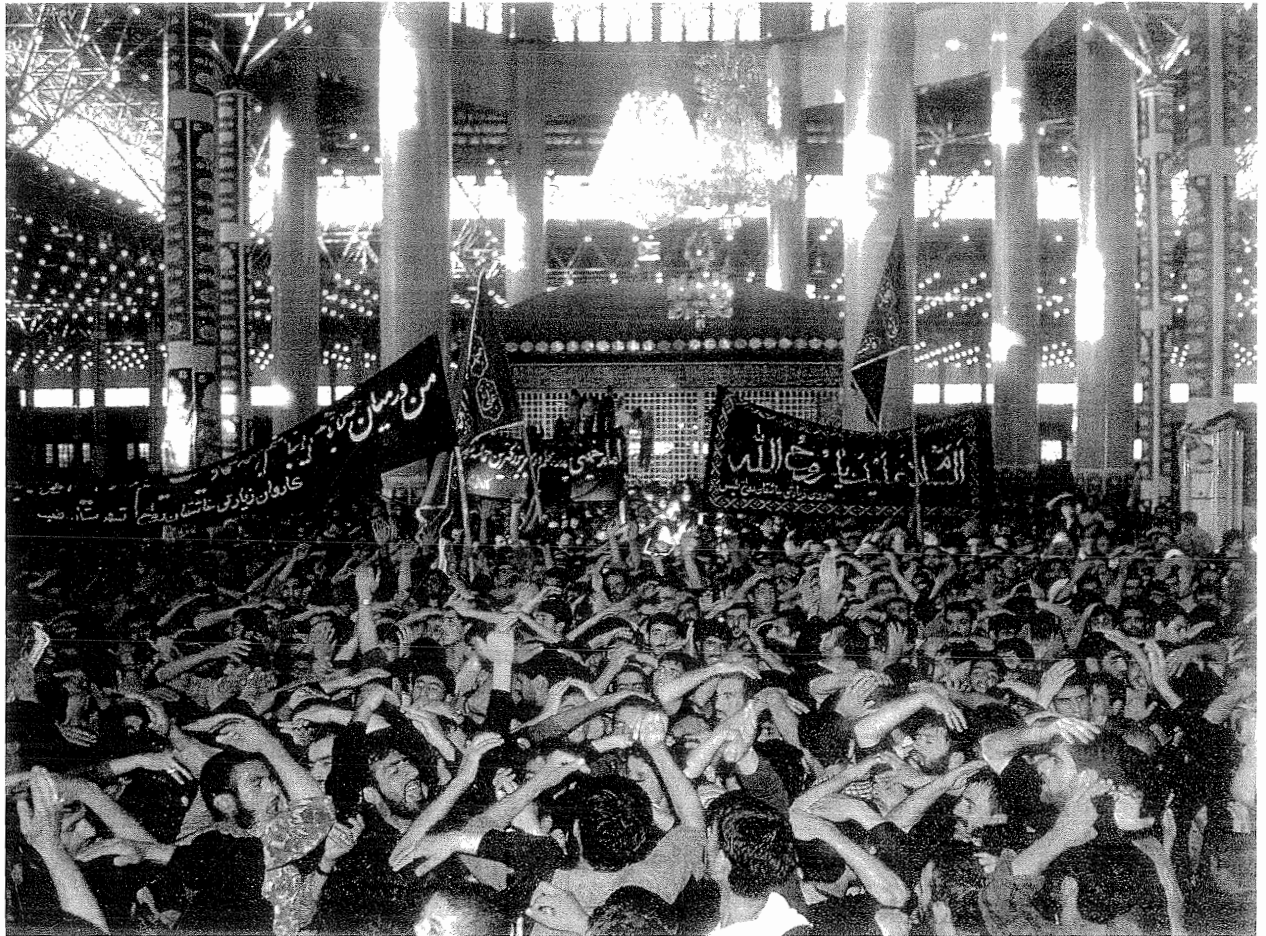


Fig. 9. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini. Interior view looking toward burial chamber. (Photo after *Tihārān dar yak nigāh*)

onto them, are curious reminders of contemporary technology (fig. 10). The abruptness with which the dome joins the roof and the minarets meet the ground highlights their role as fragmentary architectural signs, conveying meaning in and through their historical allusions and their modern sensibility.<sup>34</sup> Their embedded messages situate the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini very much in the present and mark its context both spatially and ideologically.

#### COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION

The mausoleum is a large hypostyle hall, approximately two hundred feet square. The plan of the building is uncomplicated, and the resulting space is as overpowering as the voices emanating from the loudspeakers

outside. Entering the tomb precincts, one experiences no notable spatial transition other than the small foyer and shoe-check. One immediately encounters the main sanctuary, and one's movement through the space is interrupted only by three steps. This open plan of the hall has its functional explanation: security can be closely maintained and large crowds accommodated (fig. 11). Unlike other state monuments, the tomb of Khomeini has a festive air; children play in the great hall, and people even sit and sip tea on the carpeted floors. In tone, the tomb is closer to popular shrines, which function as informal gathering spaces. Its air of sanctity has been altered by its program, however: nowhere is the religious ethos enforced by the rituals of removing the shoes or donning an extra veil. One seeks a place of meditation and reflec-



Fig 10. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini. Exterior showing minarets under construction.

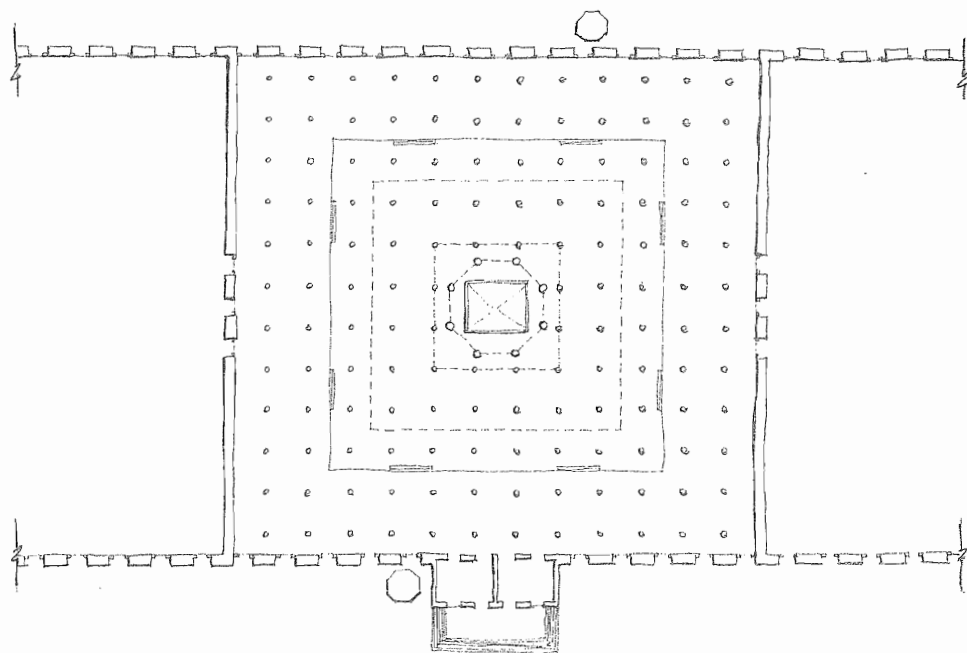


Fig. 11. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini. Schematic plan (not to scale).



tion expected in a funerary structure, but the architectural design does not allow it. The individual is consumed in the rhetorical space of ideology.

