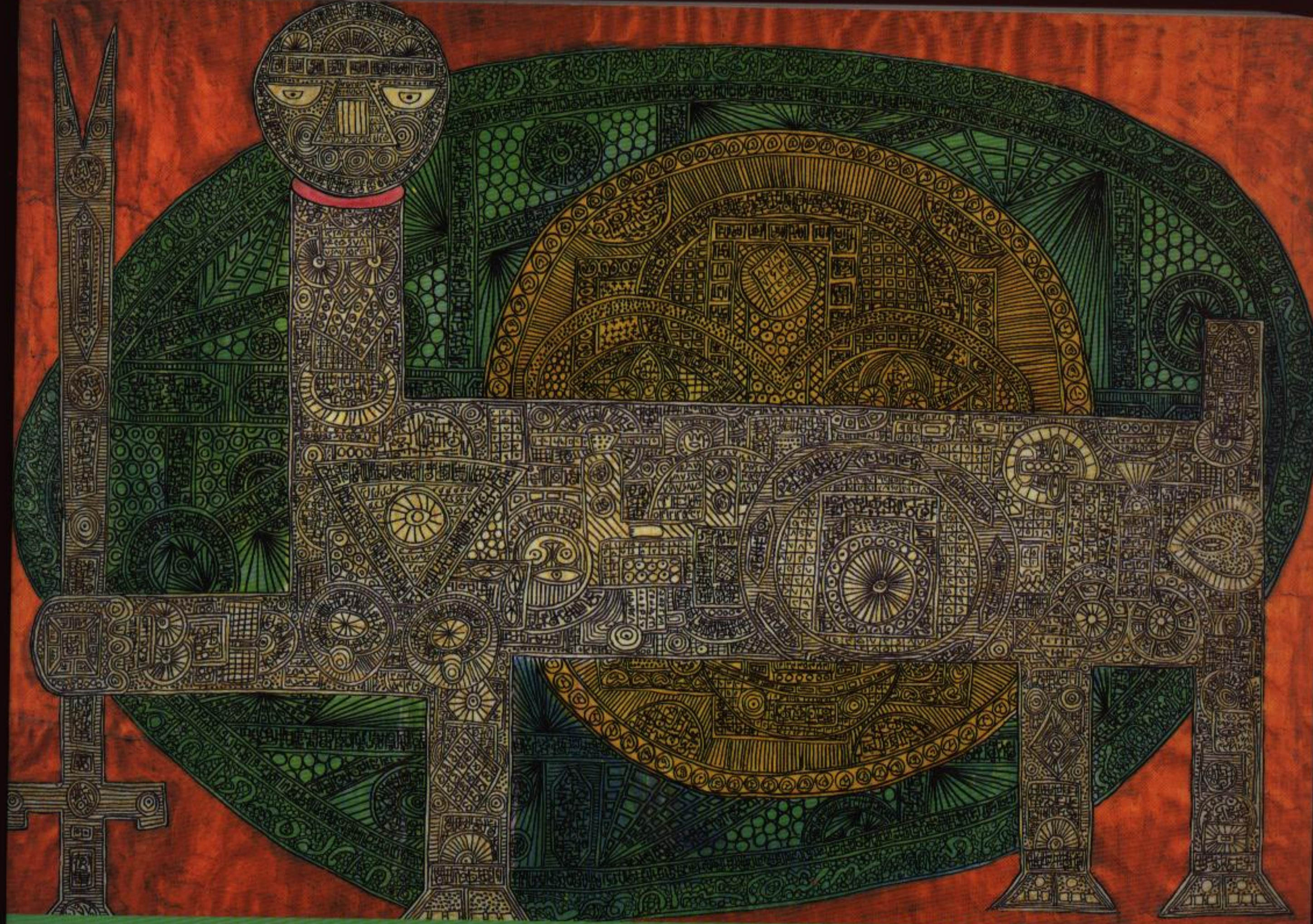

PICTURING IRAN

Art, Society and Revolution

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I.B.TAURIS

MULTIPLE ICONOGRAPHIES: POLITICAL POSTERS IN THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

by Haggai Ram

SOCIAL UPHEAVALS and revolutionary struggles often give rise to innovative forms of political artistic expression. In order to build "insurgent consciousness," this art talks back to power, subverts its authority, and proposes alternative, oppositional ways of thinking and behavior.[1] In times of turmoil, when hegemony is at best constricted, this art engages in the construction of new symbols, countermyths, and, ultimately, new meanings.

