The Banknotes of Abyssinia and Ethiopia

Coupons from Italian POW Camps in British India: a Reminder of a Harsh Era

Tokens of Transformation and Contesting Power: Iranian Banknotes in Revolution and Turmoil

One Collector’s Long Journey to Find The Banknote Book – A Review
Tokens of Transformation and Contesting Power: Iranian Banknotes in Revolution and Turmoil

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As could be seen in a previous article, the Pahlavi state used symbols of ancient Iran and modern technology to express its political agenda and lay out a form of justification for its rule. At the same time aspects of traditional forms of legitimation, especially Islamic forms of legitimation, were almost completely neglected.

As Peter Chelkowski remarks “[b]y the 1980s, the Islamic Republic was in full semiotic control of the representation of itself, and serves as a dramatic example of how collectively held symbols – appearing in murals, graffiti, postage stamps, banknotes, posters and primary-school textbook illustrations – were used to mobilize a people.” Provisionally, the remaining stock of ancien régime banknotes was overprinted and there was a plethora of locally altered banknotes, which sometimes just bore an “x” that covered the Shah’s face. Yet many times slogans and stamps were also added. Successively, the symbols of monarchy altogether vanished and were replaced by symbols of the “Islamic Revolution.” Yet, while the discontinuities might be obvious, this article will also shed some light on continuities, both structurally and symbolically. Most importantly however, it shows a dramatic ideological paradigm shift that was expressed and created by iconographic means.

The only mosque ever shown on a Pahlavi era banknote was the mausoleum of Daniel in Shush (ārāmghā-e dānīāl). It does surprise, since the importance of this Jewish and Muslim pilgrimage site must certainly be considered second to those Shi’i sites in Mashhad, Qom or the historically important mosques of Esfahan – to name only the most celebrated. Yet, its geographic location might have tipped the scale. Shush or Susa, as it was known in ancient times, lies within the borders of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan. In the early 1900s, fostered by the British, it claimed independence from Iran as an autonomous emirate with the name of “Arabistan.” The subsequent rebellion of Sheikh Khaz’al al-Ka’bi was short-lived, and finally quelled under Reza Shah. Thus, the conical shaped dome of Daniel’s mausoleum on the back of the 5 rial banknote (1937-1944, P32, P39) can be considered another symbol of a successful government controlling and representing all of its territory.
The Peculiar Fate of the Blue 200 rial Banknote

One of the last banknotes to be issued by the government of the Shah holds another very distinctive place in Iran’s iconographic history. It shows a portrait of the Shah, which was first introduced in the 10th series of 1971 commemorating 2,500 years of the Persian Empire (P103). It features the Šāhyād-e Āryāmehr monument which, completed by the young architect Hoseyn Amanat in 1971, stands in line with the École des Beaux Arts monuments which became so characteristic of the late Pahlavi era’s architectural legacy.5 It was inspired both by the Roman tradition of the triumphal arch and the Tīq-e Kārān, the only remaining structure of the former Sasanid capital of Ctesiphon in modern day Iraq. Part of the imperial palace, it had a large freestanding eyvān.6

The Šāhyād, however, goes beyond referring only to pre-Islamic architectural legacy for it attempts to unite three major periods of Iranian history by combining the Sasanid parabolic arch of Ctesiphon with the pointed Islamic vault in a new construction of concrete and travertine. The architect placed small yards around the monument, through which the visitor was conveyed to the white stone tower which itself represented the rule of the Shah and his father.8 It was the iconic expression of a symbolic gateway to the coming of the “Great Civilization” envisioned by the Shah who personally approved the design. Located just a few hundred metres away from the city’s airport it also served as an actual gateway to the capital.8

The first issue reads the caption of meydān-e Šāhyād (place of Šāhyād), which was later changed to the name of the monument itself (šāhyād-e āryāmehr). It also showed a pattern repeating a six-cornered star on its back, which resembled the Star of David. Soon “rumours were spread that the new banknote had been printed in Israel and in a few hours the Iranian bank cancelled it”10 – rumours which can still be heard today, as some money traders in Tehran refer to it as “print of Israel” (čāp-e ersā il). The design was soon recognisably altered to depict a twelve-cornered star.

