

## THE ART OF STATE PERSUASION: IRAN'S POST-REVOLUTIONARY MURALS

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Largely ignored by Western visitors for almost three decades, Tehran is the puzzling capital of an increasingly powerful and defiant Iran. Vast and densely populated, this Middle Eastern megalopolis makes for a rich urban topography, its mystique amplified by a shroud of chronic smog.<sup>1</sup> Though landscape stimulants competing for the visitor's attention abound — be they flashy billboards, colorful posters, or catchy advertisements —, none are more gripping for the foreign visitor than the city's murals.<sup>2</sup> Cast across Tehran's prominent avenues, on both private and public buildings, the murals constitute dominant fixtures of the city's visual space. Varying in color, genre, and symbolism, they are of distinctive artistic style, painted and brought to life by regime-sanctioned artists.

Though Iran's propaganda culture has been a subject of academic inquiry,<sup>3</sup> mural images per se had not been systematically presented to Western audiences until the spring of 2007. At a time when Iran was making daily headlines, the murals' number and size, as well as their powerful iconography and aesthetics, inspired a photo exhibit entitled "*Walls of Martyrdom*": *Tehran's Propaganda Murals*, displayed from May to July 2007 at Harvard's Center for Government and International Studies South Concourse Gallery.<sup>4</sup> The exhibit employed mixed visual media such as a fifteen meter-long cityscape design,

<sup>1</sup> For a relatively recent study of Tehran see Ali Madanipour, *Tehran: The Making of a Metropolis*. New York, 1998. Seyyed-Mohsen Habibi and Bernard Hourcade, *Atlas de Téhéran métropole/Atlas of Tehran Metropolis*. Tehran, 2005, contains invaluable information about the capital in French, English, and Persian.

<sup>2</sup> Talinn Grigor, "(Re)Claiming Space: The Use/Misuse of Propaganda Murals in Republican Iran," *IIAS Newsletter*, No. 28 (August 2002), 37.

<sup>3</sup> William L. Hanaway, Jr., "The Symbolism of Persian Revolutionary Posters." In Barry M. Rosen, ed., *Iran Since the Revolution: Internal Dynamics, Regional Conflict, and the Superpowers*. Boulder, 1985; Peter J. Chelkowski, "Iconography of the Women of Karbala: Tiles, Murals, Stamps, and Poster," in Kamran Scot Aghaie, ed., *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*. Austin, 2005. For stamps, see Roman Siebertz, *Die Briefmarken Irans als Mittel der Politischen Bildpropaganda*. Vienna, 2005, pp. 119-38. A review by H. E. Chehabi containing a summary of this excellent book can be found in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39:3 (August 2007): 499-501.

<sup>4</sup> Fotini Christia took the photos that were featured in the exhibit, and Ghazal Abbasy-Asbagh was in charge of the exhibit's production and design. For more information and commentary on the exhibit see Cate McQuaid, "The Art of Attraction," *The Boston Globe*, 31 May 2007 and Meredith Goldstein, "Another Brick in the Propaganda Wall," *The Boston Globe*, 18 May 2007. All mural photos have been archived and are available in digital form through Harvard University's library system.

depicting a number of murals in an urban context as a way to recreate the feeling of walking down a Tehran avenue, a digital map of Tehran with pictures of several of the murals superimposed on their real location to give a sense of their sheer number and geographic spread throughout the city, installations simulating martyrs' graves, and a number of large banners suspended around the walls of a sunken courtyard.

The exhibit's primary objective was to give an insider's view of the Islamic Republic's psyche through documenting and presenting images that are part of Tehran's daily urban experience and of which people outside Iran are largely oblivious. But the exhibit also aspired to debate and to deconstruct the murals' narratives. In that regard, it was accompanied by a panel of Iran experts from across the disciplines that discussed the use of mural art in the Islamic Republic of Iran, interpreted the murals' iconography and symbols, and commented on their contemporary political relevance as well as their resonance with the Iranian public.