The political posters that were produced and disseminated during the Islamic Revolution in Iran were no exception. Created by artists committed to the Revolution, these posters clearly set out to redefine social values and norms, and to produce what François Fubert has called "a new mystique," at once liberating and envisioning a blissful future.[2] As the Shah's authority diminished, engaged artists produced posters whose iconography opposed and inverted ideas and images that supported the status quo. Not just a secondary reflection of the revolutionary movement, these posters played a vital role in the struggle for change and in the articulation of collective ideology. In this sense, the Revolution and its art were mutually constitutive.

The revolution marked a defining moment in Iran's modern history. Occurring in a period relatively free of the heavy hand of both the pre- and the post-1979 governments, the Revolution and its art produced multiple

layers of meanings and iconographies. These multiple iconographies bridged the literary with the visual, the past with the present, the sacred with the profane, the modern with the traditional, and the national with the international. As will be seen, these multiple meanings defy all reductive explanations of the Revolution as purely "Islamic" and challenge the stereotypical view of Islam as iconoclastic.

The role of political posters in the Iranian revolution has been addressed in a number of scholarly studies.[3] Generally, the studies focus on how these posters combine two graphic styles, the one local and the other international, the one "traditional" and the other "modern." In this way, they view the Iranian revolutionary poster as emblematic of the hybrid, postmodern character of emergent cultural formations in Iran. As Michael J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi have suggested,

> The revolutionary posters of the Iranian revolution ... vividly articulate the cultural interreferences of modern Iran, bringing together on the one hand traditional graphic traditions of the Persian miniature, of murals used as props by epic storytellers, and of calligraphic and arabesque design, and on the other hand an international third-world revolutionary modernist graphic lineage that dates back via the Cuban revolution to the Russian revolution. Often different posters fit into one or the other tradition. But not infrequently, these two traditions come together in brilliantly powerful condensations, or in equally powerful disseminations (in which two sets of meanings do not fuse but remain in creative tension generating different chains of associations).[4]

In what follows, I will tell a somewhat different story of the Iranian revolutionary poster. Focusing on its multiple iconographies, I will attempt to highlight the very diversity and richness of the revolutionary culture, its ruptures and continuities, and its unresolved contradictions. Although the Revolution culminated in an Islamic state—that is, the self-proclaimed authentic embodiment of pure Islam—its impetus and motivations, and, accordingly, its iconography, images and messages, were multifarious.

Three posters provide a point of departure for our examination. All three make direct appeals to action by defying power, subverting authority, and inverting icons as a means to authorize oppositional ways of thinking

and behavior. For example, in one poster the Shah's oil regime becomes a weapon of its own destruction, as an oil derrick stands in for the hilt of a dagger plunging through the United States-supported Pahlavi crown. [Fig. 24] Another poster suggests that in order to create a better future, it is necessary for people to be active and to take risks in the present. [Fig. 25] Here, the revolution is visualized as a red arrow that will arrive at the gates of a blissful future, exemplified in the poster by a red sun. However, what must precede this destiny is an arduous struggle against three obstinate forces, represented by three columns. The revolutionary arrow has already broken through the first column on which the Pahlavi crown stands perilously. The second column is marked "internal reaction" and upholds a silhouette of the Shah's profile. Uncle Sam's hat sits atop the third column that is labeled "imperialism." Another poster juxtaposes a photograph of a crowd of people with a huge outline of a hand that is about to propel a spherical American flag out of the frame of the image. [Fig. 26] A bright destiny is implied for these demonstrating masses, rendering their painful present as relative and temporary, provided, as the text printed in red states, that they "continue the Revolution ... until the [total] termination of plundering."

