



Dream-Realities

Rematerializing Martyrs and the Missing Soldiers of the Iran-Iraq War

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Casting the fallen soldiers of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) as ‘martyrs’ plays a crucial role in the legitimization discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The government has succeeded in integrating many ‘martyr families’ into a state-revering political cult. This ethnographic study draws on theories of affect and atmosphere to investigate how practices around saintly dreams and their materialization in photographs and grave-stones of martyrs have challenged the state narratives and discourses. I approach the veneration of martyrs through both affective and narrative sources and explore grave-stones as new saintly localities. These localities are spaces of divinely intermediation with intimate connection to the transcendental realm. The multifaceted atmosphere of these sites offers nonconformist and heterogeneous entanglements in which dream-images of martyrs allow for the momentary subversion of the state’s political cult.

■ **KEYWORDS:** affective space, atmospheres, Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, dream-images, dream-reality, martyr-cult, Muslim shrines, saintly dreams

How can the gravestones in the martyrs’ section of Tehran’s largest cemetery be tied to an imagination of the beyond, “a medium of absence” (Meyer 2015: 165) that invokes practices of veneration which embellish the formal governmental arrangement of the ‘martyr-cult’ in the post-Iran-Iraq War context? In Behesht-e Zahra cemetery of Tehran, the section dedicated to those designated as martyrs attracts large groups of venerators—women in particular—to visit the graves, perform certain religious rituals, and thus refashion a new field of post-war saintly localities.

Already at the time of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Behesht-e Zahra was the center stage for emerging patterns of mourning and rituals that one might call, following Michel Foucault, the ‘political spirituality’ of Islam (see Afary and Anderson 2005: 4). In his own inquiries about Iran’s Revolution (1979), Foucault witnessed the significance of martyrs in Tehran’s main cemetery.¹ In Behesht-e Zahra, as he describes it, the earthly world and the realm of the transcendent interlink, inasmuch as the mourners locate the ‘spiritual’ as embedded in the ‘corporeal’.



The mourners, in other words, perform what they perceive to be the intermediary power of the martyrs, which emanates from the deceased corpses as a connecting force between martyrs and living supplicants.

Drawing on Foucault's concept, I show how the formal discourse of martyrdom and its governmentalizing practices have brought certain objects at the cemetery into being by molding and specifying them as sacred relics. I then go a step further, exploring the 'atmospheres' (Böhme 1993) that are shaped by the "affective exudations" (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 174) of the graves that challenge the state's official discourse on martyrs. I argue that in venerating graves of certain martyrs, the atmospheres become complicit in generating political and moral claims regarding 'divine presence'.

Based on a sensory ethnography and the participatory observation of a particular gravestone in Behesht-e Zahra, which visitors claim releases a "heavenly fragrance" and provokes saintly dreams, I explore how an intermediary space arises where the engagement with the materiality of the grave actualizes an intimacy with the martyr by way of communication to the Elsewhere. This scented gravestone is the marker of a martyr, Ahmad Polarak, who was an ordinary soldier, and his mother Sayyida Polarak, who during her lifetime was known for her saintly dreams.²

Martyrs and Stones: Mobilizing Affects

The post-war martyr-cult of Iran often gives a privileged position to the term 'martyrdom,' locating it within specific Shia traditions. This conjures up the sufferings and martyrdom of the third imam, Hosayn, and his followers in an uneven battle in Karbala (AD 680). In the contemporary context, martyrdom refers to the statement by Ayatollah Khomeini, the charismatic revolutionary leader, in which he had equated the fallen bodies of the revolutionaries with the martyrs of Karbala. Upon his arrival from exile, he first visited Behesht-e Zahra and delivered a mass address over the graves of martyrs of the revolution. In the post-war period, various state institutions and organizations were formed to arrange such commemorations—leading to the ideological propagation of the martyr-cult—and to provide social services for the families of martyrs.

