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Walk Next to the Wall: Images of Martyrs in the Egyptian Revolution

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Introduction

Prior to the Egyptian revolution that began on January 25, 2011 citizens of Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt are taught to “walk next to the wall”; a phrase that means keep your head down, mind your own business, do not meddle in the affairs of those who outrank you, and feed your family.¹ In the end, walking next to the wall is not enough to save them. They can no longer escape attention by blending into the walls of their cities. Khaled Said² is not the first young man to die at the hands of Cairo’s police, nor is he the last.³ No one could say that the shy young man ‘had it coming to him’. No one could say that he must have deserved the brutal death that he received. Blogger Mahmoud Salem described Said as “looking every inch . . . [a] modern Egyptian youth . . . A little innocent-looking guy who looks like your son, your cousin, your nephew.”⁴ A young mother, Amal, who was never interested in politics before Said’s death, said that she “felt he could be one of [her] sons.”⁵ Said’s death could not be swept under the rug like the many who came before him. His visage, before and after his death, appears everywhere. His face appears on the walls of Egypt’s cities in graffiti when the grip that Mubarak’s regime had over art and society weakens. Khaled Said is not alone. His face is joined by the faces of the hundreds of other men, women, and children who die during Egypt’s revolution. Graffiti is in a unique position due to its fluidity of meaning. These faces’ meanings change based on their viewers and the times. The wall that they are supposed to ‘walk next to’

² A spelling variation of Khaled Said is Khaled Saieed which is found in Liberation Square by Ashraf Khalil. Another variation that has been encountered was Khaled Saeed. The majority of the sources used for this paper spelled his name as Said, therefore, that is the spelling that will be used for the duration of this paper.
³ Khalil, Liberation, 81-82.
⁴ Ibid, 76.
⁵ Ibid, 82.
for protection becomes the wall where they proclaim their freedom from an oppressive regime. The walls that were once a way of hiding and ignoring the world becomes their means of revolution and rebellion. The faces on the walls of Egypt galvanize her people to greater action. They remind the citizens what they were fighting for; the faces remind the citizens why they are facing tear gas, maiming, and death in the streets.

**Martyrdom in the Arab World**

Khaled Said and many of his counterparts who are displayed upon the exterior of buildings in Egypt are martyrs for their country and for their people. The perimeters of what a martyr is fails to be rigidly defined. The meaning evolves when cultural and historical contexts change. For Western Judeo-Christians martyrdom is linked with religious struggles against paganism. Their martyrs choose their death over an alternative that they deem to be unacceptable. In the Arab world martyrdom is more closely associated with dying in conflict against an injustice rather than their agency in their death.

Prior to the Arab Spring there were three predominant models of the creation and commemoration of martyrs. These three types differ based on who controls the meaning of those who die and what those meanings entail for the people who encounter them. The first of the three is found in Iran. Shi’a Islam is practiced in Iran; this sect of Islam sees martyrdom as a reward and blessing. In Iran the state controls meaning. During Iran’s revolution in 1979 the

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7 Ibid, 370.
8 Ibid, 372.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
commemoration of the martyrs is taken over by the state. The memorials created are large murals on walls that carry a religious theme to propagate the ideal Islamic character, the murals empower the people of Iran. Both the meaning and the production of these visual images are tightly controlled by the Iranian government.

The second dominant model comes from Palestine. Here, as in Iran, martyrs are seen as tools for creating political memories. Where they differ is on who manages the meaning. In Palestine the meaning is not primarily controlled by the state. There are a variety of groups who create meaning for these martyrs and they range from society organizations to the military to the ordinary citizens. Palestinian martyrs are viewed as victims. They are individuals who deserve sympathy because they died violently at the hands of circumstances such as a massacre or a bombing. The exception to this sense of victimization in martyrdom is the istishhadi who partake in suicidal missions against their perceived enemies. The martyrs in Iran become a collective identity beyond themselves; they become icons. By becoming icons for their country the martyrs themselves are deprived of any agency. Their meaning is predefined for them; it is static rather than dynamic.