It is interesting to note that the Islamic Republican Party issued the first and third posters described above. Yet neither of them, nor the second, makes any explicit reference to Islamic imagery. Nor do they make specifically religious claims. Employing typical third-world anticolonial imagery, they link the Iranian Revolution with similar struggles elsewhere in the world.[5]

However, the revolutionary poster, like the revolutionary culture it helped constitute, is, as mentioned, multifaceted and diverse, with multiple iconographies. Neither the poster nor the revolution itself can be explained away merely in terms of the "secular," nor can they be dismissed as simply "religious." In many instances Islamic imagery was harnessed to the task of nurturing and sustaining an "insurgent consciousness." As a primary marker of cultural authenticity, Islam provided a host of visual symbols to stimulate a struggle for political emancipation and national liberation.

One poster vividly demonstrates how the revolutionary artists often conflated themes of third-world anti-colonial struggles with religious symbolism. [Fig. 43] As the logo at the lower right clearly indicates, this poster was issued by the movement of The People's Mojahedin (*Mojahedin-e Khalq*), which was "the first Iranian organization to develop systematically a modern revolutionary interpretation of Islam."[6] The poster depicts a disembodied,

Fig. 43.
Poster with a chained hand.
c. 1970–79.
35 x 23 in. (88.9 x 58.4 cm).

clenched fist freeing itself from the chains of bondage. The fist represents the empowering agency of Allah, whose name is inscribed in the veins of the forearm. Encircled miniature portraits of Imam Khomeini and Dr. Ali Shari'ati hover in the upper and lower left corners. Both these men, albeit for totally different reasons and motivations, helped transform Shiite Islam into a *worldly* and a *third-worldly* program for anti-colonial struggle and national liberation.[7] Overlapping religious and anti-colonial, Marxist iconographies are revealed in the slogan at the bottom of the poster, which reads: "towards a classless *tawhidi* society." An Islamic term for monotheism, *tawhid* is also a revolutionary neologism that came to mean "unitary" and, by extension, "classless."[8] The poster thus makes visual the connection between a monotheistic Islamic society and a classless Marxist society.

Another striking example of how Islamic iconography subverts power is found in a poster commemorating Zeinab. [Fig. 27] The daughter of Ali, the first Shiite Imam, and sister of Hossein, the third Imam, Zeinab is

best known for her leadership role following the historic battle of Karbala in 680 A.D. The battle of Karbala, which has a deep ontological meaning for Shiites, was waged between Hossein, representing the Household of the Prophet (*ahl-e beit*), and the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. After the massacre of Hossein and seventy-two of his companions, Zeinab assumed the leadership of the women and children who were taken prisoner to the court of the Caliph Yazid in Damascus. Zeinab "kept the survivors of Karbala together and maintained the message of Husayn until the [ailing] fourth Imam had recovered and could assume political leadership."[9] The poster thus urges that all Iranian women emulate Zeinab's heroic and steadfast leadership in times of crisis and despair.

Interestingly, in the poster the figure of Zeinab is depicted in the negative—as a white silhouette—with her thrusting, clenched fist shattering a simplified bright-red-and-green form representing the palace and crown of Yazid. Contained within Zeinab's silhouette is a crowd of contemporary veiled Iranian women collectively assuming her identity. These women—their white faces emerging from a field of black chadors—also raise their fists and, more significantly, become visible *only* through the simultaneous absence and presence of white-shrouded Zeinab. The poster graphically conveys what these contemporary women are expected to do: like Zeinab, they must destroy the palace and crown of "Yazid of their own age" (*Yazid-e zaman*), the Pahlavi Shah. As Chelkowski and Dabashi point out in relation to this same poster, "the smashed crown … is as much Yazid's as the Shah's."[10]

Zeinab's iconography not only induces women actively to oppose power, it also tells them exactly *how* they can do so. An inscription at the bottom of the poster reads: "Zeinab, Oh spokesperson of Ali"; to the left is the convoy of camels and white-shrouded women, each carrying a baby child, advancing toward the palace of Yazid. While a prisoner in Yazid's court, Zeinab spoke out defiantly against the caliph's tyranny, keeping alive the message of Imam Hossein. Thus, the caravan that took Zeinab and the other Karbala prisoners to Damascus came to be known in Shiite popular imagination as *karvan-e tabligh-e Karbala*—"the caravan of the propagation of [the tragedy] of Karbala."[11] To oppose power, therefore, implied revealing the tyrannical nature of the Shah's regime, that is, to *speak out* against the Pahlavi monarchy. In this way, each and every devoted Iranian woman becomes a Zeinab and thus symbolically joins the convoy of prisoners to Damascus.