#### MURALS AND REVOLUTION

Large politically charged murals set in public spaces have been used in many places to mobilize or inspire people.<sup>5</sup> While occasionally expressing a commitment to the *status quo*,<sup>6</sup> political murals have far more often been painted in support of radical change. Most famously, in the 1920s the revolutionary government of Álvaro Obregón in Mexico sponsored established artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros to paint monumental murals on public buildings to portray and celebrate the revolutionary struggle of the Mexicans.<sup>7</sup> Murals also figured prominently in the Marxist government of Salvador Allende in Chile, where there were 150 mural brigades by 1973,<sup>8</sup> and in Sandinista-dominated Nicaragua, where the authorities issued an instruction manual on the techniques of mural painting.<sup>9</sup> (The Cuban revolutionaries, however, like the Soviet before them, rejected murals as a means of propaganda.<sup>10</sup>) In Europe, the Portuguese revolution of 1975 inspired leftist parties to cover walls with elaborate paintings.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the ideology of revolutionaries, they are by definition anti-elitist and claim to represent the masses. And to be accessible to the mobilized masses as a whole, propaganda

<sup>5</sup> See Bill Rolston, "Political Murals: International Perspectives." In *Politics and Painting: Murals and Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Cranbury, NJ, 1991, pp. 112-124.

<sup>6</sup> Such is the case of the Loyalist (i.e., Protestant) murals in Northern Ireland, which appeared soon after the division of Ireland in the 1920s and the establishment of Protestant-dominated Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. See Ibid., "Triumph and Confusion: Loyalist Wall Murals," pp. 15-49 and Bill Rolston, *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland*. Belfast, 1992, pp. 1-24.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920-1925*. New Haven, 1963.

<sup>8</sup> David Kunzle, "Art and the New Chile: Mural, Poster and Comic Book in a Revolutionary Process." In Henry Millon and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*. Cambridge, MA, 1978, pp. 356-81.

<sup>9</sup> Departamento de Propaganda y Educación del FSLN, *El Mural*. Managua, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> David Kunzle, "Public Graphics in Cuba," *Latin American Perspectives* 2 (1975), p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> *As Paredes na Revolução*. Lisbon, 1978; and Walter Grasskamp and Alfred Kottek, "Wandmalerei in Portugal," *Kunstforum International* 50 (1982), pp. 87-97.

paintings have to be huge. The rationale for this was forcefully given by Siqueiros in 1922 when he wrote in his “Declaration of Social, Political and Aesthetic Principles”:

We repudiate so-called easel painting and every kind of art favoured by ultra-intellectual circles, because it is aristocratic, and we praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property.<sup>12</sup>

In Iran, revolutionary gigantism was even more of an innovation, as Persian painting had been mostly of the miniature variety,<sup>13</sup> at least until the late eighteenth century, when, inspired by European paintings, Iranian artists began producing oil paintings.<sup>14</sup> By the reign of Nasereddin Shah (r. 1848-1896), paintings depicting religious subjects, such as an often reproduced portrait of Imam Ali, came to be used to bolster the legitimacy of royal power.<sup>15</sup> But by the 1970s most painters active in Iran were of a secular persuasion with little interest in religious themes. While a painter like Abol Saeedi did indeed produce large murals, for instance in the foyer of Rudaki Hall (renamed Vahdat Hall after the revolution), it would have been utterly absurd to expect him to become revolutionary Iran's Siqueiros. This makes painted cinema posters depicting a film's major actors the only antecedents for the revolutionary murals in the visual landscape of Iranian cities, and one wonders whether some of the painters who produced these posters reinvented themselves as propaganda artists for the new regime.

#### MURALS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

The revolutionary regime that succeeded the monarchy in 1979 introduced murals on an extensive and organized scale as part of a propaganda campaign aimed at asserting the Islamic character of the 1979 Iranian revolution. The capital, Tehran, received the lion's share.

