

Thirty Years Later: Iranian Visual Culture from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Presidential Protests

ELIZABETH L. RAUH¹
University of Michigan

During the 2009 presidential election protests, demonstrators actively recalled the events of the 1979 Revolution through their protest activities, both in the streets and online. In reclaiming the revolutionary rhetoric and history through visual recoding and reprogramming, the Green Movement protestors and supporters challenged the Islamic Republic's claim to the legacy of the 1979 Revolution and, thus, the very legitimacy of government authority. This essay examines posters, photographs, slogans, graffiti, and other visual and artistic activities to illustrate how the Green Movement harnessed and adapted the visual culture of the 1979 Revolution. Comparing the visual cultures of the 2009 protests and the 1979 Iranian Revolution shows how protestors activated the memory of the 1979 Revolution during the election crisis, enabling the Green Movement to claim the Karbala paradigm as a legitimizing narrative and tool of mobilization.

In a photograph from the 2009 Iranian presidential election crisis, a large crowd solemnly surrounds a protestor holding up a small poster (Figure 1) of a hand silhouette in the stylized form of the *panjah*, an emblem of the prophetic family in Shi'i Islam. The index and middle fingers are tinted green, and inscribed across the palm is the phrase "Ya Huseyn" ("Oh Huseyn!"). As a complex totality, the poster's many visual and textual elements powerfully telescope the multiple discourses and disputes that emerged during the 2009 election crisis.

¹ I am extremely grateful to Christiane Gruber for her guidance throughout my research and her generous commentary during the development of this text. I would also like to thank Pedram Khosronejad for actively encouraging me to pursue research on these events. I would additionally like to thank Ulrich Marzolph, Sune Haugbolle, and Nicholas Rauh for their invaluable assistance. Any errors in translation are my own.

Elizabeth L. Rauh: elizrauh@gmail.com

Date submitted: 2012-02-14



Figure 1. Photo of "V-Panjah" poster in Muharram protests during Montazeri's funeral. Qom, December 21, 2009.

Source: <http://www.iranianuk.com/uk87/pic24/9799032.jpg>

Images of hands serve multiple symbolic functions within Iranian visual culture. A single hand is a common revolutionary statement calling for solidarity and collective action—most notably in the form of a clenched fist. Although the fist originally appeared in nineteenth-century European and U.S. industrial iconography as a stand-in for factory production, it later symbolized global workers' rights movements as a gesture of protest, discontent, and readiness to fight (Korff, 1992). The image of the clenched fist retained these connotations throughout the revolutions and uprisings that shaped the world over the course of the twentieth century (Cushing, 2011).² For instance, it featured frequently in posters and other visual media as a call for a mass uprising during the 1979 Iranian Revolution that brought down the monarchy of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–1980) (see Figure 2).

² On fists in Iranian revolutionary posters, see Fischer and Abedi (1989). For more information on Iranian revolutionary and wartime posters, see Chelkowski (2002), Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999), Gruber (2009), Hanaway (1985), and Ram (2002).

During the 1979 Revolution the open handprint appeared alongside images of clenched fists as a stark reminder of the brute force of suppression deployed by the Pahlavi government. Throughout the uprising the regime's security forces fired repeatedly on demonstrators. Protestors in the streets dipped their hands in pools of their own blood as well as that of others and pressed their blood-smeared hands against walls to leave red handprints as visual reminders of the regime's deadly acts (see Figure 3) (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999). The bloodstained impressions became sites of public mourning and continued defiance. Peter Chelkowski asserts that the practice of leaving bloody prints on city walls during the Iranian Revolution arose from the religious Shi'i symbolism of the sacrifice of 'Abbas. 'Abbas was Imam Huseyn's half-brother and the standard-bearer at the pivotal Battle of Karbala in A.D. 680, that finalized the sectarian split between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. 'Abbas famously continued to fight against the Umayyad army despite losing both his hands in battle (Chelkowski, 1980). As such, images of disembodied hands in the 1979 Revolution linked the revolutionaries' bodily injuries to the courage and resolve of 'Abbas himself and to the memory of Karbala.

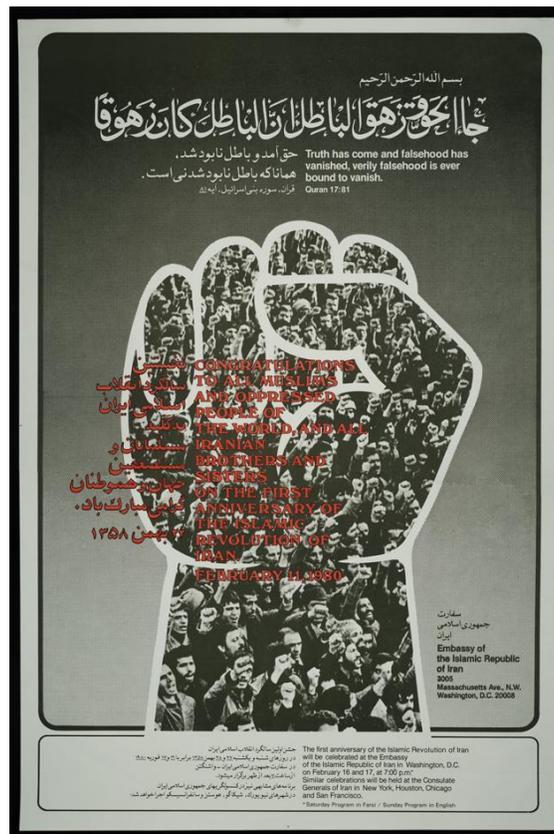


Figure 2. A collective fist, poster issued on the one-year anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, 1980.