Yet Zeinab's story can only be fully grasped within the broader context of the Karbala paradigm: that is, the story of the martyrdom suffered by

Imam Hossein and seventy-two companions on the plains of Karbala. The focus of this story, as Michael Fischer explained, "is the emotionally potent theme of corrupt and oppressive tyranny repeatedly overcoming (in this world) the steadfast dedication to pure truth; hence its ever-present, latent, political potential to frame or clothe contemporary discontents."[12] Accordingly, since 1963, Khomeini and other like-minded oppositionists had often articulated their struggle against the Pahlavi monarchy as a reenactment of the battle of Karbala; they assumed the righteous role of Hossein, and the Shah was portrayed as the usurper Yazid. This metaphorical paradigm reached a climax during the Revolution, when Iranians were called upon to emulate their martyred Imam—to follow in his footsteps and be willing to shed blood for the Revolution.[13]

Indeed, images of martyrdom feature prominently in revolutionary posters. Their representations embody a two-fold objective: to commemorate the fallen and to sanctify the loss of life by those engaged in the revolutionary struggle. Jay Winter, in his study of the practices of commemoration and mourning in Europe during and after the Great War, suggested, "however 'modern' the Great War was, its immediate repercussion was to deepen and not transform older languages of loss and consolation."[14] This, Winter notes, provided a way of remembering that enabled the bereaved to live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind. In a sense, revolutionary posters likewise can be seen as modern sites of commemoration, which invoke "traditional" motifs and images about sacrifice and death as a means of helping survivors cope with their loss and trauma. For example, one poster reproduces a black-and-white headshot of a young man, apparently killed in the anti-Shah struggle. The photograph is embellished with a Koranic verse saying that God prefers the *mojahed*—in this case, a holy martyr—to "those who desist." [Fig. 44] In death, Mohammed Bazargani, a member of

Fig. 44. Poster of a martyred member of the Mojahedin. c. 1980–88.
14 x 10 in. (35.6 x 25.4 cm).

the Mojahedin-e Khalq who was slain in the revolution, assumes the stature of an "Islamic martyr" (*mojahed shahid*). In a search for comfort, then, older motifs were combined with recent ones, taking on new meanings.

Another poster provides similar comfort and consolation. [Fig. 29] On the right, a kneeling man dressed in black is shot, and then falls, drenched in blood, clasping a red tulip. His fall is shown in a series of four freeze frames. Covered with blood, he is in the end prostrate, blending in with the blood-red ground in a kind of a mystical union. In martyrdom he achieves unity, the ultimate goal of the mystical quest. Significantly, the tulip is a familiar metaphor in Persian Sufi allegorical poetry, associated with the blood of lovers shed in the quest for the Beloved. This helps explain why "the tulip has become the icon of martyrdom for the Islamic Republic, and it is one of the most omnipresent symbols in the republic's visual arts."[15] In sum, spiritualist representations of martyrdom helped Iranians to come to terms with their losses in the Revolution, just as "spiritualist communion" of a similar kind reached a high point in the period of the 1914–1918 war in Europe.[16]