Tehran was a particularly propitious locality for large-scale murals. While the traditional Iranian city was characterized by narrow winding lanes and buildings of roughly the same height,<sup>16</sup> the modernization of the capital in the twentieth century had produced a very different urban morphology. Wide avenues provided the grid in the newer areas, while in old neighborhoods new thoroughfares were ruthlessly cut into the urban tissue. The vast majority of the capital's streets run either in a north-south or in an east-west direction. Moreover, zoning laws regulating the height of buildings were and are practically non-existing,<sup>17</sup> which means that one can easily find adjacent buildings of wildly different

<sup>12</sup> David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Art and Revolution*. London, 1975, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Oleg Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting*. Princeton, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> S.J. Falk, *Qajar Paintings: Persian Oil Paintings of the 18th and 19th Centuries*. London, 1972; and Layla S. Diba with Maryam Ekhtiar, eds., *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch 1785-1925*. Brooklyn, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Mehdi Mohammadzadeh, “Neshanha-ye mosavvar va taqdis-e qodrat dar asr-e Qajar,” *Golestan-e Honar*, no. 8 (Summer 1386/2007). Perhaps the possible continuities between these Qajar-era paintings and the murals of the Islamic Republic deserve further study.

<sup>16</sup> Masoud Kheirabadi, *Iranian Cities: Formation and Development*. Austin, 1991, pp. 20-8.

<sup>17</sup> GholamHosein Karbaschi, mayor of Tehran between 1988 and 1998, even instituted a system whereby one could *legally* disregard existing zoning laws by “buying density,” i.e., paying the municipal authorities to add stories beyond what was officially allowed to a building.

heights. Few buildings have windows in their eastern and western walls, so as to avoid direct sunlight. The combination of these characteristics generates a large numbers of blind walls that can be used as a canvass for murals or advertisements.

Multistory buildings can be found mostly in the more prosperous (and more secular) Northend (*shomal-e shahr*) of Tehran, which was a happy coincidence for the revolutionaries, because it was precisely in these neighborhoods that the religious character of the new state was most contested, making it desirable (perhaps even enjoyable) daily to remind the affluent *taghutis*, as the secular prerevolutionary elite was called by official propaganda, that they lived under an Islamic regime.<sup>18</sup>

In the years following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, most murals showed images of the fathers of the revolution, mainly Ayatollah Khomeini, always looking stern, and of figures the new authorities claimed as spiritual predecessors, such as Seyyed Hasan Modarres (1858-1938). (Figure 1 and Figure 2) But as casualties mounted in the war against Iraq, officially termed the “Imposed War,” the war’s fallen became more prominent, recognizing the Iranian people’s massive sacrifice on the battlefield. As anthropologist Roxanne Varzi put it, “it was the war that ultimately defined the Islamic republic as an image machine.<sup>19</sup> Midway through the Iran-Iraq war, the “Artistic and Cultural Bureau of the Qom Seminary’s Office of Propaganda” published a collection of exemplary Iran-Iraq war murals along with a set of detailed guidelines for aspiring muralists. These guidelines clearly underscored the role and importance of murals as a propaganda medium:

Under all circumstances the effectiveness of the revolutionary mural must be kept clearly in mind. Vague, indirect and superfluous paintings should be avoided at all costs. ‘What is significant is to consider what a passer-by (sic) can take away in his memory and mind.’ The artist must study religious texts as seriously as he examines the techniques of other artists. Murals with a theme or a scene are preferable to portraits with no specific message. Revolutionary posters should not be merely copied. Every artist must let go of his unique imagination and create something unique. The location of the murals must be selected carefully so that a passerby can clearly see the complete picture. But the ultimate objective should be brevity of message, deliberate and emphatic brush strokes, clear cut shapes and brilliant colors. Every mural should be framed by solid colors, selected from one of the dominant colors of the picture.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the map of the geographic distribution of murals prepared by Ghazal Abbasy-Asbagh for the exhibition clearly shows their concentration north of Enqelab (formerly Shahreza) Avenue, which is considered the symbolic border between the affluent and westernized Northend and the poorer and traditional Southend. On the socio-cultural north-south divide of Tehran see Mahvash Alemi, “The 1981 Map of Tehran: two cities, two cores, two cultures,” *A.A.R.P. Environmental Design* 1985, pp. 74-84 and Martin Seger, “Segregation of retail facilities and the bipolar city centre of Tehran,” in Chahryar Adle and Bernard Hourcade, eds., *Téhéran: Capitale bicentenaire*. Paris and Teheran, 1992, pp. 281-99. It should be pointed out that the growth of middle-class suburbs in the west and east of Tehran, the move northwards of newly rich traditional families that benefited from the revolution, and considerable infrastructural investments in the Southend have attenuated the opposition between north and south in recent years.