On the roof are three clerestory zones that bring in natural light. The structural grid of twelve columns to a side is spanned by a metal space frame in the form of trusses, which allow for an expansive space that provides open vistas throughout the interior. In contrast to most shrines, which consist of distinct rooms arranged in hierarchical and compartmentalized order, the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini is a vast, open arena—completely open when it was first constructed, but by 1996 separated by a wall into male and female sections. The roof and columns are built of prefabricated metal members, the most expensive elements in the mausoleum (fig. 12). Light fixtures are placed at the joints of the trusses to highlight the abstract grid of the superstructure, and the imported technology of the roof is left exposed to display its tectonic virtuosity. The plain metal columns and the vast area they provide are most suitable for state-sponsored ceremonies. During the Islamic month of Muharram, for example, the columns are draped in black and green textiles on which are emblazoned religious epithets and images of Khomeini and the current leader of the republic. Hordes of people come to hear the sermons and to perform the flagellation that is part of the *‘āshūrā* ceremonies.<sup>35</sup>

The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini draws upon traditional architectural elements to which interesting twists have been added, primarily in their material articulation. Visitors' attention converges at the center of the building where Khomeini's cenotaph lies, surrounded by a metal grill (*zarīh*) (fig. 13). Unlike the elaborate silver- and gold-plated grills that enclose many cenotaphs of Shi'i imams and Sufi saints, this structure is made of plain metal strips soldered together to form a lattice grid. The four corners of the burial enclosure, which is covered by a green canopy, are embellished with bouquets of plastic flowers, cheap decoration suggesting an attitude of "anti-elitist availability" and meant to convey an image of Khomeini as simple and unpretentious.<sup>36</sup> This message is reinforced by the inscription from sura *al-A'raf* (The Elevated Places) encircling the cornices of the burial chamber:

He [Allah] replied: "I will visit my scourge upon whom I please: yet my mercy encompasses all things. I will show mercy to those that keep from evil, give alms, and be-



Fig. 12. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini. Interior detail.

lieve in Our signs; and to those that shall follow the Apostle, the unlettered Prophet, whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel. He will enjoin righteousness upon them and forbid them to do evil. He will make good things lawful to them and prohibit all that is foul. He will relieve them of their burdens and of the shackles that weigh upon them. Those that believe in him, those that aid him and follow the light to be sent forth with him, shall surely triumph."<sup>37</sup>

The reference to the Prophet Muhammad as *‘ummī*, "the unlettered prophet," reinforces the official persona of Imam Khomeini—a humble yet upright leader who will help his followers achieve success and salvation in this world and the next. The references in the verse to the Torah and the Gospel underscore the tolerance and inclusiveness of Islam, echoing the