Source: Middle Eastern Posters Collection, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library. Box 4, Poster 171.



Figure 3. 'Abbas 'Attar. Photo of bloody handprints on a wall in Tehran.

Source: Geo Magazine, May 1979.

These handprints are visceral vestiges of the violent suppression committed by the forces of the Shah. Created spontaneously in the midst of revolutionary chaos, they are documented not only in photographs, but in graphic arts as well. A poster produced by the Islamic Republic two years after the 1979 Revolution, for example, shows a bloody handprint splayed on a wall (see Figure 4). The sanguineous impression appears alongside revolutionary posters and anti-establishment graffiti, several of which are likewise inscribed in blood red. Whether displayed as revolutionary fists or as splayed red hands, therefore, images of hands in Iran evoke the uprising against the regime in 1979 and furnished a visual record of its violent behavior in the urban landscape.



Figure 4. Poster showing a wall covered in graffiti and with depictions of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati, 1981.

Source: Middle Eastern Posters Collection, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library. Box 4, Poster 175.

In the poster produced during the 2009 protests, the design of the hand silhouette deliberately invokes the prophetic household (*ahl al-bayt*). In Shi'i Islamic traditions, members of the Prophet Muhammad's family—the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah, her husband Imam 'Ali, and their sons, Hasan and Huseyn—are symbolized by the five-fingered handprint of the *panjah* (the word for "five" in Persian). In Iranian visual culture in particular, *panjah* emblems are often placed atop *'alams* (Figure 5), the metal standards carried during mourning processions of 'Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, when Imam Huseyn was martyred at the Battle of Karbala.³ These traditional 'Ashura ritual ceremonies were an integral part of the uprising against—and eventual overthrow of—the Pahlavi monarchy during the 1979 Revolution (Chelkowski, 1980). Mourners march through city streets, singing and self-flagellating in sympathy with the Shi'i martyrs of Karbala (Dabashi, 2005). By vigorously reenacting the pain the martyrs of Karbala endured, the modern self-mortifiers collapse the sacred past into present reality as they atone for their inability to save Imam Huseyn and his followers. The death of Huseyn is the most important event in Shi'i Islam, and participation in 'Ashura ceremonies is believed to help secure

³ For information on *'alams* in Shi'i Islamic traditions, see D'Souza (1998), Frembgen (1995), and Newid (2006).

redemption on the Day of Judgment (Chelkowski, 1994). The mourners carry various implements to symbolize the battle, including standards, banners, flags, and a variety of weapons. These objects and their images are pervasive in Iranian Shi'i visual culture, symbolizing the Battle of Karbala and, more generally, the cosmic struggle between good and evil.⁴



Figure 5. Brass standard ('alam) engraved with the names of Shi'i Imams, 18th–19th century Iran. H: 41 cm.
Source: British Museum OA+.7432.

⁴ For further discussion of devotional objects and images in contemporary Iranian visual culture, see Flaskerud (2010).

Shi'i religious ceremonies, slogans, and images were harnessed to serve mobilization efforts during the 1979 Revolution. Today, the parallel between the visual materials employed in 1979 and those in 2009—as evidenced by images of hand and palm prints—points to a complex bond between these two seminal events in contemporary Iranian history. Indeed, the 2009 Green Movement protests and the 1979 Revolution share a framework of symbolic iconography grounded in Shi'i expressive modes of opposition and victimhood. However, such visual overlaps do not mean that the Iranians who took to the streets in mass demonstrations after the disputed 2009 presidential election imagined themselves as reenacting the events of 1979. After all, Iranian Shi'i religious symbols featured in public dissent and protest in Iran well before the 1979 Revolution.⁵ Part of a tradition of visual expressions of protest, the 2009 poster operates within a larger matrix of Iranian religious images that seek to articulate oppositional sentiment in the public sphere.

The 2009 demonstrations indubitably relied on the visual culture of the 1979 Revolution. Yet while drawing on older protests, the Green Movement creatively articulated new modes of dissent. As a case in point, the 2009 poster clearly refers to the election campaign of then presidential candidate Mir-Huseyn Musavi. Rendered in the bright teal green that marked Musavi's election campaign, the index and middle fingers of the hand silhouette form an unmistakable "V."⁶

Photographs taken during the aftermath of the 2009 election captured young Iranian protestors displaying their green-painted fingers while calling for victory and/or peaceful demonstrations (see Figure 6). The 2009 "*V-panjah*" poster introduces a new means of visual protest within the politico-religious context of contemporary Iran. By altering the Shi'i five-digit handprint, the green-dipped fingers effectively recode the silhouette, adding meanings beyond its strictly religious connotations. Thus the "reprogrammed"⁷ handprint emphasizes the double-digit gesture of victory by depicting it in the Green Movement's emblematic color, in effect signifying a hoped-for triumph for Musavi and his supporters.

⁵ On the roles of Karbala symbols and rituals in prerevolutionary political dissent, see Aghaie (2004).

⁶ A Belgian lawyer, Victor de Lavelaye, coined the "V for victory" symbol as a universal and recognizable sign for the Allies in World War II (Morris, Collett, Marsh, & O'Shaughnessy 1979).