<sup>19</sup> Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*. Durham, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> The guidelines are translated and paraphrased in Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. New York, 1999, p. 291.



1. Mural featuring Imam Khomeini. Tehran, Darvazeh Dolat, Saadi street, Pamenar.  
Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.



2. Mural honoring Ayatollah Mudarres. Tehran, Bagh Saba, Mudarres Freeway.  
Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.

Indeed, in an effort to guarantee the maximum possible resonance with the public, muralists of the Iran-Iraq war genre have employed strong visual cues of the Shi'a faith. The iconography and symbols revolve around holy sites such as Mecca, the Dome of the Rock, or Imam Hosein's shrine in Karbala. Though primary colors dominate the muralists' palettes, the Islamic green is overwhelmingly the color of choice. Calligraphy, geometric shapes, and curvilinear designs suggestive of Islamic art are also part of the muralists' artistic repertoire. These are in turn fused with highly specific symbols such as the hand, whose five fingers standing for Mohammad, Ali, Fatemeh, Hasan, and Hosein represent the prophet's family. Bloodstained hands evoke the martyrdom of Imam Hosein in Karbala and the mutilation of Abbas, Hosein's half brother, while red flowers such as the tulip or the rose symbolize love and sacrifice. They depict the blood of martyrs, and they promise reward of heavenly bliss.<sup>21</sup> Slogans, whether Koranic verses or sayings of Ayatollah Khomeini, are also a prominent fixture of murals,



3. Martyr wearing headband with religious insignia reading: "Oh moon of the Bani Hashim," [reference to Abbas, brother of Imam Hussein martyred in Karbala.] Tehran, Abbas-Abad, Mudarres Freeway. Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.

<sup>21</sup> On the appropriation of martyrs by the state see Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L'Islamisme et la mort: Le martyre révolutionnaire en Iran*. Paris, 1995.



4. Mural featuring portrait of martyred General Mehdi Zeyneddin, commander of the army of Ali Ibn Abi Taleb (PBUH), with the flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran and banner bearing religious insignia. Tehran, Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri Freeway, (Gisha) Nasr. Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.

inscribed mostly in Persian but also in Arabic and on occasion even in English (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Though less numerous than those depicting the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, another group of thematically persistent political murals have featured anti-American and anti-Israeli images. Appearing in the early days after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and gaining traction during the U.S. hostage crisis, they have persisted unabated to this day. The complicated politics of the region — such as the U.S. backing of Saddam during the Iran-Iraq war, the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq — have provided the regime with consistent and topical themes and inspiration for such murals (Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7, and Figure 8). It is interesting to note that beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict, anti-western struggles elsewhere in the world have not featured prominently in the iconography of Iranian murals. This contrasts, for instance, with Republican (i.e., Catholic) murals in Northern Ireland, which have expressed solidarity with Palestinians, black South Africans, Namibians, Sandinistas, Basques, and the East Timorese<sup>22</sup> — but not Iran, in spite of the fact that the Iranian government renamed a street adjacent to the British embassy “Bobby Sands Street,” after an IRA militant who died in prison.

<sup>22</sup> Bill Rolston, “Visions or nightmares? Murals and imagining the future in Northern Ireland.” In Brian Cliff and Éibhear Walshe, eds., *Representing the Troubles: Texts and Images, 1970-2000*. Dublin, 2004, p. 120.



5. Mural featuring a “Down with the USA” slogan. Tehran, Former US Embassy Compound, Dr. Ali Shariati, Bagh Saba.  
Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.