In this sense, Behesht-e Zahra has turned into the locus of normative modalities of religiosity in Tehran. Containing about 1.5 million two- to three-story graves to embrace more corpses, as well as rooms for Islamic ablution of the deceased, shrines and sites of commemoration, and religious murals (Adelkhah 2003: 114–116), it underlines the governmental habitus and the symbolic repertoire of martyrs in contemporary Iran (Kaur 2010: 447; Mitchell 2012; Shams 2019: 5). The first section of the cemetery, accessed immediately after entering the gate, is reserved by Martyrs Foundation for those who are designated as martyrs by the state. Inside this section, an offshoot of the foundation is in charge of organizing ceremonies, constructing memorials, and disciplining the space. It holds collective prayers, conducts guided tours, and controls visitors' practices and women's attire.

Some of the gravestones are from the 1978–1979 Revolution; others are from the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and the Hajj incident of 1987.³ The section is chronologically ordered through memorial statues that rise amid otherwise horizontal gravestones and also mention the cause of martyrdom. The hierarchy of the fallen soldiers is maintained through the size and placement of their graves, according to their military status.

The strict control and homogeneity of affective arrangements have left little space for inconvenient and non-conforming practices. Martyrs are celebrated as "being alive" and are believed to be "equal in the eyes of Allah," as many banners, quoting Qur'anic verses, remind the visitors.

I depart, however, from this interpretation by analyzing the martyr-cult in Behesht-e Zahra through the lens of a theory of affect that attends to practices and material objects which depict the specificities of the veneration of martyrs in relation to the ‘imaginal elsewhere’ as a time-space between the material and the spiritual (Mittermaier 2011: 4; 2012: 249). I explore how certain affects in a highly homogenized space—crafted and maintained through a state’s formal martyr-cult—can invoke a different set of rituals and invite visitors to combine them with their own subjective, interiorized experiences, such as saintly dreams. How do these rituals embellish and/or challenge the formal discourse and the order of the place?

The focus on affect and Elsewhere provides possibilities for capturing the multifaceted role of bodies and material objects beyond any fixed symbolic reference. I draw on Yael Navaro-Yashin’s (2012: 173) concept of “affective space” that conceives bodies and things through the energies they “exude to their environment.” The veneration of the martyrs, in this respect, hinges upon an extraordinary character that “gives presence” (Böhme 1993: 119; 1995: 22) to its material surroundings and casts a spiritual atmosphere for the venerators.

The ‘imaginal elsewhere’, specifically in the Shia tradition, is tied to what the renowned Orientalist Henry Corbin has dubbed as *mundus imaginalis* or ‘the imaginal’ (Corbin and Horine 1976).⁴ Corbin locates the imaginal as the place where spirit and body are one—where spirit, taking on a body, becomes *caro spiritualis* or ‘spiritual corporeity’ (see also Carrette 2000: 139; Stauth 1991: 274).⁵ In Corbin’s view, the imaginal world is ontologically real; the imagination is a privileged locus of experience, transformation, and relation. As testaments to the reality of the imagination, Corbin underlines both ‘dreaming’, particularly as an experience that we all share and that opens onto the imaginal, and the veridical nature of visionary dreams, as bearers of other-worldly knowledge. He goes even further, asserting that imaginal experiences are more real than concrete experiences in the flesh. Yet he states that they share something with sensory experiences since they cannot take place, at least at first, without the mediation of the senses (Corbin and Horine 1976: 10–12; Pandolfo 2018: 176–177). Corbin’s viewpoint is integral to understanding Muslims’ saintly and veridical dreams and aligns with Amira Mittermaier’s (2012) Elsewhere, tracing the location of saints/martyrs and dream-images at the *liminal and intermediary* passage between the two worlds. The locus of Corbin’s ‘imaginal space’ is reversed in Walter Benjamin’s ([1927] 2004: 3) conception of ‘dream-reality’ (*Traumwirklichkeit*), for he seeks to show the opposite path—namely, how the images and materials of the waking world are akin to dream-images.