During the Revolution the biggest demonstrations occurred around the Šāhyād and some of the most iconic photographs of that time bear witness to this. But how did the new regime deal with the fact that the Šāhyād was unmistakably a monument to and by the Shah? Sadeq Khalkhali, a Shi’i cleric labelled the Shah holds another very distinctive place in Iran’s iconographic history. It shows a portrait of the Shah, which was first introduced in the 10th series of 1971 commemorating 2,500 years of the Persian Empire (P103). It features the Šāhyād-e Āryāmehr monument which, completed by the young architect Hoseyn Amanat in 1971, stands in line with the École des Beaux Arts monuments which became so characteristic of the late Pahlavi era’s architectural legacy.5 It was inspired both by the Roman tradition of the triumphal arch and the Tīq-e Kārān, the only remaining structure of the former Sasanid capital of Ctesiphon in modern day Iraq. Part of the imperial palace, it had a large freestanding eyvān.6

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During the Revolution the biggest demonstrations occurred around the Šāhyād and some of the most iconic photographs of that time bear witness to this. But how did the new regime deal with the fact that the Šāhyād was unmistakably a monument to and by the Shah? Sadeq Khalkhali, a Shi’i cleric labelled the "hanging judge,"11 who aimed for the destruction of Persepolis and Cyrus’ tomb in Pasargadae, and eventually demolished the mausoleum of Reza Shah in Tehran – is reported to have planned the same for the Šāhyād.12 It was only the mix of marble and a reinforced concrete structure13 that saved the monument from its doom. For a brief time the very rare issue of a 200 rial bill depicting the renamed “Monument of Freedom” (banā-ye āzdādī) appeared, but was replaced soon thereafter. Today the Šāhyād is referred to as “Freedom Tower” (borj-e āzdādī), its square as “Freedom Square” (meydān-e āzdādī), and despite neglect14 continues to be an important public symbol and political stage. Not only are the annual celebrations of the “Victory of the Islamic Revolution” on 22nd of Bahman held there. In a strategy that Charles Kurzman coined “cultural Jiu-Jitsu,”15 in parallel to the martial art that makes use of an opponent’s energy, the “Green Movement” (jonbē-ye sahāz), which emerged as a protest movement after the elections of 2009, has occupied various spaces of meaning that seemed to be exclusive to the government discourse.

A poster calling for protests on February 14, 2011, the first anniversary of Mir-Hoseyn Māsavī’s arrest. In the heyday of the so called “Arab Spring” it draws parallels not only to the Iranian Revolution – by showing the Šāhyād and making it the staging point – but by the use of the plural form of “dictator” also to the ongoing events in Arab states: Muhammad Hosni Mubarak resigned from his office only three days before February 14, 2011.

The Hot Summer of 1981

The ever-growing tensions between the factions of the Revolution made an imprint on the decisions of the Central Bank. Ali-Reza Nobari (1980-1981)16 was replaced by Mohsen Nurbakhsh (1981-1986 and 1994-2003) as Governor of the “Central Bank of Islamic Republic of Iran,” as it was now called, after Abolhassan Banisadr (1980-1981) was impeached as Iranian President.22 Under Banisadr and Nobari the Shah’s watermark that continued to be used in an overprinted form, was replaced by a “Lion and Sun” (šīr-ō-khorūd) watermark. Overruling a committee of historians and artists,23 in 1980 Khomeini replaced the “Lion and Sun” with an emblem representing both Allah (“God”) and overlapping parts of the Islamic creed lā ilāha illā l-lāh (“There is no God but God”). A few months later also the banknotes were affected by this change and bear testimony to the defeat of the moderate nationalist wing: while the printing machines at Thomas de la Rue were still running, it was decided to cover the “Lion and Sun” watermark with a black seal reading “Islamic Republic of Iran.”24
Stages of a revolutionary transformation: six-cornered star on back and meydān-e Šahyād (“place of Šahyād”, P103a, top left and top right); twelve-cornered star on back and meydān-e Šahyād (“place of Šahyād”, P103b, second from top, left and right); twelve-cornered star and Šahyād-e āryāmehr (“monument of the Light of the Aryans”, P103c, third from top, left and right); overprint issue with “lion and sun” (P119, fourth from top, at left) and twelve-cornered star and banā-ye āzādī (“monument of freedom,” P127a, fourth from top, at right); redesigned issue (P127, bottom left and right).
The first modern Iranian banknote from 1890 (P1, top) displays the national symbol of Iran, the “Lion and Sun” (šīr-ō-khoršīd) with the Qajar Kiani crown. 90 years later the “Lion and Sun” had one of its last appearances for the time being on an Iranian banknote (P118, middle). While there is an overabundance of theories on its origin, by the 16th century the “Lion and Sun” (bottom) had become a multifaceted symbol in Iranian culture, and over time developed into a national symbol, bridging religious, ethnic and political gaps. It appeared on the national flag, was printed to coins, medallions and paper money alike; but in the eyes of the clerics it soon became a symbol attached to the monarchy. Today, nevertheless, it remains the most prominent sign of Iranian nationhood and identity in Iran, among the Iranian diaspora and many exiled organizations – ranging from the National Front to the MEK. Also it can be found in other Persianate societies too – it is featured on the front of Uzbekistan’s 200 sum note (P80), for example.