A caption along the bottom left of the poster indicates that it was produced in conjunction with an exhibition on the Islamic Revolution that was held when the Hosseiniyyeh-e Ershad seminary reopened. Interestingly, the event was organized in collaboration with the students of the Fine Arts College at the University of Tehran. This exhibition celebrating the seminary reopening thus exemplifies the multifarious culture of the Revolution—one that bridges the particular with the universal, the "secular" with the "religious," the national with the Islamic. Founded in 1964, Hosseiniyyeh-e Ershad seminary marked a crucial development in the process of forming and popularizing modern Shiite views that were later incorporated into the "Islamic" teachings of the revolution.[17] Lecturers at this institution, such as Ali Shari'ati, included many of those who helped articulate a modern Islamic ideology. Hosseiniyyeh-e Ershad was eventually closed down by the Shah's regime. On the other hand, the University of Tehran, which was inaugurated in 1934, has been identified, even after 1979, as the bastion of the Pahlavi monarchy's type of Westernized modernization.[18] This coming together of two seemingly conflicting institutions of learning demonstrates that the culture of the revolution was the product not of the exceptionality of "Islam," but rather of the dialectical accommodation and selective appropriation of indigenous and exogenous, "Eastern" and "Western," national and international influences. Thus, all reductive explanations of the Revolution as strictly "Islamic" are, at best, insufficient.

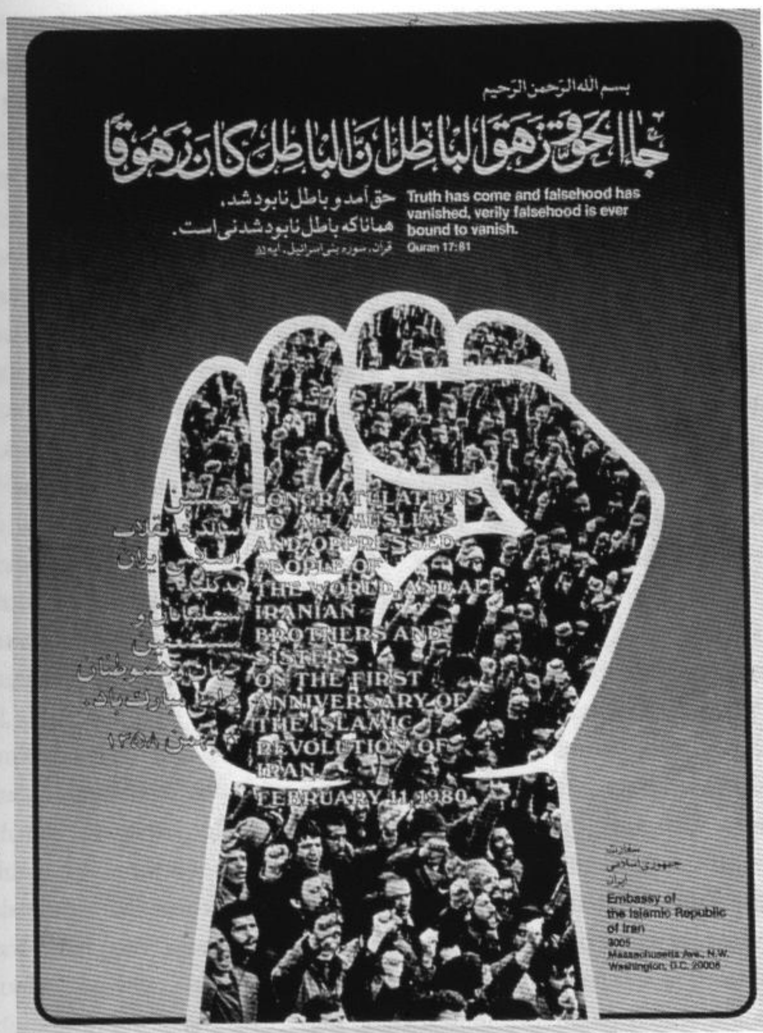

Fig. 45. Poster with a clenched fist. 1980.
31 x 24 in. (78.7 x 61.2 cm).

A poster commemorating the first anniversary of the Revolution encapsulates in a remarkable manner the complex hybrid culture of the revolution. [Fig. 45] In it the national and the international, Iranian particularism and Islamic universalism, are all enmeshed to the point where they constitute a single discursive field. Dominating the poster is an enormous, simplified clenched fist containing within itself a photograph of a mass of demonstrators, also with raised fists. The text in red, superimposed in both

Persian and English over the fist, congratulates "all Muslims and oppressed people [*sic*] of the world, and all Iranian brothers and sisters on the first anniversary of the Islamic Revolution of Iran." The Koranic verse running along the top alludes to the victory of "truth" (*haqq*, i.e. the Revolution) over "falsehood" (*batel*, i.e. the enemies of the Revolution, internal as well as external).