In analyzing the burial sites of the martyrs, I suggest bridging these two approaches, showing, on the one hand, how saintly dreams impinge upon the imaginal at gravesites and, on the other, how the photographs and relics present on these graves render the dream-reality visible. Mittermaier (2008: 50) has articulated the interconnection between dreams and saintly localities as mutually constitutive. Venerators whom I discuss in this work have experienced dreams prior to, during, or after visiting the shrines. Meanwhile, drawing on Benjamin I am able to illustrate that saintly and veridical dreaming are not always in causal relationship with the shrines. Rather, dream-reality stands for a porous medium that channels a multitude of temporalities and images—the divinely, the ghostly, the mythical, as well as involuntary memories—to the affective space of saints and shrines.

Concomitantly, the interface between the affects that come from things and the atmospheres around them, which bear a spiritual mood, characterizes the venerators’ perceptions of saintly localities. In this sense, the venerators’ engagement with graves, tombs, and photographs of the martyrs reflects a shift away from the centrality of the formal, state-generated discourse of martyrdom. It underpins instead the ‘imaginal elsewhere’ as the social matrix of dreams, cosmological references, and their material reverberations.

The physical, supernatural, and imaginary ‘remnants’ (Navaro 2017; Navaro-Yashin 2012: 15) sedimented in the graves of martyrs provoke potentialities that go beyond the state’s objectives, illustrating how the state-crafted normative arrangement of space is obstructed by the incongruent practices of veneration that are in fact shaped around unassimilated remnants of state-revering and memorializing projects. In celebrating an unknown ordinary soldier, the venerators disrupt the affective arrangements of the martyrs’ section and reject the structural hierarchy of the place.

Martyr Polarak’s Scented Gravestone

In the small corner of the martyrs’ section in Behesht-e Zahra lies Ahmad Polarak, the famous martyr whose gravestone is said to emit a “heavenly fragrance” and is “never dry.” In three trips to the cemetery, once in 2015 and later in 2016, I conducted an ethnography of Polarak’s gravestone. My first trip was on a Friday morning in May 2015. I drove in the traffic jam of people visiting their deceased family members. I arrived at the first section and walked among the gravestones, observing the metal-framed glass cases containing the photograph of each martyr, the Iranian flag draped over each tomb, and the narrow lines of grass that surrounded them. I was conscious of the gravestones of various heights and sizes, and took care not to fall over them.⁶ The visitors were laying flowers, pouring rosewater, and reciting religious texts. Some were caressing the gravestones of the martyrs while talking to the spirit of the deceased. As I approached plot 26 of the martyrs’ section, I saw from afar a group of women sitting tightly around the gravestone of Martyr Ahmad Polarak. The group stretched to the neighboring graves, and at the intersection with the road they took turns performing their prayers on a small red rug.

A middle-aged man was performing elegiac poetry (*nowheh*) for Imam Hosayn, and the women, their faces covered with the edge of their black veils, were crying in silence, their shoulders shaking. His performance attracted passersby and families who were sitting around the graves nearby. Those who were passing, it seemed, engaged less deeply in the prayer ritual than the women. They stopped for a short while, murmured some words of prayer and continued on their way.

Many of the new arrivals at Martyr Polarak’s grave were driven simply by curiosity; they wanted to see for themselves the grave of the ‘fragrant martyr’. Polarak’s fame has to do with the scent of roses that engulfs the gravestone with a layer of cold humidity, according to his venerators. They believe that the fragrance descends on the gravestone to mark Polarak’s exalted status of saintliness. The stone and its fragrance forge an elating and easing atmosphere among venerators, which they believe is linked to the spiritual and divinely character of the stone.

As I tried to find my way through the crowd around the grave, women venerators pushed me toward the stone with their bodies. One grabbed my arm while repeating, “Come and touch it, my girl! See, we dry it with our chador, but the moistness reappears on the stone.” Statements such as these were not only meant to attract strangers; women would also share their sense of awe with each other while repeatedly gathering the perfume with their chadors. Every round of veneration started with a new group, kneeling in a close circle around the grave, with people’s palms on the stone in acts of prayer while collecting the scented dampness with the edge of their veils. It culminated when they would raise their perfumed hands to the sky and chant a salute to the Prophet and his family for the acceptance of their veneration.