At the same time, the portrait of the Shah was omitted from all banknotes, although they were not completely redesigned. The ornamental features and the motifs of the back mostly remained pre-revolutionary: the Marlik Cup (500 rial, P128), the tomb of Hafez in Shiraz (1,000 rial, P129) and the now disused building of the National Assembly in the Baharestan district of Tehran (10,000 rial, P131). The portrayal of the royal Golestan Palace on the 5,000 rial bill (P106) was erased and replaced with the oil refinery of Tehran. The 200 rial bill (P127) re-uses a motif from the series of 1951, the mausoleum of Avicenna in Hamadan (āramgāh-e ibn-e sinā). The front on all the 1981 issues shows the Emam Reza Shrine in Mashhad, the resting place of the eighth Emām of Twelver Shi’ism. It is the only burial site of a Twelver Emam in Iran and without doubt the most important pilgrimage site on its soil. Altogether the desire for a compromise between the factions is evident: the break from the old to the new order may be political, but does not entirely reach to the cultural realm.
The Return of the Mosque and the Advent of Populism

With the end of the summer of 1981, all signs of compromise, pre-Islamic Iran, poetry and technology disappeared. Those revolutionaries hoping for Khomeini to be a mere spiritual, but not a political leader found themselves in error. Khomeini used the US hostage crisis and the aggression of Saddam Hussein to further put down any opposition to his concept of the “Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist” (velāyāt-e faqīh). Iran’s iconographic appearance was reshaped by the mosque and by revolutionary crowds – albeit in a fashion that did not incorporate all the segments that represented the revolution. The iconography and narrative of the “Iranian Revolution” was turned into the “Islamic Revolution.”

On the front of the 5,000 and 10,000 rial bills of 1981, which have some slight variations, show a huge revolutionary crowd led by clerics. Some of the demonstrators carry pictures of Khomeini, others banners reading the revolutionary slogans “Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic” (esteqlāl, azādi, jomhūrī-ye eslāmī), “Neither East nor West, but Islamic Republic” (na lārī, na ǧarbī, jomhūrī-ye eslāmī), and “We all are your soldiers, Khomeini” (mā hame sārbāz-e tā-‘īm, khomeynī). Chelkowski remarks:

Unlike the pre-revolutionary banknotes, the rulers’ portrait does not appear directly on the notes of the Islamic Republic. This is a clever symbolic manipulation to suggest that Khomeini has not imposed his rule but is the ‘chosen’ representative of the people who carry his portrait out of love and devotion.26

The 5,000 rial note shows the Fatemeh Ma’sumeh Shrine in Qom on its back, while the 10,000 rial note displays the Emam Reza Shrine in Mashhad. Although it is a recent invention of tradition that Qom had been an ancient centre of Shi’i learning and scholarship,27 it became an important site for anti-Shah agitation on the eve of the revolution. More essentially the two shrines link the events of the revolution to the Shi’i Karbala paradigm which was exploited during the revolution to link the Shah to Yazid, the murderer of the third Emam, and thus to the epitome of an un-Islamic, tyrannical ruler. Secular, communist or nationalist groups who were pivotal to the success of the revolution are sidelined within this iconographic paradigm, which aims at entirely Islamicizing the Iranian Revolution, and society.