⁷ This expression is borrowed from Nicolas Bourriaud (2002, p. 17), who notes artists' remixing of preexisting forms, signs, and symbols to create new narratives.



Figure 6. Protestor's "V for victory" hand with green and red-painted fingers holding a carnation. Tehran, 2009.

Source: <http://www.iran-free.org/archives/411>

The poster's use of green is highly strategic. Green is the color of Islam; it is one of the three colors of the Iranian flag (with red and white); and it is also the color associated with the prophetic family and especially Imam Huseyn. The 2009 *V-panjah* poster thus reiterates the Green Movement's associations with the Islamic faith, the prophetic family, and its martyred figurehead.

Not only did the Green Movement employ traditional Iranian Shi'i imagery and visual codes to advance its claims to religious and political legitimacy, but it also adopted and subverted the slogans of the 1979 Revolution. The *V-panjah* poster, for example, includes the Shi'i religious phrase *Ya Huseyn*. In the context of the 2009 demonstrations, this phrase surely points to Mir-Huseyn Musavi, not just Imam Husayn. The invocation is a traditional call to the imam, chanted during 'Ashura mourning rituals. In a December 2009 BBC news item, a Tehran student named Siyavash states that during the ensuing ten days of Muharram mourning, "We will go out and chant '*Ya Huseyn, Mir-Huseyn.*' This way, we convert the religious chant into a political one" Cornes (2009, p. 2). By modifying the traditional Shi'i invocation, Siyavash and other Green Movement protestors sought to express their support for opposition candidate

Musavi. The slogan *Ya Huseyn, Mir-Huseyn* thus aims to preserve Shi'i persecutory sentiments while also claiming them for the Green Movement's political purposes. Significantly, this specific Shi'i evocation of the *Ya Huseyn* rhythmically chanted during processional mourning rituals was also a way to voice public opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy in the 1979 Revolution. Given its pre-established use in oppositional protest, the *Ya Huseyn* phrase in the 2009 poster juxtaposes the contemporary crisis with that of the 1979 uprising while highlighting their shared Shi'i symbolic language.

In sum, the 2009 poster is a prime example of how Green Movement protestors adopted and updated antecedent images, slogans, and other visual and oral-textual forms of public discontent (Alizadeh, 2010). As the *panjah*, the blood-smeared hands, and the altered Shi'i invocation show, the Green Movement fell in line with the 1979 Revolution's established patterns of visual opposition to an incumbent regime. The 2009 protests thereby reinvigorated the Karbala paradigm in the fight for democratic representation and social justice (Fischer, 2010).

In the modern collective Shi'i memory of the battle at Karbala, Imam Huseyn is a revolutionary figure who resisted an immoral, more powerful enemy (Dabashi, 2005). The ideologues of the 1979 Revolution—Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) and Ali Shariati (d. 1975) in particular—marshaled the model of Imam Huseyn and the Karbala paradigm to mobilize protestors. As Hamid Dabashi notes, "Shi'ism is a religion of protest. It can only speak truth to power and destabilize it," and in the context of the 1979 Revolution it "was put to full revolutionary use to overthrow a corrupt government [the Pahlavi regime]" (Dabashi, 2005, p. 91). Attempting to force another change in government, protestors in 2009 likewise deployed Shi'i rituals and visuals in a concerted effort to frame the contemporary crisis as a relived Battle of Karbala, pitting the righteous and persecuted masses against a much stronger and better equipped adversary.

The 2009 protests thus challenged the current Islamic Republic's claim to the legacy and ideals of the 1979 Revolution. By doing so they undermined the government's legitimacy as an upholder of the Islamic faith, and, ultimately, the state's authority over the Iranian people. By cloaking the 2009 protests in Islamic and Shi'i symbolism, the Green Movement used the Islamic Republic's political imagery as visual weaponry, destabilizing the religious claims of the state and seriously undermining the regime's politico-religious legitimacy. The Green Movement at once boldly asserted its own rightful inheritance of the 1979 Revolution and reclaimed the Shi'i persecution narrative of Karbala to build popular consensus and mobilization against all odds.

"Where Is My Vote?"

On the morning of June 13, 2009, many Iranians awoke to alarming news. The night before, many had gone to bed excited and optimistic, predicting a victory for Mir-Huseyn Musavi in the presidential election (or at the very least a runoff between him and the incumbent candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). Instead, the announced result was a "landslide victory" for Ahmadinejad, who reportedly garnered 70% of the vote. Almost immediately questions arose, both in- and outside Iran, concerning the speed with which the results were announced as well as the surprisingly high volume of votes for Ahmadinejad. In the days, weeks, months, and now years since the voting that occurred on June 12,

2009, many Iranian citizens still ask, "Where is my vote?" (*Ra-yi man koja-st?*). When demonstrations first erupted after the announcement of the results, many Iranians hoped that the one individual with the authority to recall the election—Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Khamenei—would intervene and overrule the results of what many began to refer to as a "stolen election."

Much to the disappointment of millions, a week after the election, Khamenei endorsed Ahmadinejad's victory and declared that the high voter turnout validated not only the results, but also the electoral procedures employed by the Islamic Republic. The negative popular reaction came swiftly. Increasingly diverse segments of Iranian society joined to protest the "electoral coup" and Khamenei's support of Ahmadinejad. In Tehran and in cities across the country, silent demonstrations were organized through word of mouth and phone calls as the government shut down Internet services. Demonstrators spontaneously spilled into the streets as Iranians from the rich northern Tehran suburbs to the poorer neighborhoods in the south united in protest.