A chain of rites around the site reinforces the belief in the existence of the fragrance. In the brief time I stood at Polarak’s grave, I observed two large groups of women in sessions of mourning. As soon as they arrived, the women broke through other mourners and approached



Figures 1 and 2: Martyr Polarak's gravestone, May 2015. Photographs © Sana Chavoshian

the fences. They bent over the grave several times, rubbed the gravestone through their veils, and then touched their faces. Having collected perfume from the gravestone, they proceeded to scatter small packages of sweets all over the grave.

Later, a girl among them picked up some sweets from the gravestone and distributed them among the visitors. Such distribution of food for the purpose of a religious promise (*nadhr*) is a well-known custom among women at shrines or in women's domestic prayer circles. The girl devoted this act specifically to Martyr Polarak's saintly soul. However, what distinguished her sweets from broader practices of *nadhr* was, in her own words, "the lasting effect of their perfume" on the body. "They heal the soul," she said, while packing the rest of the sweets in her bag for her family.⁷ The ritual of collecting and redistributing the perfume plays a significant role in the way the venerators perceive the fragrance. It stages the spiritual atmosphere around the fragrance, bringing it from a vague olfactory impression to the level of embodiment through eating and performance.

There are also several stories about the origin of the fragrance that refer to the 'imaginal elsewhere'. Such stories spread among visitors at the graveside and in women's domestic prayer groups. In an elegiac performance, I heard a biographical narrative. A man with a white beard and a *kafiyya*—a checkered scarf that is a symbol of the Palestinian resistance and popular with members of the Basij (an offshoot of the Revolutionary Guards)—raised his hands over his head and shook them back and forth in the air, a move commonly used in religious mourning performances to secure the audience's attention. In a loud voice, he told the following story about Martyr Polarak:

You, who are gathered today at this grave! You should know that Martyr Polarak was an orphan who rose to the rank of military commander. A commander who was voluntarily cleaning stinking and dark holes for the well-being of other soldiers. For this reason, he is rewarded with this scent. Martyr Polarak was a teenager who became pious in his early youth. He prayed throughout the nights. It is his tears for Imam Hosayn during prayer that have turned to this perfume.

The man stopped for a moment, bent down, and touched the stone with his right hand. In a calmer voice, he then showed his palm to the crowd and added forcefully: "A stream from heaven passes under this stone!" He ascribed the source of the perfume to the sensible presence of the divine in absentia, dilating the site into an Elsewhere. His performance, with resonant sound and facial expressions strained in grief, gave new purchase to the atmosphere around the stone. It was a form of attunement by affective and expressive divine speech, now reappropriated to galvanize venerators' emotions and to define their proper mode of emotional expression (see Hirschkind 2006: 121–122; Schulz 2012).

On the bench closest to the row of tombs where Martyr Polarak is buried, a woman was sitting with a pile of papers on her knees. During our conversation, she revealed another narrative about the source of the fragrance. This woman, whom I shall refer to as Narges, kept records of those whose prayers to Martyr Polarak had been granted. Narges told me that pilgrims in monetary need would bring her documents pertaining to their financial difficulties. Charitable pilgrims would also approach her, offering to help those among the pilgrims who were in such need. The pilgrims who received such grants would not consider the money as charity, but as a gift from Polarak. The offerings would take place after reading testaments to Polarak's saintly interventions in venerators' lives.⁸

When talking about the fragrance of the stone, Narges became cautious and defensive. In the presence of people whom she believed were skeptical, she seemed reluctant to speak of

her experience. Unlike the *nowheh*-performing man, she did not regard the perfume as self-evidently extraordinary. Nor, to my surprise, did she relate the fragrance to the sole fact of the martyrdom of Ahmad Polarak. In a genealogical elaboration, she explained to me the transmission of saintly connections in Polarak's family, starting from the mother's title, Sayyida, which marks her as the Prophet Muhammad's descendant. In Narges's view, the scent of the stone was a continuation of prophetic characters transferred by means of genes and blood. She described Sayyida Polarak as a virtuous, pious woman with a remarkable ability to experience saintly dreams. She added that most women mourning by the grave had been trained at monthly pious circles that Sayyida Polarak had held in her small house in Tehran and in which Narges had also participated.

