

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES IN ACTION: ANNUAL UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH POSTER SESSION

The Politics of Monumentalizing Trauma: Visual Use of Martyrdom in the Memorialization of the Iraq-Iran War

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This poster focuses on three mediums of commemoration: the monument, the memorial, and the museum as tools of state-sanctioned memory creation, and thereby spaces for politicized rituals of memory which further state-building projects. Specifically, during and after The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) the al-Shaheed Monument (1983), and the Victory Arch (1989) in Baghdad and the Martyrs' Museum (1996) in Tehran functioned as politically strategic representations of collective trauma. Both the Ba'ath party in Iraq and the emerging Islamic Republic in Iran used these sites to render and politicize memories of violence and loss. Despite obvious differences, the projects in Baghdad and Tehran appealed to a need to address national trauma while bolstering idealized images of statehood. The Ba'athist party under Saddam Hussein capitalized on the collective trauma of the Iraq-Iran war to further a hegemonic Sunni identity, which was both religious and political. The use of immense scale, vulgar displays of power, and Islamic imagery in both the al-Shaheed Monument and Victory Arch linked Sunni and Ba'athist causes and allowed Hussein to characterize the Iran-Iraq War as a sacred project of national and religious vindication. Similarly, the Martyrs' Museum in Tehran constructs a specific version of history using motifs of the Battle of Karbala, Imam Husayn, martyr and civilian deaths, and blood to tie Iranian national identity to ritualized Shia martyrdom. The Martyrs' Museum parallels the religification of national identity as seen in Iraq, and configures death as a public, religiopolitical act. Despite Ba'athist Iraq's secular self-image, the strategic harnessing of trauma both Iraq and Iran demonstrates a constructed connection between political state hegemony, religious practice, and rituals of grief. In these ways, state propagated imagery through physical commemorations of the Iran-Iraq War furthered the political - and resulting religious - sectarian divide in the official positions of the two nations.

The Politics of Monumentalizing Trauma: Visual Use of Martyrdom in the Memorialization of the Iraq-Iran War and the Creation of National Subjects

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Thesis

The Iraqi and Iranian governments, under Saddam Hussein and Ruhollah Khomeini respectively, harnessed Islamic imagery in their curated commemorations to the Iran-Iraq War to legitimize their own nationalist state. Therefore, they enforced and propagated flattened political-religious national identities. Put differently, the use of Islam and Islamized ritual—deployed within the framework of constructed Sunna/Shia difference—in these commemorations of shared national trauma allowed Hussein’s Ba’ath party and Khomeini’s Islamic Republic to outline a vision of their idealized national subject, one who adhered to a Sunna or Shia political identity and practiced remembrance and mourning accordingly. The construction of these archetypal citizens thereby created and maintained difference between the two states.

**The al-Shaheed Monument (1983)
Baghdad, Iraq**



McCurry Steve, Photograph of The al-Shaheed Monument AD Classics: Al Shaheed Monument / Saman Kamal, ArchDaily, Luke Fiederer, 11 Aug. 2017



Salman, Ahmed “Al-Shaheed Monument and Museum: General View with Sculptural Centerpiece.” Al-Shaheed Monument and Museum, ArchNet.

The two 40 meter turquoise glazed half domes sit on a 190 meter circular platform upon an artificial lake. One dome shelters a metal Iraqi flag and the other a pool of water (Khalil 23). The monument is dedicated to the “Martyrs of Saddam’s Qadisiyya” (Antoon 29). The structure through its form and use of water invokes Islamic imagery of the afterlife. The Iraqi flag, frozen mid-wave posits the nation and its martyrs within an Islamic history and space. Underscored by the underlying Sunni-Ba’athist politics of Saddam Hussein’s wartime rhetoric, this overt Islamic symbolism creates a paradise in which Iraqi martyrs rest for eternity, separate from their Iranian counterparts.

**The Victory Arch (1989)
Baghdad, Iraq**



The Victory Arch’s two forearms protrude from the earth to hold crossing swords over a parade walkway. The forearms were molded from casts of Saddam’s arms and the swords made from melting down the weapons of Iraqi “martyrs” who died fighting in the war (Khalil 4). The two hands rest upon nets filled with the helmets of fallen Iranian soldiers (Khalil 8). The imagery is deeply violent as the hundreds of empty helmets play the visual and symbolic role of human skulls thus providing a visceral image of the cost of the “victory” that the monument commemorates. The casts of his arms which protrude from the piles of helmets demonstrate that the singular importance of his figure emerges from the death of the Iranians. This again creates a fabricated image of opposition, that is, that Hussein is the embodiment of Sunni Ba’athist Iraq exists and emerges due to the death of the Islamic Republic.

**The Central Martyrs’ Museum (1996)
Tehran, Iran**



Karim, Morgan. “Iranian Martyrs Museum.” *Iran-Iraq War*, Wikipedia , 21 Jan. 2013

Gruber, Christiane. “The Martyrs’ Museum in Tehran: Visualizing Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran.” *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 1-2, 2012, pp. 68-97. Taylor & Francis Online. doi:10.1080/08949468.2012.629171.

The Central Martyrs’ Museum contains images of martyrs, copies of the Qur’an, portraits of Khomeini, prayer beads, clothing, weapons, letters, identity cards, photographs, and currency. These objects are often in their found state, covered in blood or the grime of the battle field. One display contains a helmet, boot, clothing, and other personal wartime objects encrusted in gold paint thus rendering them forever preserved in perfect chaos (Gruber 76). The gilding of these objects creates a visually appealing narrative of history in which glory and pain are permanently preserved in their unaltered original states despite the fact that inherent in the museum and memorial alike is the curation and aestheticisation of each event which renders every preservation of history completely subjective. A large mirror outside the prayer rooms of the museum depicts a gold silhouette of the Shrine of Hosayn which is located in Iraq but remains one of the most sacred Shi’ite monuments (Gruber 91). By choosing to portray perhaps the most sacred Shi’ite monument in the museum, the Martyrs’ Museum’s creators solidified the Shi’ite framework of the conflict. The mirror which reflects the image of the viewer next to that of the Shrine of Hosayn, forces Iranian subjects to exist, mourn, and remember within a distinctly Shi’ite space.