Soon it became painfully clear that the election had been rigged. This outcome triggered what Hamid Dabashi has called a "social fact," in that whether or not the election was stolen became a moot point. Although the disputed election results had indeed provoked the 2009 protests, it was the state's reaction and increasingly violent suppression that transformed them into a widespread grassroots movement that questioned the very legitimacy of the government (Dabashi, 2009). In the process, public attention shifted from Ahmadinejad to the Islamic Republic, which itself became the main target of the opposition movement.

Although the news media have tended to describe the 2009 uprising as a "Twitter Revolution," this moniker poorly reflects the main modes of popular communication during the events that followed the election.⁸ Most Iranians had no access to Twitter in the days following the election, so most protests were organized via cell phone, text messaging, and word of mouth (Erich, 2009a). Naming the election crisis after the micro-blogging service Twitter disregards the magnitude of the unrest and fails to account for the grassroots, person-to-person character of the street protests in general. Perhaps most importantly, it ignores the severity of the physical violence many protestors endured during the regime's brutal crackdown (Alizadeh, 2010).

In a great show of force, Iranians marched in the streets of major cities across the country in the largest protest demonstrations since the 1979 Revolution. The demonstrations were largely peaceful and met with little violence, although clashes and arrests of opposition leaders as early as the morning of June

⁸ Reese Erlich argues that the idea of a "Twitter Revolution" developed from the Islamic Republic's restrictions on foreign reporters covering the election. Barred from covering the events firsthand, journalists sought information from Internet sites like Twitter. They thus remained ignorant of the mass street protests outside, as most Iranians experienced Internet limitations during the protests. See Erlich (2009b).

13, 2009 were reported (Simpson, 2009).⁹ The next day, further protests and street demonstrations were organized in many cities and towns. In Tehran, several students were arrested and many injured in a raid on Tehran University—a major site of twentieth-century political activity in Iran, including the 1999 student uprising against the government—by the Basij, a volunteer paramilitary militia acting on the state's behalf (Barzin, 2009).

Some of the largest demonstrations disputing the election to date took place on June 15, 2009, when the Islamic Republic began to realize it faced its most serious challenge since its inception. As the world watched, an estimated one million people¹⁰ gathered in Tehran to protest in an event showcasing the widespread dissatisfaction with Ahmadinejad's presidency and the Islamic Republic. Protestors marched toward Tehran's famous Freedom Square (Maidan-i Azadi) to hold a silent rally (Abrahamian, 2010). Originally named the King's Memorial Square (Maidan-i Shahyad),¹¹ the square had been the site of mass demonstrations against the Pahlavi monarchy in 1978–79; now the Green Movement protests in 2009 occupied the same urban staging ground where the previous revolution had been secured.

Similarly, many of the slogans chanted during the Summer of 2009 resembled those cried out during the 1979 Revolution. Some were appropriated verbatim, while others were reworked and adapted to suit the Green Movement's purposes. The slogans, protest signs, graffiti, and other forms of dissent in real and virtual Iranian public space offer insight into how the movement verbalized and visualized itself in response to the 2009 presidential election and the intransigence of the Islamic Republic.

The Green Wave: Slogans and Graffiti

As demonstrators streamed into the streets of Tehran and other major cities on June 13, 2009 and the days that followed, they chanted slogans in protest of the reported election results. Shouts of "*Ra-yi man koja-st?*" or "Where is my vote?" boomed on the ground and in the blogosphere, even though Internet access was severely limited in the weeks before and after the election (Worth & Fathi, 2009). Immediately after the election, "Where is my vote?" quickly became one of the demonstrators' most popular chants, a way of demanding accountability from the government for Ahmadinejad's highly suspect landslide win while simultaneously avoiding overt criticism of the regime. Slogans chanted early on in the opposition movement's street protests came to be reiterated and circulated through visual materials, especially posters, fliers, large banners, and online graphic images. Many protestors held fliers bearing only the written question "Where is My Vote?" in green ink, often in both Persian and English. One protestor's sign incorporated mention of her brother's death, stating: "My brother was killed because he asked: 'Where is my vote?'" (*Baradaram ra koshteh choon porseed: "ra-yi man koja-st?"*) (see Figure 7).

⁹ See videos of the demonstrations following the announcement of the presidential election results in MSNBC's June 13, 2009 report at

<http://www.nytimes.com/video/2009/06/13/world/1194840902621/thousands-protest-in-iran.html>

¹⁰ Muhammad Baqir Qalibaf, the then and current mayor of Tehran, estimated crowds of three million people marched across the city to Freedom (Azadi) Square on June 15, 2009. See *Balatarin* (2009).

¹¹ On the history of Tehran's street names, and alterations to them from the Qajar dynasty to the postrevolutionary period, see Papoli-Yazdi (1992).