As her story unfolded, Narges's body seized up, and her face and lips turned pale in awe: "I can swear that the perfume here on the grave is the same perfume on Sayyida Polarak's hands when she was touching our faces after falling into the state of vision."⁹ Then, in a rapid change of mood that I noticed in the words stuttering between her teeth, she revealed that one day the state authorities had told Sayyida Polarak to desist from any ritual practice related to her saintly vision and the perfume on her hands. They even banned her home-based lectures and intercepted women at the gate of her house to stop them from visiting her. Despite these measures, the scent had subsequently "re-emerged on the stone." Narges then pointed to the placard placed over the gravestone as a response to actions of the cemetery authorities, which read: "The mother of the martyr forbids lighting candles at this place." Recalling an occasion when she had to clean the burnt spots and ashes of flowers from the grave's surface and stunned by the "unbelief" of the authorities, she said: "The guides were setting fire on the stone to confirm its sham in the eyes of the venerators. They were watching overnight to find the person who covers its surface with perfumed oil. They were sending experts to qualify the smell."

Narges's emphasis on the quality of Polarak's fragrance is significant for its double sense here. First, the transition of the fragrance from the mother to the gravestone of her son was evident to Narges due to the identical scent. The configuration of the dreamer-mother and her martyred son with the same scent of roses had elevated the family to a saintly status. Second, the scent by itself is not extraordinary to the visitors. Some describe it as akin to the smell of a popular perfume for men named Tearose.

From this perspective, the sharp scent of the perfume appears in what is considered as heavenly fragrance and charges dream-reality with political affordance. It depicts vividly the close ties of the venerators' 'imaginal elsewhere' to the taste of religious authorities and the state. The fragrance attests a constellation of sacred places and Muslim shrines, the souvenir perfume of pilgrims to Mecca, and a well-known product in the close circle of Ayatollah Khomeini, rendering its familiar smell to the space of the divine.¹⁰ While it conveys an atmosphere of transcendental intimacy to the martyr among venerators, it is driven from the life-sphere of pious women as it finds its way back to the waking world.

In his article "Dream Kitsch," Walter Benjamin ([1927] 2004) refers to the mundane aspect of dream-reality to indicate the interpenetration of the dream and waking world in an anti-Freudian constellation. 'Dream-realities,' according to Benjamin, stand against the ahistorical Freudian unconscious in that they render a historically specific phenomenon. Objects ascribed to dream-realities are "'ordinary' commodities [that] become invested with a magical, quasi-religious and dreamlike aura" (Calderbank 2003: 3). As the dream and waking world are interpenetrated, ordinary objects from everyday life are assimilated into dreams as much as they find their way back to the waking world. The permeation of qualities of the imagination and dreamscapes into everyday life is a genuine human experience, which can be observed in the *heavenly fragrance* emitted from Polarak's gravestone.

Reconciliation with Missing Martyrs

In what follows I discuss another incident concerning Martyr Polarak's gravestone—the dense presence of photographs of missing and fallen soldiers placed around his tomb—which I view as an intersection of dreams and sites of veneration. Among veneratorators there is a new perception that the site invokes veridical dreams of the missing soldiers. The intense pictographic reservoir around the tomb, I argue, offers veneratorators the experience of living and sharing their veridical dreams.

My second visit to Martyr Polarak's gravestone took place in a rather different context. Sayyida Polarak had passed away in February 2016 and was buried far from her son. With her death, the intrusion of the state authorities seemed alleviated. Among the veneratorators of Martyr Polarak were old women and men in wheelchairs who were carrying framed photographs of their martyred sons. Some of them, I learned, were parents of missing soldiers. Their veneration of Martyr Polarak sought his intermediation in order to precisely locate their sons' place in the vast cemetery of anonymous graves through veridical dreams.