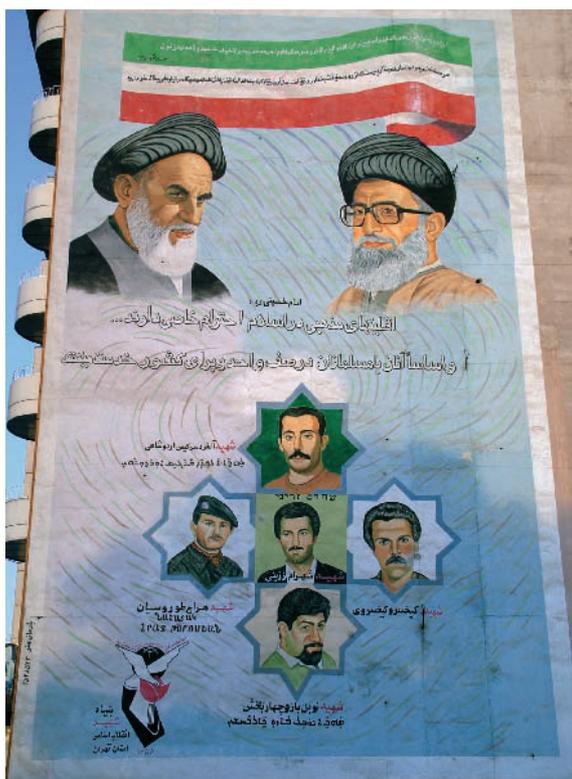
6. Mural featuring a hand draped in the U.S. flag coming out of a satellite dish holding a burning match. It is meant to symbolize U.S. attempts to use satellite media to communicate messages intending to burn the flowers of the revolution. Tehran, Former US Embassy Compound, Dr. Ali Shariati, Bagh Saba.  
Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.



7. Mural featuring The Supreme Leaders of Iran looking over Mecca, the Dome of the Rock, and the Shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala, as well as over Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the late leader of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas. Tehran, Davudieh, Modarres Freeway. Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.



8. Mural featuring Supreme Leaders Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei — left, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini-right, with Palestinian Martyr, Ahmad Ja'far Qasir. Tehran. Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.



9. Mural featuring a flag of Iran bearing a citation from the Qur'an and the portraits of the Supreme Leaders Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini looking over Iran-Iraq war martyrs belonging to religious minorities. Tehran, Kavusieh, Mirdamad Boulevard. Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.

While images of the founding fathers, depicted as smiling benevolently after the election of Mohammad Khatami to the presidency in 1997, and depictions of martyrs, including one that shows Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian men killed in the war (Figure 9), did not disappear, by the mid-1990s a more minimalist and abstract mural art also emerged. Instead of the somber and over-realist approach of the openly political murals, these new murals moved from the propagandistic to the artistic, from the literal to the spiritual, transforming the communication of the message on the wall from conscious to subliminal. This signaled a new phase of mural art, characterized by abstraction and the depiction of everyday mundane objects as a way to effectively depoliticize the murals (Figure 10 and Figure 11).

#### THE ARTICLES IN THIS VOLUME

The two authors who contributed research articles to this volume address a set of different, but interconnected themes, collectively providing a comprehensive overview of mural art in post-revolutionary Iran.

Christiane Gruber's article provides a thorough analysis of the use of imagery in post-revolutionary Iran and the trajectory of the Islamization of Iran's urban space from



10. Mural featuring painted windows, trees and a painted shadow meant to replicate the shadow from the pedestrian bridge on the building. Tehran, Amir-Abad, Kurdistan Freeway. Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.

the revolution to the present. A temporal outlook of mural art developments suggests that the change in the thematic repertoire was motivated by an effort to conform to the relevant directives of the times. For instance, in the immediate post-revolutionary phase, murals were dominated by depictions of the fathers of the revolution, as well as by anti-Americanism. With the onset of the Iran-Iraq war, martyrdom emerged as the dominant theme, and held strong till the mid-1990s, and the onset of Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), which in turn witnessed the rise of the liberal theme of beautification, trumping over the pre-existing politically-minded murals.