The 5,000 (P133) and 10,000 rial notes from 1981 (P134) suggest by showing a crowd with Islamic gear and appearance that the revolution was Islamic in its essence. The shrines of Qom and Mashhad on the backs strengthen this statement.

The 500 rial note (P137) shows on the front the congregation of the Friday prayer (namāz-jom‘e) and the gates of the University of Tehran (sardar-e dāneqāh-e tehrān).

The same can be said about the 500 rial note from 1982. It shows the congregation of the Friday prayer (namāz-jom‘e) and the gates of the University of Tehran (sardar-e dāneqāh-e tehrān), which after the revolution became the central place of Tehran’s Friday prayer. A detail in the lower left corner depicts the Feyziyye school.
in Qom. Chelkowski observed that while the apparel of those depicted makes it clear that they are to represent all ages and classes, it is especially revealing that a Sunni Turcoman is included who can be identified by his characteristically folded arm and dress. By doing so the banknote demonstrates the “regime’s claim to leadership of the entire Muslim world” and underlines its efforts of exporting the revolution.

The first issue of the 1,000 rial note (P138) had to be withdrawn because it mislabelled the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as al-Aqsa Mosque. The front shows the seminary (madrase-ye fayziye dar qom) where Khomeyni taught before the revolution.

The Feyziyye (madrase-ye fayziye dar qom) from the corner of the 500 rial note is depicted in large on the front of the 1,000 rial note of 1982, this time the Emam Reza Shrine keeps it company in the lower left corner. Described as “a decaying nineteenth-century seminary” prior to the revolution, it was from here that Khomeini, after years of studying and teaching, was exiled in 1963 in response to his criticism toward the “White Revolution.”

In the reading of the triumphant parties of the revolution, it was there that the revolution commenced and today the anniversary of Khomeini’s arrest, June 5, 1963 (15th Khordad 1342), is annually commemorated in the Islamic Republic. The reverse shows – although initially mislabelled as al-Aqsa Mosque – the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It is connected to another annually celebrated holiday. Introduced by Khomeini in 1979, the “International Qods Day” – Qods being the Persian spelling variant of the Arabic name for Jerusalem – it calls to “liberate Qods” and, in Khomeini’s words, “to proclaim the international solidarity of Muslims in support of the legitimate rights of the Muslim people of Palestine.” The criticism of Israel and Zionism repeatedly also served to foster relationships between Iran and other countries or parts of its populations with a similar political leaning toward Israel, and became a prominent public symbol of the regime.

On the front of the 2,000 rial note from 1985 there is again a portrait of Khomeini being held. The soldiers represent the three main branches of the Iranian military apparatus: the regular armed forces (sepah), the paramilitary Basij (basij-e mosta’zafin, literally “the mobilised of the oppressed”) and the Revolutionary Guard (sepah-e pādnān-e engelāb-e edāmi). The banner on the mosques reads: “In the dawn of victory the martyrs are missing” (dar jam-e pīrāzī jā-ye šohadā khālī) which was also used in the streets of Tehran during the revolution. Nonetheless, this motif is not primarily concerned with the events of 1979, but as we learn from the caption and the shape of the depicted mosque – celebrates the liberation of Khorramshahr (ázād-ye khorrāmiāhr). When in 1980 Saddam Husain’s troops attacked Iran, Khorramshahr was a small cosmopolitan port city on the Iran-Iraq border, and soon became one of the most iconic stages of the war. On May 22, Khorramshahr, which had become a ghost town, was finally recaptured. To underline the message of martyrdom and sacrifice during the war the image of martyr (shahid) Mohammad Hosein Fahmideh was used as a watermark. Fahmideh was a thirteen-year-old boy who in 1980 sacrificed himself in a suicide attack, stopping an Iraqi tank which was advancing to Khorramshahr. Khomeini declared Fahmideh a national hero and referred to him as “our leader” (rahbar-e mā).
The back of the commemorative 100 rial note of 1971 (P98) shows the Reconstruction and Development Corps (sepah-e tarvi va abadani) in the middle vignette. Reprising this initiative, besides the Friday Mosque of Yazd the 200 rial bill of 1982 (P36) shows the workers of the Construction Jihad (jehad-e sozandegi) labouring close to a village in the countryside.