To facilitate visits, a large green fiberglass shade was erected as a protection against the sun. In its shadow, the rows of tombs looked even more compact. Around Martyr Polarak's tomb, there were numerous photographs of fallen soldiers, depicting them on the threshold of death, and notes stuck on every spot of his tomb. The density of images here was far greater than those in all other sections of the cemetery I had walked through, including old pictures of groups of men in military uniform in the battlefields, posters with religious themes, short advertisements for pilgrimage tours, and handwritten pieces of prayer. There were also close-up photographs of blood-covered faces of fallen soldiers and long shots of renowned military commanders. The faces of the deceased and missing and the blood-covered faces of those on the verge of death had created a phantasmagoric atmosphere that generated a sense of proximity to the dead, an affective proximity expressed in visual and photographic mnemonics. The loss was exhibited not only in terms of absence from life; it was also commemorated for the corpses that had not been retrieved through discovering operations.

Between the rows of tombs, I noticed two women looking closely at the collage of pictures. I approached them with my camera, curious about their practice. One of them, Tahereh, a confident and outspoken woman, had already sensed my presence. When I explained to her that I knew Sayyida Polarak, she was able to trust me. While still standing in front of the photographs, she told me with eyes widened in excitement about women who had seen some of the martyrs from the photographs in their dreams. She then lowered her voice and explained how the process occurs in a dream, where Martyr Polarak appears as the mediator between the dreamer and the lost soldier: "Martyr Polarak takes them to the location or appears together with the missing family members."

I looked at the pictures again. Some of the photographs were old, torn around the edges, or covered partly by another picture. There was no list of names or dates to identify the faces. On one of them, I found the red mark of a pen over the head of a smiling man. It was quite likely a sign that he was either missing or martyred. What best captured these pictures that evoked dreams was the idea that *they were coming from the dream-world*, as one of the visitors had described to me.

Tahereh was a young married woman who worked as an accountant for a private company. She was attentive in her words and watchful of superstition. In the first few minutes of our chat, she had made it clear that what she told me were her "personal feelings and might not be true for others." She was keen to explain the reasons for her visit along with some evidence. At a women's pious circle in Tehran, she had heard about a woman, a missing martyr's sister, who had



Figures 3 and 4: Photographs of fallen soldiers in their blood at plot 26, February 2016.
Photographs © Sana Chavoshian

dreamt of her brother as a result of venerating Martyr Polarak. Since the incident, Tahereh had been regularly commuting to the cemetery on the last Friday of every month in order to pay her respects. Once, during her visit, she met the woman. Tahereh was able to recognize her through the framed photograph she was holding, which carried the name of her martyred brother.

I wanted to know whether she had found her brother. She made a promise to take me to him. We went together to one of the anonymous martyrs' plot, and she showed me the grave which she had seen in her dream. There I learned how important it is to visit Martyr Polarak regularly, not for asking for dreams but because he is not an individual martyr. He is present to us as much as to other martyrs. It is all so real. They have compared the data of the buried anonymous martyr with her brother, and they found out that the location, time, and even their age matches.

Tahereh's introspective remarks about what motivated her to commute to Behesht-e Zahra demands thinking deeper about the interlinkage of the imaginal and the material, the dream and the material objects of the waking world.

In Benjamin's ([1927] 2004) conception of dream-reality, images from dreams permeate into the waking world. He provides an insight into martyrs' veneration as the correspondence between overlapping spaces of dreams and waking. The anonymous photographs of the soldiers can be viewed as a visual liminal experience. This image-space serves the common aims of veneration while promoting the transcendental connection between the martyrs and the dreamers. With this in mind, we may consider veneration in the broader context of pilgrimage to martyrs' graves.

Based on Tahereh's comments, dream-reality grounds the formation of new saintly localities. It is dreams that motivate the venerators to undertake a pilgrimage such as this. In her evocative work on divine-driven dreams in Egypt, Mittermaier (2008: 58–62) sheds light on this interlinkage by outlining its modalities. Mittermaier speaks of 'visitational dreams' prior to pilgrimage and the occasions in which dreams are incited during pilgrimage.¹¹ Dreamers' veneration of Martyr Polarak's gravestone follows similar modalities. However, as manifest in the case of Tahereh, the link between dreams and shrines is not always causal. Instead, Tahereh's interest in observing and communicating about the pictures implies treating photographs as *supernatural remnants* that have remained from saintly and veridical dreams. She, then, experiences herself in reference to her immediate locatedness at the grave and in the part that belongs to her dream-world. In this sense, the rose fragrance and the photographs go hand in hand in shaping and reinforcing the dream-reality.