On this sign, two red handprints commemorate the loss of life while also visually recalling the bloody handprints of 1979 (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Hamed Saber/Creative Commons. Photo of a woman holding up a sign "My brother was killed because he asked: 'Where is my vote?'" Tehran, June 17, 2009.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:5th_Day_-_They_Killed_My_Bro_Koz_He_Asked_%22Where's_My_Vote%22.jpg

Other 2009 slogans did not develop solely in reaction to the election, but rather were adopted and adapted from the 1979 Revolution. One example of an appropriated slogan is the Arabic-language call to prayer "Allahu Akbar," or "God is Great." During the prerevolutionary period, Iranians protested the Shah's oppressive regime by chanting "Allahu Akbar" from their rooftops under cover of the night. The resounding chorus of voices echoing across the city in unison in these nighttime demonstrations purposely made it difficult for the Shah's police force to locate, identify, and arrest individual protestors (Gheytonchi, 2010). By vocalizing dissent against the Shah's secularization policies, the overtly Islamic chant loudly

proclaimed that Iranians would not desist in their opposition to the regime and assured fellow protestors that they were not alone in their fight.

Opposition protestors began shouting "*Allahu Akbar*" as night fell on June 13, 2009.¹² Many observers noted the "irony" of the Green Movement embracing an Islamic phrase as one of its slogans. However, the use of the same famous chant of the 1979 Revolution forced observers to immediately begin drawing comparisons between the 2009 protests and those of thirty years prior. Activating the verbal language of the 1979 Revolution lent a sense of historical import to the 2009 protests from the outset. In an even further ironic twist, the Islamic Republic banned the chanting of "*Allahu Akbar*" two weeks after the 2009 election, in effect censoring the very phrase that had heralded the governing body into existence (Maddow, 2009). The ban was ignored, and the phrase became one of the iconic slogans of the Green Movement, appearing in protest signs, graffiti, YouTube comments, Facebook statuses, and other media.

In an August 2009 interview with the online Iranian news journal *Rooz Online*, the cleric Mohsen Kadivar stated: "The movement's motto is '*Allahu akbar* [and] death to the dictator [*marg bar dictator*].' Nobody can negate the powerful slogan of *Allahu akbar*" (*Rooz Online*, 2010). By appropriating the religious slogan *Allahu Akbar* and its revolutionary past, the Green Movement sought to reclaim the 1979 Revolution and the Islamic faith. The chant materialized repeatedly after the 2009 election dispute, including as recently as February 2011, when the Green Movement attempted demonstrations to show solidarity with the Arab Revolutions and protests of 2011.

The slogan "*Marg bar dictator*," which translates as either "Death to the dictator" or "Down with the dictator," adapts the 1979 revolutionary slogans "*Marg bar Shah*" (Down with the Shah) and "*Marg bar Amrika*" (Down with America)¹³ to decry incumbent leaders as despotic and deserving of downfall. This act of opposing the current regime by shouting a slogan used against the Shah in 1979 reveals the Green Movement's subversive redirection of revolutionary zeal. Shouts of "*Marg bar dictator*" threatened the legitimacy of Khamenei and the Islamic Republic by equating them with the corrupt and authoritarian Pahlavi regime. Protesters also targeted Ahmadinejad's foreign allies with the slogan, exclaiming, "*Marg bar Russi; Marg bar Chine*" or "Down with Russia; Down with China." In recent years Russia and China have supported the Iranian regime, trying to counterbalance hegemonic position of the United States in global politics and meanwhile seeking opportunistic alliances in exchange for Iran's oil and other natural resources (Simpson, 2010). These new versions of old slogans thus recall the fear of foreign interference that tinged the uprisings of 1979, when the United States and Israel were the primary targets of antagonistic sentiment and slogans (Gheytonchi, 2010).

In 2009, chants and slogans such as these enabled the Green Movement to actively participate in the Iranian public sphere via insertion of its key symbols and anti-regime rhetoric. Splashed on city walls

¹² To hear audio of these renewed nighttime chants, see the video edited and re-uploaded to the YouTube website by the user MightierThan on July 12, 2009: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOheQ9msgMQ>

¹³ More iterations of this and other revolutionary slogans appear in a compilation by the Islamic Republic's Center for Documents of the Islamic Revolution (Markaz-i Asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami) that documents the slogans and chants of the 1979 Revolution (Markaz-i Asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami, 2000).

in a veritable tidal wave of graffiti, the movement's slogans—spray painted or handwritten in pen, frequently in green—adorned bus stops, pedestrian walkways, and other public spaces. The result was widespread awareness of the Green Movement's massive challenge to the government's authority and control over the Iranian public sphere. Until this time, the Islamic Republic's propaganda programs had dominated public spaces, presenting government ideology in large-scale murals, banners, and posters that overtook the urban landscape, particularly in the capital city of Tehran.¹⁴ In both presence and content, the anti-regime graffiti and images offered a forceful and anonymous challenge to the government's symbolic hegemony—in this case using the urban city-scape as a battleground to assert political ascendance.



Figure 8. Photograph of graffiti "Marg bar dictator" (Death to the dictator). Tehran, 2009–2010.

Source: <http://observers.france24.com/content/20100302-tehran-graffiti-war-green-movement-basij-militia-spray-paint-tags>

The written graffiti amplified the Green Movement's shouted slogans. "Marg bar dictator" was frequently spray painted on city walls (Figure 8), sometimes with the first two words *Marg bar* in green and the word "dictator" in red. This symbolic color scheme thus refers not only to the Green Movement

¹⁴ For more information on the state-sponsored public murals program in Iran, see Grigor (2002), Gruber (2008), Karimi (2008), and Marzolph (2003).

but also to the combined use of red and green for the protagonists and antagonists in Shi'i religious plays known as *ta'ziyehs*.¹⁵ In these performances participants reenact the Battle at Karbala: actors playing Imam Huseyn and his followers wear green, while those portraying the enemy Umayyad army are dressed in red (Chelkowski, 1980).