This 200 rial note was also replaced soon after by another banknote – the last of its denomination since inflation made the amount of 200 rial effectively worthless. Its front shows the Friday mosque of Yazd and its back is dedicated to the "Construction Jihad" (jehad-e sozandegi). Echoing the "Reconstruction and Development Corps" (sepah-e tarvi va abadani), which was instrumental to the White Revolution, the "Construction Jihad" was established by a decree of Khomeini, and originally served to improve conditions in rural areas, recruiting a large array of volunteers. During the Iran-Iraq war its scope encompassed also military tasks, and today it has merged with the Ministry of Agricultural Jihad (jehad-e kešavarzi). Chelkowski points out that the front, which depicts the Friday mosque of Yazd, not only styles the jehad-e sozandegi an Islamic enterprise, but also links its developmental task to the remote and rural areas of the country. Likewise, it proves that “there are no strict rules regarding the graphic arrangements printed by the Islamic Republic, as long as the message comes across."34

From the “Second Republic” to Ahmadinejad
When Khomeini died in 1989, Ali Khamenei became “leader of the revolution” (rabbar-e engelab) and shortly afterwards Ali

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected president (1989-1997). It did not take long for Khomeini’s image to be printed on all the new notes. First came the 1,000 (P143) and 10,000 (P146) rial issues in 1992, and a 5,000 (P145) in 1993. They were followed by a 20,000 (P147) in 2004, a new 2,000 (P144) rial note in 2005, a 50,000 (P149) rial note in 2007 and 100,000 rial (P151) issues in 2010.35 Most of the new issued banknotes have enhanced security and layout features like signs for the blind, intaglio microprint, offset see-through registers, threads of holographic type with micro text, fluorescent ink etc.

After ten years of a permanent state of emergency, the banknotes of the “Second Republic” signal a policy of détente and normalization.

After the permanent state of emergency during war and revolution which not only facilitated the remodelling of Iran’s social and political structure, but also caused about US$1 trillion of direct and indirect costs36
The duumvirate of Khamenei and Rafsanjani initiated a Thermidor. In a televised sermon, Khamenei informed the nation that Imam Ali had been a successful plantation owner, who, when not out fighting for Islam, had stayed home meticulously cultivating his property. He added that Imam Ali had taken care of his appearance and had worn the best clothes possible when preaching.

In addition to a new economic policy of the “Second Republic,” the political climate became more pragmatic — the new banknotes' backs bear testimony to this new reality: they show peaceful pigeons nesting in an arrangement of red flowers and green leaves (P145), the national sanctuary of Mount Damavand (P146), the naqī-e jahān Square with Shah Mosque (masjed-e sāh, officially: masjed-e emām) and Ali Qapu Palace in Esfahan (P147) and Sa'di's mausoleum in Shiraz (P151). The 1,000 rial note continued to show the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the new 2,000 rial bill (P144, 2005) portrayed the Ka'ba in Mecca in a new design.

The revised 20,000 rial note (2009) continues and extends to the al-Qods theme of the older 1,000 rial note.

In recent years, however, a tendency to reverse this political and social détente has surfaced. After Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president for the first time, the 5,000 and 20,000 rial notes underwent redesigns that carried a political message. The replacement of the 20,000 rial note continues and extends to the al-Qods theme of the older 1,000 rial note. Its back now shows the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and links the banknote to a unified Islamic and Palestinian cause once again. The note is another visible sign of the interconnection between the Islamic Republic's foreign affairs and the Palestinians' efforts.

While the mainstream Western view on Iran's technological accomplishments links them to an alleged nuclear weapons program, the government's strategy of demonstrating technological progress bears parallels to the Pahlavi era. Yet the mid-2013 replacement for the 5,000 rial note shows pottery from the 14th century (jarāf-e sofāl - qam-e haštom-e hejri).