Furthermore, Tahereh did not undertake her pilgrimage for the sake of an upcoming dream or the possibility of 'falling into' saintly dreams.¹² Instead, she put her point lucidly by phrasing her experience of locatedness as being in a "neighborhood of saints/martyrs" (*hamsaye-i khuban*). More precisely, the pictographic reservoir invokes the redemption of proximity (Tserkassova 2014: 121). It is not only the tomb of the local saint that attracts the venerators, but also the physically remote lost victims of war and the imaginal space for the missing soldiers.

This blurring of the boundary between missing and dreamt martyrs intensifies the venerators' experience of the imaginal space, where conjuring up saintly dream-images takes place through looking at the photographs and perceiving the way they return the gaze (Benjamin [1935] 2005). The absence of captions on the pictures reflects the indecipherability that 'the dreamers' and the 'owners' of the pictures ascribe to them. They are charged with another purpose, with the potential to pass through dreams and point to another place. In a non-representational moment, dense and anachronistic, the images symbolize the intermediary space, the

short ‘distance’ between the realm of transcendence—the divine as the house of martyrs—and the mundane matters of waking reality.

The dreamers and the photographs of the missing soldiers embellish settled ideations of martyrdom that are cultivated by the state insofar as they reference a ‘thick presence,’ a place critically intimate with other times (Kasmani 2019b: 36). They dilate the tomb of Polarak to entail an ‘imaginal elsewhere’ from which the lost soldiers and martyrs communicate with their venerators. This insight might explain why such rituals at the cemetery are viewed as increasingly threatening to state power and its authorities in that they craft and embellish concepts and practices that despite being regulated by the state are subsequently reappropriated.

The propensity of the image to have an opaque status between concept and thing—or, as I put it, between a dream and the waking world—has been a long-standing concern for Michael Taussig (1993: 134–135), who writes of the “fetish-power of appearance” and “exceeding symbolic signification.” There are certain occasions that embrace the possibility of detaching the aura of images, releasing the spirit of objective materials and calling upon the aura to animate their spiritual power (*ibid.*; see also Benjamin [1935] 2005).

The pictures around the tomb of Martyr Polarak are intended to create a spiritual entity. They mark the threshold, the porous experience that relates images from dreams to pictures in the waking world. Nameless and without captions, they depict faces of death—faces of soldiers who can be evoked only in dreams. Lost, they cannot be properly commemorated or grieved. They are missing wanderers in dreamscapes.

Conclusion

In analyzing the veneration of Martyr Polarak as one that permeates the dream-world and is experienced sensorially, intermingled with atmospheres, I illustrate a synchronization of the real and the imaginal through images from dreams and a this-worldly fragrance. There is a large array of scholarly literature that analyzes the political and social relevance of the notion of martyrdom as epitomized in ‘the Karbala paradigm’ (Fischer 1980; see also Aghaie 2004; Deeb 2006; Gilsenan 2000; Keddie 1983). In these works, the emphasis lies on the symbolic order that involves martyrs: in Shia discourse, ‘salvific and passive’ Islam is distinguished from the ‘revolutionary and active’ power of the martyrs of Karbala as a force of social cohesion and mobilization.¹³

Against the grain of the one-sided ideological and symbolic repertoire of the Karbala paradigm, an affective approach allows me to emphasize the role of the ‘imaginal elsewhere’ by drawing attention to the invocation of saintly dreams and spiritual atmospheres. I read Polarak’s tomb through the material, supernatural, and imaginary remnants that are unassimilable by formal nationalistic and memorializing practices. The supernatural remnants around his tomb consist of collective visions and images from saintly dreams (Mittermaier 2012: 260; Navaro 2017). The appearance of the ‘imaginal elsewhere’ hinges upon the intermingling of sensorial atmospheres and images from dreams. Concomitantly, the affective and *imaginal* space of martyrs underlies ritual practices as a marker of political stances, affiliations, conflicts, and differences in Behesht-e Zahra.