The same color binary was successfully deployed during the referendum vote to establish an Islamic Republic in the Spring of 1979. Most Iranians were illiterate at the time, so their only cues in choosing a ballot were the green-colored cards for the pro-Islamic government and the red-colored cards assigned to vote against the theocracy, which tapped into an Iranian Shi'i color-based memory (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999). The 2009 *Marg bar dictator* graffiti reasserts this color antithesis by using red for the word *dictator*. The green, implying the Green Movement's virtuousness—stemming from Imam Huseyn and the martyrs of Karbala—symbolically subverts the Islamic Republic's claims to Islam and the legacy of Karbala, while the red paints the regime as an oppressive and violent enemy responsible for spilling the blood of its own people.

Unsurprisingly, Green Movement graffiti provoked a response from the Islamic Republic, as inaction would have implied approval or consent of the opposition's messages. A photograph taken on June 13, 2009 of a wall near Musavi's campaign headquarters captures a government worker whitewashing the post-election explosion of green graffiti (see Figure 9). Amidst the hodgepodge of Green Movement names and slogans, the name "Ahmadi" (a diminutive of Ahmedinejad) is spray painted in black over a green "Musavi" tag. These overlapping graffiti offer another example of the official response to Green Movement graffiti: the regime and its supporters overlaid it with counter-messages and/or removed it altogether. Throughout the election crisis, opposition protestors and regime supporters defamed each other in black paint (Ali, 2010). The color black (*siyah*) connotes misfortune and "bad" in Persian; in addition, the phrase *siyah shodani ziban*, or "blackened language," means "to curse" (Steingass, 1970, p. 713). Protestors and regime-supporters made contrapuntally use of this color in graffiti, generating visually symbolic instances of cursing of the opposing group's political leaders and messages.

¹⁵ For more information on *ta'ziyeh* performances and related arts, see Chelkowski (1985) and Peterson (1979).



Figure 9. A man paints over campaign slogans near the headquarters of presidential candidate Mir-Huseyn Musavi in Tehran on June 13, 2009. Musavi's name is written in green while a diminutive of Ahmadinejad's name is written over it in black. Olivier Laban-Mattei/AFP/Getty Images. Source: http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2009/06/irans_disputed_election.html#photo35

Hand gestures from the Green Movement demonstrations also appeared alongside the slogans of the graffiti wave. Many graffiti include a green V symbol, replicating the protestors' "V for victory" finger gestures (see Figure 10). One example in particular couples the V symbol with the slogan "Zandeh bad azadi," "Long live freedom" (see Figure 11). The recurrence of the slogan and victory symbol in Green Movement visual and verbal rhetoric illustrates the broad dispersal of the movement's symbols and messages. In 2009, the Green Movement's V appeared in another form of visual exchange, namely, Iranian banknotes (see Figure 12). Currency was inscribed or stamped with Green Vs by the opposition movement and redistributed into public hands in an effort to display the pervasive influence of the Green Movement and assert allegorical control over the Islamic Republic's "currency."¹⁶ This tactic once again recalled the activities of the revolutionaries of 1979 who likewise deployed banknotes sporting anti-regime inscriptions (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999, pp. 194-211).

¹⁶ For more examples of the Green Movement's alterations of the Iranian state's banknotes, see "Exhibit: Iranian Banknotes" (2009), available at <http://payvand.com/blog/blog/2009/11/16/exhibit-iranian-banknotes-uprising>



Figure 10. "V for victory" graffiti on a street sign in Tehran, 2009–2010.

Source: <http://observers.france24.com/content/20100302-tehran-graffiti-war-green-movement-basij-militia-spray-paint-tags>



Figure 11. "Long Live Freedom" graffiti with "V for victory" symbol. Tehran, 2009–2010.

Source: <http://observers.france24.com/content/20100302-tehran-graffiti-war-green-movement-basij-militia-spray-paint-tags>



Figure 12. "V for Victory" stamps on Iranian banknotes, 2009.

Source: <http://payvand.com/blog/blog/2009/11/16/exhibit-iranian-banknotes-uprising>

As the Green Movement evolved in the weeks and months following the 2009 presidential election, so did the slogans and visual messages in the Iranian public sphere. Alongside "*Marg bar Shah*," protestors adapted another famous chant from thirty years ago—"Esteghlal, Azadi, Jomhuri Eslami," or "Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic"—instead shouting in unison: "*Esteghlal, Azadi, Jomhuri Irani*" (Independence, Freedom, Iranian Republic). This one-word alteration bore enormous implications. By modifying an earlier slogan to refer not to an Islamic republic but rather to the concept of an Iranian government, the Green Movement expressed dissatisfaction with the current government while simultaneously signaling its own inclusivity as a grassroots movement. The slogan implicitly calls for an outright restructuring of Iran's theocratic government, seeking to separate and reclaim Islam from the state.