The poster, then, makes its appeal far beyond Iranian borders, to embrace "*all* Muslims and oppressed people of the world." At the same time, however, its primary frame of reference remains wedded to the conception of the Iranian nation as embodied in the masses who are shown to have carried out the "Islamic Revolution of *Iran*." The poster confronts "global oppression" and, more specifically, oppression against Muslims anywhere. Yet at the same time it bears a distinctly Iranian message: the community it denotes, and inculcates pride in, is clearly limited to the boundaries of modern-day Iran. Indeed, in this poster Iran assumes the role of a "redeemer nation."[19] Compared with other nations, Iran alone possesses the special leadership qualities required to bring about the liberation of the world's oppressed. Significantly, this conflation of nationalist, Islamicist, and internationalist concerns can also be seen in many posters commemorating May Day in the early years of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[20]

Yet revolutions are also—perhaps principally—struggles over memory. A revolution requires "more than a cult of saints," writes Matt K. Matsuda about the meaning of the toppling of the Vendôme Column in Paris in 1871. "It required war on the memories of the old order ... [H]umanity would be possible only when such memories were destroyed, the old forms and vestiges crumbling as their props were pulled down."[21] In the Iranian Revolution, too, the commitment to break with the past provided a foundation upon which to build a new society. Like the Paris Commune in 1871, the Iranian revolutionaries of the 1970s "sought to exorcise the past in the name of the future."[22] Accordingly, they set out to eradicate the hegemonic historical narrative of the Pahlavi monarchy by creating a counter-historical narrative that was ideally structured to fit the new teleology of the revolution. Thus, while pivotal "moments" in the master commemorating narrative of the ancient regime—such as the launching of the White Revolution in 1963, the Shah's self-coronation in 1967, and the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy in 1971—were abolished, new ones were created in their place. Not surprisingly, revolutionary posters were harnessed to this task of inculcating a restructured historical awareness.

One clear example is a poster commemorating the uprising of Fifteenth of Khordad (June 5) 1963, when Khomeini was arrested for leading protests against the Shah's White Revolution. In the course of this uprising the authorities quelled resistance among the religious students in the central Feiziyya seminary in Qom, and a number of students lost their lives.[23] [Fig. 30] Positioned on the right within the outline of the country silhouetted against a black field, the figure of Khomeini is seen addressing a crowd in 1963, inciting the masses to protest nationwide. On the left, disembodied arms holding rifles aloft provide a visual representation of this kind of resistance. Yet this poster was not intended merely to commemorate an isolated event. Rather, it attempted to create, retrospectively, a meta-narrative of Iranian history that was similar to that of the Pahlavis' only in form, "imbedded in secular time, with all its implications of continuity."[24] In terms of content, however, this revolutionary narrative recounted a very different story. The historiography produced by the Shah viewed the years of the White Revolution as times of majestic power and benevolent modernization. That of the revolutionaries did not: "The Fifteenth of Khordad [is] the starting point of the revolt (*qiyam*)," states the inscription at the bottom of the poster, and with it there emerges an entirely different narrative of the White Revolution. It is a narrative that draws a direct line between the 1963 uprising and the Islamic Revolution, and so it tells a story of utter disenchantment with the Shah's program of modernization. In the final analysis, post-1963 Iranian history becomes a story of uninterrupted resistance leading to and through the Revolution of 1979. A neat, linear, and progressive historical narrative of revolution, with a promising beginning and fulfilling ending, displaced that of the Shah. "Not mere rage nor effacement of symbols was taking place, but a sacred transition, of both political and spiritual legitimacy."[25]