By interlacing the ‘imaginal elsewhere’ and dream-reality, I try to soften the sharp distinction that Mittermaier (2011: 249) considers between this-worldly matters and aspirations and the higher other-worldly ones. In this binary, she perceives dreams as counterpoints to the state-promoted order of modernity, with its this-worldly sensibilities and material affects. Instead, I argue that ordinary objects from everyday life generate dream-images and build a transcendental intimacy with the martyrs. To this end, I capture the elusive atmospheres around the burial

sites of martyrs. The veneration of martyrs concentrates on sensory elements, such as fragrances, colors, and sounds, on the one hand, and on the reinvention of the stories of martyrs and their sites, on the other. Attending to these elements as constitutive of the atmosphere around the grave of a martyr, I show how they resist the “increasing governmentality” and “conventional structures of authority” at sites of saint veneration (Kasmani 2019a: 144). In fact, I argue, the post-war saintly localities emerge out of the interface between dream-images, imaginal space, atmospheres, and the remnants of a conventional and formal martyr-cult.

The spiritual atmosphere of the tomb renders multiple references to the divine, sometimes as a fragrance from heaven and sometimes as an image-space of the imaginal where martyrs and saints are gathered. Despite being a nuisance to authorities and sometimes prohibited by the state, emerging performances around saintly localities embellish the martyr-cult through ordinary objects and everyday substances such as a popular perfume.

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■ NOTES

1. Foucault’s *reportages des idées* were translated and included as an appendix in Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson’s (2005) *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*. Georg Stauth (1991) discusses Foucault’s hermeneutics of ‘technologies of the self’ as related to change in a paper on the theories contained in Foucault’s reports on the Iranian Revolution. A recent work on Foucault’s ‘political spirituality’ is Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi’s (2016) *Foucault in Iran*.
2. On the dynamics of transcendental and intersubjective affinities with Shi’i saints among women, see Edith Szanto’s (2012) “Following Sayyida Zaynab” and Chavoshian’s (forthcoming) “In the Aura of the Prophet: Dreaming Sayyida Faṭīma and the Tropes of Connectedness in Iranian Women Pious Circles.”
3. The 1987 clash between Shi’i Iranian pilgrims, who were gathering for their annual political demonstration in Mecca, and the Saudi Arabian security forces resulted in the death of about 400 people.
4. Corbin applies ‘the imaginal’ and the Persian terms *alam-e mithal* and *malakut* interchangeably.
5. Compare with Foucault’s concept of ‘political spirituality’ (Afary and Anderson 2005).
6. On the visual atmosphere of post-revolutionary Iran, Roxanne Varzi (2006: 24–25) writes: “In Khomeini’s Iran the concept of the image functioned as more than just a sign; it was an actual actor on

the political stage ... Iran as an impermeable surface of images and imaginings [was portrayed by] angry fists and ... crazed martyrs; ... a place where for years the black and red colors of mourning and martyrdom shrouded the nation.”

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. Names of individuals have been changed.
8. For ‘evidencification’ in terms of attesting saintly interventions and truthfulness, see Bandak (2013).
9. It should be noted how Narges’s argument on smell aligns with the Islamic dream tradition, in which dreaming is considered an inner eye to the other world (Marlow 2008), and how the dreamer’s movement in the physical world (e.g., going to a shrine) is believed to complement the imaginal (Sindawi 2008).
10. On Imam Khomeini’s web page, see “Memoire: On Tearose Perfume,” http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/c78_117847/ (2008, in Persian).
11. Dreams not only lead to pilgrims visiting shrines. They also shape a discourse of authentication and validation of saintly places (see, e.g., Bilu 2010: 154).
12. Here Tahereh’s ‘selfscape’ (Hollan 2004) is influenced by dreaming emotionally and perceptually. However, dreaming is not a personal, individual experience but derives its motivation from shared narratives of dreams.
13. For more recent critical engagement with the Karbala paradigm, see Christian Funke (2017: 287) and Edith Szanto (2012: 31–34).

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