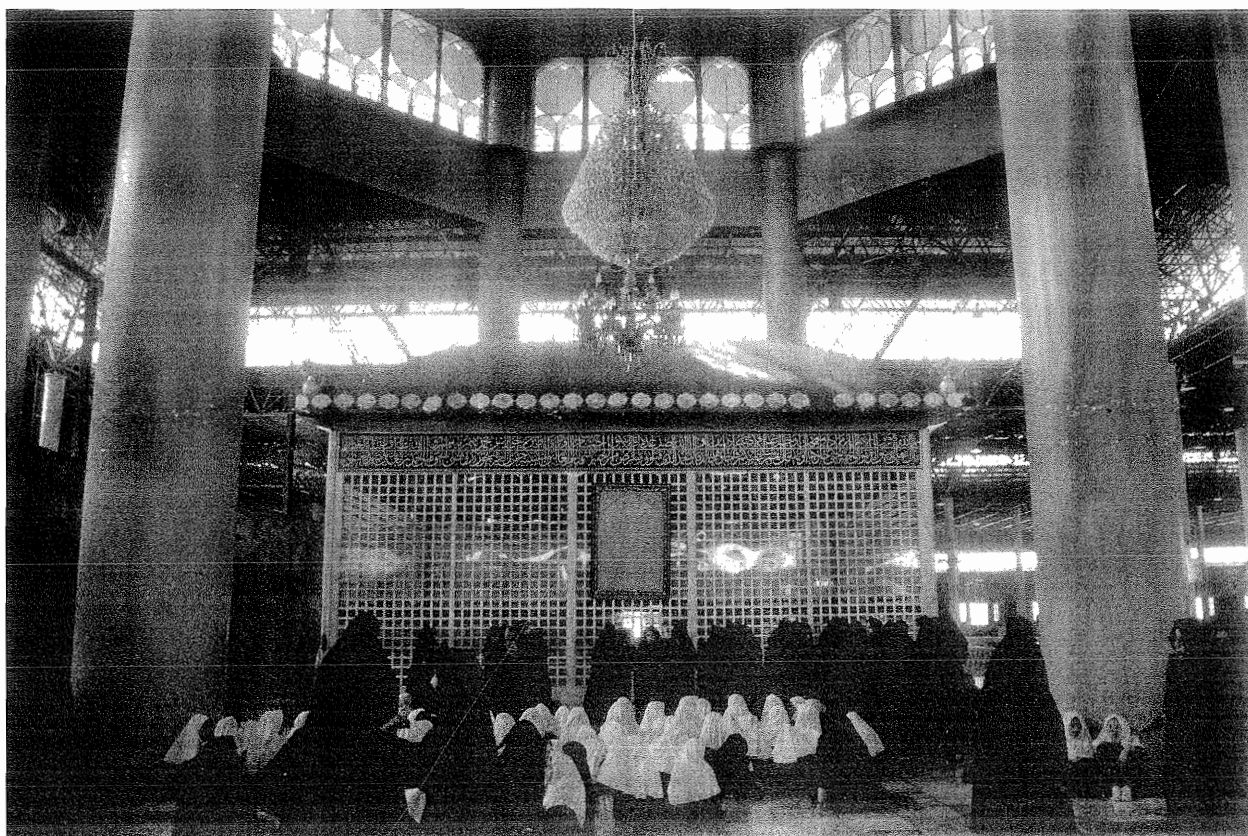


Fig. 13. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini. Interior view of burial chamber.

message of the verses inscribed on the minarets outside.

The simple *zarīh* is the focal point of the tomb complex. It is the site for state ceremonials, during which international visitors lay wreaths to honor the memory of Ayatollah Khomeini. It is also where pilgrims to the edifice enact rituals of piety, such as reading the pilgrimage prayers (*ziyārat-nāma*) that are framed above it and throwing money in supplication through its open lattice. Because so many husbands, brothers, and sons are buried in the nearby Bihisht-i Zahra, many visitors to the tomb are women.<sup>38</sup> Their presence highlights another important aspect of its design: its familiar shrine typology, which links an institution patronized mostly by women, in Iran and elsewhere in the Islamic world, with the state monument. By creating a space where female presence is welcome—indeed, expected—the builders also acknowledge the revolution's debt to Iranian women, whose powerful role in the

Islamic revolution is documented in textual and visual media disseminated by the government.

Above the burial chamber is a brightly illuminated and mirrored hemisphere. Eight massive columns in the green color of Islam hold up the intricate muqarnas dome, made of mirrored glass. Within the drum are two rows of large stained-glass windows depicting red tulips. Instead of the Qur'anic inscriptions that encircle the drums of traditional Islamic funerary and religious structures, these windows feature huge, highly stylized tulips. Thus they not only illuminate the cenotaph below;<sup>39</sup> they also commemorate the martyrs who lie buried in the adjacent Bihisht-i Zahra cemetery. Their placement is an appropriate coda to a tomb meant to represent the nationalist and populist ethos of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



## CONCLUSIONS

The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini is an edifice intended for a diverse audience, be it diplomats, pilgrims, or tourists; its standard religious iconography has been given contemporary significance to cater to this public. Just as the art of the Islamic Republic of Iran was brought out onto the streets in the form of posters and billboards, the architecture of its most representative monument unself-consciously incorporates a variety of popular references.