Yet the counter-narrative of the revolution reached its (teleo)logical conclusion only with the official date commemorating the triumph of the Islamic Revolution. The date chosen for this momentous occasion was 22 Bahman (February 11) 1979, the day when the last stronghold of resistance of the Shah's regime was overcome. Another poster, for example, proclaims 22 Bahman "the day of the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran." [Fig. 23] In it a bullet is shown in five stages, at the top mostly white and the remaining four progressively covered with blood. The image implies that victory was achieved with the blood of the people; that the Revolution, to echo Ayatollah Khomeini's famous words, represents the quintessential "triumph of blood over the sword."[26]

The posters analysed here provide visual testimony to the wealth and heterogeneity of the Revolution's cultural, and social, and political concerns. Drawing on traditional Shiite sources, they also equally incorporate ideas from a variety of other sources, including Marxism, to fashion a militant, subversive, and sometimes contradictory political message. This ideology, as we have seen, focused not on issues of scripture and theology, but on immediate, local, and global grievances and needs. Within this context, 22 Bahman marked a turning point in the history of political posters in Iran, because it triggered a process that resulted in the formation of a centralized state under the leadership and control of the Islamic current. Henceforth, and especially after the brutal monopolization of power by Khomeini's people in June 1981, all political socialization came under the direct and exclusive control of the state. Political posters bearing the stamp of the Islamic Republic have another fascinating story to tell. Suffice it to note that, though created under the purview of an "Islamic regime," they are as complex and multiple in their imagery and iconography as the earlier posters discussed in this essay. A series of Warhol-esque posters of leading Iranian clerics, including Khomeini, produced by the Islamic government of Iran in the 1980s, is one vivid example of this. [Fig. 31] They confirm the view that political symbols expressing the ideals and principles of the new order draw on a variety of sources, indigenous and exogenous, and cannot be subsumed under a rigid and inflexible category of "Islamic fundamentalism." Perhaps there is more cultural pluralism in the Islamic Republic of Iran than has been acknowledged.

NOTES

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1 George Lipsitz, "Not Just Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano," in *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphics in California*, ed. Chon A. Noriega (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2001), p. 76.

2 Furet uses this phrase with reference to the French Revolution of 1789. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 114.

3 See William Hanaway, "The Symbolism of Persian Revolutionary Posters," in *Iran since the Revolution*, ed. Barry

Rosen (Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1985); Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 333–82; Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: the Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 1999). See also Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

4 Fischer and Abedi, p. 339.

5 Perhaps this is why Hanaway found revolutionary posters to be reminiscent of the artistic styles of the Russian and Cuban revolutions.

6 Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989), p. 1.

7 The secondary literature on Shari'ati and Khomeini is vast. English readers can consult Shari'ati's and Khomeini's own writings translated into English. See for example 'Ali Shari'ati, *Hajj*, trans. A. Behzadnia and N. Denny (Houston, 1980); Ali Shari'ati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980); R. M. Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. and annotated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980).

8 Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1996), p. 117.

9 Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 214.

10 Chelkowski and Dabashi, p. 102.

11 For post-revolutionary representations of Zeinab see Haggai Ram, *Myth and Mobilization in Revolutionary Iran: The Use of the Friday Congregational Sermon* (Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1994), pp. 84–85.

12 Fischer, *Iran From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, p. 13.

13 On the Karbala paradigm and the Revolution see ibid., especially pp. 181–244; Mary Hegland, "Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village," in *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); and Haggay [Haggai] Ram, "Mythology of Rage: Representations of the Self and the Other in Revolutionary Iran," *History and Memory* 8 (Spring/Summer 1996): 67–87.

14 J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 76.

15 Fischer and Abedi, p. 345.

16 Winter, pp. 54–77.

17 Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 91–93.

18 David Menashri, *Education and the Making of Modern Iran* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 143–54.

19 R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 20.

20 Abrahamian, pp. 60–87.

21 Matt K. Matsuda, *The Memory of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 36.

22 Ibid., p. 43.

23 According to Fischer, *Iran From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, p. 124, "for three days *disturbances continued* in Tehran, Qom, Mashhad, Isfahan, and Shiraz, and precautionary measures were taken elsewhere. Thousands died."

24 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 205.

25 Matsuda, p. 27.

26 Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 246.