



BEHEŠT-E ZAHRĀ'

BEHEŠT-E ZAHRĀ', the chief cemetery of Tehran and principal shrine of the Islamic Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79. Its name, “the Paradise of [Fāṭema] the Resplendent,” is by way of allusion to the Jannat al-Baqī' cemetery in Medina, where the Prophet's daughter is generally believed to be buried.

Extending over a vast area to the right of the highway leading out of Tehran in the direction of Qom, the Behešt-e Zahrā' began to be used for burials in the 1330s Š./1950s. It acquired a particular association with the revolution when anti-regime demonstrators killed by security forces in Tehran throughout much of 1978 began to be buried there. In the aftermath of the massacre that occurred on 8 September 1978, no fewer than 4,290 certificates are said to have been issued for burial at Behešt-e Zahrā' (Hiro, p. 77). As one of the few places in Tehran immune from attack by security forces, the cemetery became a site for demonstrations and commemorative ceremonies: mourners would be exhorted by preachers to continue the struggle against the shah's regime.

Because of the emotive and symbolic value the cemetery had acquired, it was chosen by Ayatollah Komeynī as the site for his first public address on returning to Iran on 12 Bahman 1357 Š./2 February 1979. Proceeding there directly from Mehrābād airport and flanked by members of the Revolutionary Council, he delivered a speech denouncing the existing Majles as unrepresentative and the Baḳtīār government as illegal. In the same address he also accused the shah of having caused only the cemeteries to prosper under his rule (Emām Komeynī, pp. 3-9).



The years after the revolution were, however, to see a great increase in the numbers of those buried at Behešt-e Zahrā'. Many of those killed by different insurrectionary groups, notably the Mojāhedīn-e Kālq, have been buried there as martyrs of the revolution. A special area was assigned, for example, to those killed in the explosion at the Tehran headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party on 7 Tīr 1360 Š./28 June 1981. An infinitely larger category is formed by those who have fallen in the war with Iraq, which began on 31 Šahrīvar 1359 Š./22 September 1980; they, too, are buried in special areas of the cemetery.

Tombs at Behešt-e Zahrā' are typically surmounted by a metal-framed glass cases containing a photograph of the deceased, religious texts, and—not infrequently—a portrait of Ayatollah Komeynī, as well as by flags of the Islamic Republic and red, black, and green banners bearing religious inscriptions. In addition to private mourning at the graveside, officially organized rallies and demonstrations also take place at Behešt-e Zahrā', particularly during the celebrations of the triumph of the revolution held each Bahman/February. The consecration of Behešt-e Zahrā' to the cult of martyrdom is now vividly symbolized by the fountain, installed at a crossroads in this vast city of the dead, that runs perpetually with red-tinted water.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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D. Hiro, *Iran under the Ayatollahs*, London, 1985.

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