The tomb and the posters both challenge assumptions about taste and who determines it; they also call into question concepts of modernity and to whom it belongs. Superficially at least, the revolutionary discourse in Iran embraces modernity with a pragmatism whose goal is to create symbols in a bold and direct manner. In posters, the socialist clenched fist is transformed into a Shi'i *panja*, the open hand representing the family of the Prophet (Muhammad, 'Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn). Analogously, the architecture incorporates modern materials that transform a traditional commemorative type into a contemporary monument. As Ayatollah Khomeini wrote:

For if by manifestations of civilization is meant technical innovations, new products, new inventions, and advanced industrial techniques which aid in the progress of mankind, then never has Islam, or any other monotheist religion, opposed their adoption. On the contrary, Islam and the Qur'an emphasize science and industry.<sup>40</sup>

The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionary posters have many commonalities, not the least of which is their patron, the government of Iran. Both advance the political and social agenda of this government at one of its most crucial moments. Both promote the revolution and its ideology, to Iranians as well as to the world, in a way that is familiar yet polyglot. The posters and billboards are primarily didactic in function, although they certainly attempt to present their message in a visually appropriate and appealing manner; this sacrifice of aesthetic values to message also pertains to the tomb, which makes use of inexpensive materials and a simple architectural *parti* to convey its function as a national and religious memorial. The building itself performs as a poster, in that its image precedes, and often supersedes, its function. In this manner of representation, the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini belongs to a class of

postmodern architecture; its significance is not limited to Islamic art history alone.

The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini goes beyond the role of propaganda to assume an architectural identity whose meaning is not immutable but changes according to the particularity of the user. Through it the mythical and historical past of Iran is evoked and made relevant. This "translation" in both time and type is remarkable for its ease, self-confidence, and conviction of design. As a monument to the leader of the revolution and the Islamic regime, the tomb has a secure place in the architectural history of Iran. It surpasses its national significance to incorporate postmodern architectural trends of the late twentieth century, which recast history in creative and complex ways.<sup>41</sup> Its articulation nevertheless suggests a sense of uncertainty: The draped fabric covering the columns can announce more than one message; the slogans may reveal some other belief; nothing is fixed or absolute. The lightweight construction of its frame gives the impression of impermanence. The joining of columns to roof trusses, although beautifully wrought, looks precarious. A transitory and ephemeral architecture, the tomb refers to timeless precedents. Precisely these aspects of the religious past and the political present are also illuminated in the visual art of the Islamic Republic. Both capture an important moment in Iranian history.

*New Haven, Connecticut*

## NOTES

*Author's note:* This essay is dedicated to the memory of Margie Ševčenko.

1. The seminal text on nationalism is Bernard Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983). Many writers, most notably Homi Bhabha, have pointed to the "ideological ambivalence" of the modern nation; see H. Bhaba, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990).

Before the Iranian revolution, the Shi'i clergy represented by Ayatollah Khomeini and reformist intellectuals like Ali Shari'ati utilized the rhetoric of the Third World regarding cultural, political, and economic self-sufficiency and increased political awareness by following Franz Fanon's ideal of what he called the "native intellectual" (see his *The Wretched of the Earth* [1963]). For the Iranian intellectuals, Islam provided an alternative scheme for progress and a source for renewal within their own tradition; their hope was to reinvigorate their society in order to resist "a fixed, stagnant, and immobile fate" (A. Shari'ati, *Art, Awaiting the Savior*, trans. H. Farjadi [Texas, 1974], p. 4).