On the new 5,000 rial, (P145), instead of doves, now Omīd (“Hope”), the first Iranian satellite, is depicted. It was launched concurrent with the 30th anniversary of the revolution in 2009. According to the BBC, President Ahmadinejad declared that it shall spread “monotheism, peace and justice” in the world. The launch of this satellite was not without international controversy with the Safīr-2 (“Ambassador”) carrier rocket intimately linked to Iran's alleged nuclear programme. Intriguingly, it also heralded that 30 years after the Pahlavi's modernization agenda was buried, technology had a comeback on the tableau of the government's legitimation strategies. A key difference to the modernization agenda of the Pahlavi era remains that the independent and self-sufficient character of Iran's economy is emphasized frequently and with insistence. This serves the government well, since foreign criticism of technological advancement can easily be labelled a hostile sentiment or even a plot to discredit the achievements of the Islamic Republic and to undermine its economic (and political) strength.

Even earlier, in 2007, a new 50,000 rial note was introduced showing Khomeini and stylised moqarnas at the front. The back shows a map with Iran centred and the English caption “Persian Gulf” in the sea — a description which although in use since antiquity is challenged by some Arab states. Above a Persian translation of a ḥadīth of Muhammad (“If the science exists in this constellation, men from Persia will reach it”) a nuclear insignia of electrons orbiting an atom is depicted. The “provocative” note was soon labelled the “atomic” or “nuclear banknote” and became subject to controversy. Not only was the atomic sign discussed, Stuart Jeffries of The Guardian wrote in a comment on the 50,000 rial bill:
Beautiful bills expressing the best things about a nation are dying out. Meanwhile, in Iran, inflation is rising so fast that Tehran has issued a note worth more than twice the previous highest denomination. Quite possibly, prices are rising because the republic’s founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, must have his mug on every note. Where are we going to learn that dead old men are never as appealing on a banknote as a spectacled owl?⁴³

Although one might disagree with this statement (and the aesthetic quality of spectacled owls), the joke that Khomeini’s image on the bills is “responsible” for inflation and economic decay is one that repeatedly can be heard in the streets of Tehran today.

Whispers, Mockery, and Protest: “Every Iranian is a Medium”⁴⁴

Another urban myth in the capital has it that the designers of the 100 rial banknote from 1985 (P140) were actually opposing the Islamic Republic and therefore delivering a secret message. According to the whispers, the ornamental 25 metre high bronze column on the left side of the façade reads “Down with the regime” (marg bar režim) when rotated 90 degrees clockwise. Astonishingly, with a little imagination and a Kufic script in mind, it could be read as such indeed. However, although the building in question housed the parliament from 1980 to 2002, it was by no means a product of this time. Instead it was built and served as a seat to the imperial senate (majles-e senā) prior to the revolution. Designed as a joint project by Mohsen Foroughi and Haydar Ghiai, who was another graduate from the École des Beaux-Arts,⁴⁵ the two bronze columns were sculpted by André Bloc, founder of the famous periodical L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui. Still, while it proves easy to unveil the myth, at the same time it reflects the success of the Islamic Republic’s pictorial strategy to re-write or even erase the history of its country: in its narrative logic the story does not even recognise an architectural feature paramount to the Pahlavi era as such.

There are not only whispers though. After the disputed election of 2009, supporters of the opposition, which became to be popularly known as the “Green Movement,” used banknotes as a medium to criticise the regime.⁴⁶ Slogans, such as “Where is my vote? Down with the dictator” (nā'y-e man kojā-st? marg bar diktātōr), “15th of June, continuation of the green epic” (25 khordād, tekrār hamāse-ye sahz), “Long live freedom!” (sende bād āzādī), “They stole the oil money, to give it to Chavez” (pāl-e naft rō dozidand, dāran be āvaz man kojārd), “Khameini the ungodly, became the servant of Putin” (khāmenei bi-din, sode nowkar-e pūtin)⁴⁷ were scrawled on banknotes – another example of “cultural Jiu-Jitsu.”⁴⁸ The dimension of this protest form apparently became so significant that the authorities had to declare that “defaced banknotes” would lose their value by January 8, 2010.⁴⁹