Gruber also elaborates on the ways governmental agencies, as well as para-statal organizations and other cultural groups employed visual public art as a way to solidify and entrench the objectives of the Islamic Revolution. Raising funds through donations, government funding, or tax exemptions, these organizations have used mural art as an outlet to echo the regime's revolutionary and religious message. Gruber's work also provides insights as to why anti-American and anti-Israel imagery have held thematic appeal for muralists. She relates these preferences to the US record of historical intervention in Iranian domestic affairs; the overtly secular and consumerist US pop-culture; and what



11. Mural featuring painted windows, trees as well as lights and buildings meant to replicate and enhance the sense of space in the urban landscape. Tehran, Amir-Abad, Kurdistan Freeway. Photograph by Fotini Christia, July 2006.

revolutionaries perceive to be the United States' exploitative stance towards resources in the developing world. In the contemporary political context, the United States has also proved an enemy of convenience and an easy diversionary target at times of internal political turmoil.

Gruber's work, though it provides a comprehensive overview of mural art from the early post-revolutionary days to the present, places its primary emphasis on political murals. However, apart from murals commemorating the fathers of the revolution and fallen martyrs, the post Iran-Iraq war era has also witnessed the evolution of a rather unorthodox, divergent type of mural art. And it is this new, liberal wave of murals that constitutes Pamela Karimi's subject of inquiry. Using primary data, including personal interviews with some of this genre's muralists, Karimi takes us through a tour of the streets of contemporary Tehran, giving us a sense of the mystical and the surreal that characterizes this line of mural work.

Lacking the stark literal dimension of their political counterparts, these abstract renditions leave a lot to the imagination. They are the offspring of a softening phase in the muralist's color and thematic palette, moving from primary colors to pastels, from realism to abstraction. Painted in part by women artists, such as Firuzeh Golmohammadi,

they often employ images of motherhood, adding a feminine dimension, a woman's touch, to the testosterone-laden, male-dominated martyrs' murals. As suggested and elaborated upon by Gruber, motherhood is now cast in a light of hope and exhilaration, moving beyond the war-inspired mandate of giving birth to male children that would in turn serve as volunteers in the martyrs' squads.

This new wave of murals draws its inspiration from the mysticism and spirituality found in Persian poetry. In that regard, the themes informing this line of mural art seem to come full circle: martyrdom and sacrifice have served as integral aspects of Iranian epic poetry. And after drawing from religion for their manifestation in the immediate post-revolutionary and Iran-Iraq war martyr murals, muralists went back to poetry for inspiration. There is, of course, notable complexity to the mysticism, which moves from the real to the surreal, and does away with clear and literal themes of martyrdom. A martyr now is not depicted as a brave young man in battle but rather as a mystical bird. There are butterflies and Palestinian *kafiyas* cast against colors and abstract forms, a clear artistic progression, an evolution of sorts, from wartime murals.

#### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

To varying extents, the works by the authors also look to the future of mural art in the context of contemporary Iranian political culture, offering predictions on the murals' fate and future relevance. Gruber treats the future relevance of political murals as an open question suggesting that it largely depends on the future trajectory of Iran's internal politics as well as its interactions with policy issues in the international arena. As she aptly notes, Tehran's audience, bombarded by an abundance of urban visual stimulants, has already become numb to mural art. The younger generation in particular, appears to be completely oblivious to the city's revolutionary iconography. Some indeed find the themes of the political murals, those of martyrdom, anti-Americanism, and the Islamic revolution dated, deeming them an anachronistic medium of persuasion and deception.

Gruber speculates that the murals of Tehran could take different trajectories — ranging from removal, to updating, or restoration. Whatever their future turns out to be, she argues that they are invariably of important historical and documentary value as a manifestation of the role and power of urban visual art in the Islamic context. Last but not least, Karimi's take is the most critical and definitive, seeing the political murals as largely obsolete. She argues that the future of mural art lies in their non-political manifestations and renditions, where mural art can serve as an avenue for aspiring new artists to express themselves in a context of what she terms as “a new civic life.”