As the weeks elapsed, the Green Movement continually adapted its activity to evade the regime's increasingly violent suppression tactics. Beatings, arrests, forced public confessions, torture, rape, and executions grew in intensity and frequency over the course of the government crackdown (Amnesty International, 2009). In response, the Green Movement moved underground to continue its activities—especially the output of visual materials via online forums and media platforms. These efforts were able to coordinate protestors to emerge en masse on government-sanctioned days of demonstration, once again showing the breadth, depth, and determination of the Green Movement under the guise of authorized rallying.

These state-sponsored rallies include Qods Day (Jerusalem Day) on September 18, which encourages solidarity with Palestine in an event traditionally marked by anti-Israeli sentiment and hyperbole. In 2009, Green Movement protestors overtook these authorized public demonstrations, chanting instead, "Not Gaza, not Lebanon. I die only for Iran" (Sadeghi, 2009). This particular slogan both denounces the Islamic Republic's willingness to furnish political and financial support for the Palestinian cause and the Shi'i militant group Hezbollah, all the while ignoring the plight of its own citizens.

In lieu of Palestine, in other words, the chant articulates the willingness of the Green Movement members to sacrifice themselves in the interest of their own people. Other examples deployed on Qods Day cemented the connection between the plight of the Palestinians and that of Iranians: one image circulating online depicted Handala, a famous caricature of a Palestinian refugee boy, wearing a green scarf alongside the phrase "Palestine is right here" (see Figure 13). The Handala figure is typically used to represent steadfastness and endurance amid disheartening circumstances.¹⁷ Recasting the symbol of the Palestinian cause as a supporter of the Green Movement undermined the Islamic Republic's ostensible support of Palestinians and at the same time identified the Iranian opposition movement with the Palestinian cause (Kurzman, 2010). Accordingly, the repurposed Handala image implied that Iranian citizens were now living on occupied land, and that the accused occupier was not the Israeli government but the Islamic Republic instead.

¹⁷ For more information on the caricature Handala and the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, see Haugbolle (2013).

2009). Flouting the government's preemptive ban on mourning ceremonies, hundreds of thousands of mourners descended on Qom to attend Montazeri's funeral on the day of 'Ashura.

Once more, protestors around the country chanted modified slogans from the 1979 Revolution. One chant from the 2009 'Ashura protests, recorded and uploaded on YouTube, explicitly compared the Islamic Republic to Yazid I, the Umayyad caliph responsible for the massacre at Karbala:

In mah, mah-e khun-e, regime sar neguneh
In mah, mah-e khun-e Sayyid Ali sar neguneh
In mah, mah-e khun-e Yazid sar neguneh
 This month, month of blood, the regime is toppled
 This month, month of blood, Seyid Ali is toppled
 This month, month of blood, Yazid is toppled.¹⁸

The "month of blood" refers to Muharram and the bloodshed that occurred at the battle of Karbala, while Seyid Ali is the first name of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Inserting his name into the Muharram chant likened the ayatollah to the Shi'i community's quintessential enemy, Yazid. As Michael Fischer (2010) notes, "the Muharram ritual cycle repeatedly identified [Khamenei] with Yazid, the arch evil figure of the religious passion plays who destroyed the social justice promise of Islam" (p. 526). The comparison undermines the Islamic Republic's claims to Islamic rectitude and its own narrative of victimhood. The 2009 'Ashura oppositional protests thus sought to equate the tragic massacre of Karbala with the regime's violent suppression of its own citizens. By equating the leaders of the Islamic Republic with the corrupt and evil murderers of Karbala, the "persecuted" Green Movement protestors advanced their claims to legitimacy and righteousness.

This merging of contemporary circumstances with a sacred Shi'i past began before the disputed presidential election of 2009. Musavi's campaign deliberately chose green as its trademark color in the run-up to the election. Green became a "low-tech,"¹⁹ multivalent symbol by which people could express both their support for Musavi and their dissatisfaction with Ahmadinejad's government. By reclaiming the color of Islam and the prophetic household, the Green Movement protestors also attempted to challenge the Islamic Republic's monopoly on the Shi'i Islamic faith.²⁰

Reportedly, it was Zahra Rahnavard, Musavi's wife, who chose the color green. A famous painter, popular women's rights activist, and art historian, Rahnavard was actively engaged in Iranian education and politics. Aware of the strong symbolism of green in Iranian visual culture, Rahnavard applied her art

¹⁸ Quoted in Fischer (2010, p. 507).

¹⁹ Michael Fischer (2010) describes the color green as a transformative instrument in the Iranian public sphere: "the low-tech green armbands and scarves (the green wave, or *moj-i sabz*, and the high-tech Internet and cell phone cameras [inscribe and fill] the spaces of perception" p. 498).

²⁰ On the choice of green for Musavi's campaign, Hamid Dabashi (2011) notes that it "almost instantly fled into the varied mazes of Islamic, Iranian, and Persian sacred and mundane registers. It was, and it remains, multi-signatory" (p. 67).

historical expertise to select revolutionary Shi'i imagery and color symbolism for the Green Movement.²¹ Even before the disputed election results flowed in, Musavi's campaign—via Rahnavard's ingenious stewardship of its visual output—was taking cues from Shi'i Islam and the 1979 Revolution.