2. The most notable proponent of this architectural design methodology is the architect-theorist Robert Venturi. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's polemical text, *Learning from Las Vegas*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1998) sheds light on the effect of the tomb: "We shall emphasize image—image over process or form—in asserting that architecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association, and that these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure, and program with which they combine in the same building" (p. 87).
3. "Parody is a perfect post-modern form in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies." (L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* [New York, 1985] p. 11). For a discussion of the differences between "pastiche" and "parody," see Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster (Washington, D.C., 1983), pp. 112–13.
4. Such as Ayatollah Khomeini's institutionalization of the *vilāyat-i faqīh*, the rule of the jurisconsult. A range of approaches is represented by Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Revolution* (Berkeley, 1993) and Mehrdad Bornaferdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (New York, 1996).
5. On Shi'i Islam, see S. Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago, 1984).
6. The architect Muhammad Tehrani was selected to design the building, according to a Mr. Allahvardi, a former director of the Bihisht-i Zahra. My attempts to locate this architect were unsuccessful.
7. The purpose of these could not be determined, as access to the land is restricted.
8. For a good discussion of the early years of the revolution, see Nikkie Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven and London, 1981).
9. The dome was erected in the sixteenth century and the portal in front in the eighteenth century. For an art historical analysis of the Qum shrine, see Kishwar Rizvi, "Gendered Patronage: Women and Benevolence during the Safavid Dynasty," in *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, ed. D. F. Ruggles (New York, 2000). For a more comprehensive documentation of the shrine, see Hossein Modarressi, *Turbat-i Pākān: Āsār va bināhā-yi qadīm mahdūdā'i kunūnt-i Dār al-Mu'minīn-i Qum* (Qum, 1976).
10. In Iran, shrines and other religious institutions are rallying places for religious factions. During the Iranian revolution, more than 80,000 of them acted as organizational bases for mobilizing the people. The shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma in Qum, in particular, became a revolutionary symbol. See Valentine Moghadem, "The Revolution and the Regime: Populism, Islam, and the State in Iran" in *Social Compass* 36 (1989): 415–50, p. 421. The shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma and the Fayziyya madrasa in Qum have been dealt with at length by Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York, 1985).
11. A. Abulfazl, ed., *The Graphic Art of the Islamic Revolution (Hunar-i girāfīk dar Inqilāb-i Islāmī: ruzhā-yi inqilāb, jang, shuhadā, shakhsīyathā)* (Tehran, 1985).
12. An exhaustive analysis of the tulip in Iranian imagery is given in Michael Fischer and M. Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Post-modernity and Tradition* (Madison, Wis., 1990) and William L. Hanaway, "The Symbolism of Persian Revolutionary Posters," in *Iran Since the Revolution*, ed. B. Rosen (New York, 1985). Hanaway comments on the reuse of revolutionary imagery in Iranian posters and draws parallels with Soviet and Cuban ones. Chosroe Chaqueri has pointed out that this symbol was also incorporated by the Tudeh party (personal communication, 1996).
13. Fischer examines this poster in his essay on the "minor media" of the Iranian revolution; the translation is his (Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, p. 370).
14. A useful comparison would be the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which Anderson refers to as the most striking image of the modern nation (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 9).
15. This type of martyrology is an important feature of the revolutionary rhetoric of the Islamic Republic. See Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York, 1999), p. 22.
16. On the significance of Karbala in contemporary Iran, see Michael J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).
17. In Iran the *ta'ziya* (mourning) processions evoke abstract virtues like sacrifice and salvation and are vital to the Shi'i experience. See William L. Hanaway, Jr., "Stereotyped Imagery in the Ta'ziyah," in *Ta'ziyah: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York, 1979).
18. A photograph of it is reproduced in *Profiles of the Revolutionary Art: a Collection of Posters from Kurdistan, Bakhtavan, Ilam, and Khuzestan (filvāhā'i az: hunar-i inqilāb: majmū'a-yi yakum-i manāfiq-i jangī: Kurdistan, Bākhhtarān, Īlām, Khūzistān)*, published by the Office for the Propagation of Islam (*Daftar-i Tablighāt-i Islāmī*) (Qum, 1985). The captions are in English, Arabic, and Persian, suggesting that an international audience was intended. None of the artists are identified.
19. The realism used to depict this is in keeping with other revolutionary art, as pointed out by Hanaway, "The Symbolism of Persian Revolutionary Posters," p. 34.
20. In his speeches, Khomeini publicly identified himself with Imam Husayn as a revolutionary who stood firm in his belief and was ready to die for it (Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, p. 220).
21. According to Shari'ati, art no longer exists "...in the aristocratic palaces and the comfortable lifestyles of the rich," but must "[extend] itself into the crowd and [spread] among the masses." (Shari'ati, *Art, Awaiting the Savior*, p. 6).
22. As Luncharsky, the Soviet Commissioner of Education, wrote in 1920: "If revolution can give art a sword then art must give revolution its service." Quoted in O. A. Shvidkovsky, "Art and Revolution in Soviet Russia," *Art in Revolution* (London, 1979), p. 13.
23. *Profiles of the Revolutionary Art* (unpaginated). English introduction.
24. See Dabashi and Chelkowski, *Staging a Revolution*, and Hanaway, "The Symbolism of Persian Revolutionary Posters."
25. In Islam, praying at someone's grave is seen as a pious obligation. Thus those who visit the graveyard almost automa-