Further proof that attempts of Iranian rulers over the last eight decades to shape and express identity through banknotes and their impact on greater Iranian society can be found in a phenomenon of the World Wide Web. In modern day, Iran inflation and economic hardships are everyday topics. Though the reasons may be attributed to either the sanctions, mismanagement of the government or – according to government media – currency speculation by individuals,⁵⁰ often comparisons favourable to the times of the Shah⁵¹ are expressed. The comparison of a pre-revolutionary 10,000 rial note with that of recent times carries political dynamite because the direct comparison of the banknotes does not allow one to name more than one prime suspect for the development: it was the Shah when the economy was good; it is Khomeini and the Islamic Republic then who are responsible.
Another type of meme brings alternative banknotes into being which express the desire for a different political reality. Both pictured notes show the image of Neda Aqa-Soltan (1982-2009), a young woman from Tehran who was killed while protesting in 2009. Among the killings of many other young Iranians, her death drew singular attention since it was captured on video and later spread on the Internet, making her a symbol of the “Green Movement.” On one of the notes an image of Neda Aqa-Soltan is shown and it can be read “I’ll get right to my martyred brothers and sisters” (haqq-e khâhâr wa barâdâr-e iahidam mi-qîrâm), “For Freedom” (barâdê azâdî) and “from the 12nd to the 15th of June we will come” (22 tâ 25 khordâd mi-‘ayîm). The front shows the biggest rally in Iran since the revolution, which Mir-Hosein Musavi had called on June 15, 2009 around the Sâhyâd. It is written, “Each day is the 15th of June” (bar rûz 25 khordâd ast), which of course bears similarities to the “Each day is ‘âșâmâ” (bar rûz ‘âtiyân ast) of the revolution. Another note is a “greenified” version of the blue 20,000 rial bill, showing a portrait of Neda Aqa-Soltan, a victory sign with the inscription “9th of July” (18 tîr), the anniversary of the student protest in 1999, and a badge (jombé-e taḥrîm-e entekhabâhî) calling for the boycott of elections.

From the time of Reza-Shah onwards, banknotes expressed and shaped Iran’s national identity. They were and are an efficient tool to contest and formulate political agendas, to manage the past and write its future: after 1979 it aided the remake of the revolution’s perception as an “Islamic Revolution” that, thanks to the mass media qualities of paper money, entered the daily life of each citizen. Conversely, the opponents of the current regime have used its contesting powers to express alternate realities on an unprecedented scale.

Bibliography


Notes
1 Hamid Dabashi and Peter Chelkowski, Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran, p. 9.
4 Courtesy of Hamaseh Golestaneh.
6 Cf. Grabar, “Ayvān”, pp. 153-154. While in most classical Iranian sources the term eyvān was used in conjunction with Old Persian apadāna and meant ‘reception’ or ‘audience hall’ it later, influenced by Western art historians, acquired the meaning of an architectural form rather than function, “a single large vaulted hall walled on three sides and opening directly to the outside on the fourth” and “one of the most consistent features of architectural structure since Parthian times” (Grabar, “Ayvān”, p. 154). The Shah Mosque in Esfahan and the Taj Mahal in Agra are the two most prominent examples of the eyvān.
21 The Central Bank gives the date of 1979 as a beginning of his governorship, but Banisadr, who supposedly appointed him, wasn’t president at that time, nor did the office exist; cf. http://www.cbi.ir/page/1570.aspx.
22 He was succeeded by Muhammad-Ali Rajai (1981) and the current Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei (1981-1989).
28 Chelkowski, “Khomeini’s Iran as Seen through Bank Notes”, p. 90.
29 Abrahamian, Khomeinism, p. 7.
34 Chelkowski, “Khomeini’s Iran as Seen Through Bank Notes”, p. 96.
39 Cf. op. cit.
42 http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1075048.html.
44 “Har irānī yek rešāne” was one of the slogans of the “Green Movement.”
47 Cf. Gökalp Babayigit, “Iran: Geld als Massenmedium.”

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