Once the election crisis began, Musavi amplified traditional Shi'i discourses by announcing his readiness to die a martyr for the Green Movement (Hafezi, 2009). The 1979 Revolution owed part of its success to the instrumentalization of ritualized street processions, which mobilized demonstrators against the Pahlavi regime and thereby exposed them to repercussions. Protestors who perished then have been memorialized as martyrs by the Islamic regime, a rhetorical mechanism meant to frame the successful anti-Shah uprisings as a redemptive affirmation of the tragedy at Karbala. Musavi's public declaration that his death would fall into the martyrial complex of the Karbala paradigm essentially positioned the 2009 protests as a continuation (and potential rectification) of the 1979 Revolution.



Figure 14. Mana Neyestani. The protests at Karbala, 2009–2010.

Source: <http://www.payvand.com/news/10/may/1176.html>

The Green Movement further asserted its claims to the legacy of the 1979 Revolution and the Battle of Karbala by visually representing protestors as experiencing the same trauma as the martyrs of Karbala. One such reimagining of Karbala depicts a riot police officer from the 2009 protests beating a

²¹ Zahra Rahnavard has published work on Shi'i symbolism and its manifestations during the 1979 Revolution. See Rahnavard (2002).

protestor to death at the epicenter of a painting depicting events from the Battle of Karbala (Figure 14).²² Uploaded to the *Radio Zamaneh* and *Payvand* news websites, the digital work by Mana Neyestani inserts a black-and-white cartoon into a coffeehouse painting by the famous painter Muhammad Modabber.²³ The scene of the 2009 beating of a protestor contrasts starkly with the colorful imagery of Karbala; indeed, the only coloration in the insertion is the protestor's bright red blood, which spills onto the ground and stains the officer's baton. Facedown on the ground, the protestor manages to form the "V for victory" with his right hand: even on the verge of death, the wounded man refuses to renounce his allegiance to the Green Movement. The digital insertion of an image of regime-sponsored violence in 2009 into the middle of the seventh-century battle, thus, casts the Green Movement protestors as undergoing the same unjust persecution and violent suppression that Imam Huseyn and his followers endured at the Battle of Karbala.

Alongside such conflated figural images, digital renderings of objects used in Muharram processions served to reaffirm the bond between a sacred Shi'i past and the unfolding political struggle. Echoing the "V-panjah" poster examined earlier, a digital graphic shows a green hand making the V gesture alongside a five-digit handprint (see Figure 15). The two right hands have been severed, and a single arrow pierces them both. Below them the slogan "Ya Huseyn, Mir Huseyn" reiterates the symbolic elision between Imam Huseyn, the "Prince of Martyrs," and Mir Huseyn Musavi, the Green Movement leader who so proudly declared his willingness to be martyred for the cause.



Figure 15. Green Movement digital logo, combining the panjah, V, arrow, and invocation "Ya Husayn, Mir Huseyn," 2009.

Source: <http://www.mowjcamp.com/article/id/73557>

²² Coffeehouse-style paintings of the Battle of Karbala similar to the digitally altered painting appear in Seyf (1990).

²³ Modabber's painting can be found in the exhibition catalogue, *Les Peintres populaires de la légende persane/Popular paintings and the Persian legend* (1974).

Use of the Karbala template to memorialize the 2009 presidential protests validates the traumatic experiences of Green Movement protestors within the larger redemptive framework of Shi'i Islam. Deeply entrenched in the Iranian social fabric, the story of Karbala is also part of a lived religion that is infinitely mutable. In this regard, Ingvild Flakerud (2010) notes,

The audience of Shia verbal and visual storytelling practices does not simply passively receive the message, but interacts in the storytelling by responding to it. Such participation may activate feelings of personal pain, as well as sympathy with the sufferings of others. Embodied emotions are thus part of the memory activated by many viewers when they engage in interpreting images. (p. 154)

Scenes of Karbala elicit powerful responses from Iranian Shi'i society. By harnessing the emotional power of Karbala, protestors in the 2009 crisis turned toward Shi'i symbolism to give greater meaning to their own traumatic experiences. In the process, they rewrote Karbala's deadly yet redemptive tale as their very own.

The Future of the Past

The Green Movement's graphic output illustrates the complex verbal and visual discourses of the 2009 presidential election crisis. The opposition's modalities of dissent harnessed the protest aesthetics of the 1979 Revolution and its Shi'i contexts and subtexts. To some extent, this engagement with the 1979 Revolution recalls the "cyclical eternal return" (Chehabi, 2010, p. 1) of revolutions, in the sense that revolutions tend to reenact paradigmatic events of the past while establishing new histories. The Green Movement's reference to past battles and revolutions is undoubtedly a highly self-aware and historicized assertion.

Green Movement protestors have framed themselves as rightful inheritors of the Battle of Karbala and of the 1979 Revolution before Khomeini and his supporters consolidated power, silenced dissenting political groups, and established a state known as the Islamic Republic. Like Khomeini and his supporters in the 1979 uprising, the Green Movement sought to successfully activate the mobilizing apparatuses and visual symbolism of Karbala, resulting in a historically intertwined praxis of protest. Meanwhile, members of the movement produced images and slogans that were essentially spurred by an ethos of righteous revolt, symbolically rectifying the course of the 1979 Revolution.

Today the Green Movement faces formidable challenges. Driven underground following the imprisonment of protestors and forced house arrests of Musavi and other leaders, the opposition movement now navigates uncharted territory. Whether or not a mass uprising—or even revolution—will eventually transpire remains to be seen. Assuredly, however, the Green Movement has forever altered Iran's future by reframing its shared history.

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