- typically must perform "pilgrimage" to Ayatollah Khomeini's tomb. The cemetery covers a vast area, which is neatly divided into burial plots and, with over 30,000 graves, is supposedly one of the largest cemeteries in the world.
26. The construction of the memorial was overseen by a civil engineer, Muhammad Hasan Akhavan, who was educated in Pakistan. Another memorial, to the "martyrs at Mecca," is planned, but construction had not begun when I visited.
  27. Supposedly a 400-acre lot has been set aside to develop the tomb precincts. Nearby, the new Khomeini International Airport is planned. If precedents are any indication, we may expect the city of Tehran to extend southwards towards this new satellite, which, owing to its commercial feasibility, will provide incentives for settlement.
  28. Qur'an 2: 256.
  29. That are generally referred to as *astāna* (sanctuary) or *buq'a* (shrine).
  30. Ayatollah Khomeini was not an imam in the Twelver Shi'i sense, i.e., a divinely sanctioned descendant of the Prophet, but rather a representative (*nā'ib-i imām*); his widespread designation as imam was a cause for anxiety among the ulema. Arjomand dates his assumption of this title to 1970; see S. Amir Arjomand, "Traditionalism in Twentieth-Century Iran," *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam*, ed. S. A. Arjomand (London, 1984), p. 217. It was used in both the international press and Iranian propagandist literature; Ayatollah Khomeini neither acknowledged nor negated it.
  31. Both these memorials served a rather different purpose than Tehran's Shahyad Aryamehr monument, which was constructed in 1971 by the architect Hossein Amanat as part of Muhammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi's celebrations for the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian empire. The tower has been renamed "Azadi" and co-opted by the Islamic Republic of Iran as a public rallying ground. I am grateful for Talin Der-Grigorian for allowing me to cite from her unpublished manuscript, "The 'Rectification' of Collective Memory: Iran's Shahyad Aryamehr Monument, National Identity, and Meaning in Architectural Forms."
  32. The pre-Islamic Iranian identity cultivated by the Pahlavi regime is discussed in M. Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity* (New York, 1993).
  33. In Khomeini's writings, the ideal Islamic age is the present, such that the Islamic Republic of Iran has surpassed Muhammad's Mecca and 'Ali's caliphate; see Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Revolution*, p. 32.
  34. Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour once again are the exponents of this attitude. The tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini in their parlance is a "decorated shed," on which symbolic elements have been applied. See *Learning from Las Vegas* (p. 91).
  35. On mourning rituals, see Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'zieh*.
  36. Such works often make use of ordinary materials and refer to commonly recognized and easily reproducible symbols. See "Kitsch" in Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, N.C., 1987).
  37. Qur'an 7: 157.
  38. On the relationship between women and shrines, see "Women, Saints, and Sanctuaries" in Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1996). The author points to the gendered space of the shrine as a site for women's emancipation and emotional catharsis.
  39. According to some, Khomeini had requested that he be buried in a field of tulips, which may also augment the significance of these flowers above his cenotaph. See, for example, the rather partisan accounts of M. A. Asghar Montazam, *The Life and Times of Ayatollah Khomeini* (London, 1994), p. 460.
  40. Ayatollah Sayyed Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini, *Imam Khomeini's Last Will and Testament*, distributed by the Embassy of Algeria, n.d. Earlier, Ali Shari'ati had written (in *Art Awaiting the Savior*, p. 6), "While our goal and our struggle may be to find our lost and changed character, at the same time knowing the West and the new waves of the contemporary world and civilization become necessary as well."
  41. On postmodern architecture, see the introductory essay in K. Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995* (New York, 1996).