The third and final model is that if the Hizbullah. Production is not controlled by the government but it still controlled from the upper parts of society rather than by ordinary

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Palestine and Israel are located in the same contested space; different people fighting for the country to be either one or the other. Egypt is the only country in the Arab World that recognizes Israel as a sovereign country. The rest of the Arab world views the land as Palestine.
14 Buckner and Khatib, Martyr’s Revolution, 374.
15 Ibid, 373.
16 Ibid, 374.
17 Ibid.
people. This model uses elements of the models found in Iran and Palestine. They use the victimization of the Palestinian martyrs and the empowerment of the Iranian martyrs. Here, when the martyrs are used for empowerment, they are empowered by a central force rather than by the people, but they remain the victims of their circumstances.

These definitions were what constituted martyrs for the Arab World prior to the Arab Spring. When the meaning of martyrs are defined by the individuals then they are seen as victims. As victims they receive no agency in their meaning. They are commemorated and memorialized. Their commemoration creates community and a greater sense of unity among groups. The groups relive their suffering which allows them to participate in a collective identity that can be shared by those inside and outside of the country. When the images are empowering their meaning is controlled by the upper echelons of society.

Buckner and Khatib say that during the Arab Spring martyrs are freed from those dominant ways of creating meaning from death. The barriers between empowerment, victimization, the state, and the people is broken down. While those who die in Egypt are still victims they are viewed as activists and “true patriots”. The people of Egypt have control over the martyrs’ stories which is why the martyrs have agency during the Arab Spring. Men and women in the Arab Spring are not struggling for issues that are specific to their own countries, but, rather, for values and rights that are considered universal. This allows the meaning of their icons – be they martyrs or slogans – to be understood by people who are outside of the

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18 Ibid, 375.
19 Ibid, 373.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid, 378.
nation. The causes attain global support that the people would not have had otherwise. Without these causes and without these martyrs the rebellions would have less support and they may not have succeeded. It is the images of martyrs that keep their collective memory alive. Without these images citizens may have forgotten what they were fighting for and what they were fighting against.

**Revolutionary Martyrs**

Magdy Ashour, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who is a prominent figure in *The Square*, said “We may or may not be massacred. It does not matter. If you’re meant to die, it’s going to happen wherever you are. The more they kill, the more we believe in our cause.”

Ashour’s quote indicates the importance of those who die when it comes to their impact on those who still engage in the struggle. Khaled Said’s death is the starting point for the revolution in Egypt, and a self-immolation in Tunisia is the trigger that set off the Arab Spring.

Mohamed Bouazizi is the spark that ignites the Arab Spring. He is a street vendor in a village in Tunisia. He is harassed by the local police while he is trying to sell products from his street cart. He protests this crass treatment of the police over his body by taking an action that proclaims his ultimate agency over his physical body. He commits self-immolation. Despite the fact that his death takes place at his own hands he is seen as a martyr. He takes his own life rather than allow others to have control over his body and his life. His choice to die is noted

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25 Ibid.
as important. He chose to die rather than suffer indignity and the loss of freedom.\(^{26}\) Bouazizi is a victim of the police, but his is his choice. An image of the Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, visiting Bouazizi in the hospital goes viral on the internet and social media.\(^{27}\) This image set events into motion that will deconstruct the Tunisian government.

Khaled Said’s murder will bring about the same deconstruction in Egypt. His image will be painted on walls all over Egypt (Figures 1 & 2). This paper focuses on images that were found in Cairo, the hub of the revolution. Citizens will carry images of his. Khaled Said will become the touchstone of the revolution. Mahtitab Jellani, a young political activist, takes to keeping a copy of Said’s autopsy photograph in her purse so she can remind people about the rampant police brutality that had become an everyday occurrence in Mubarak’s Egypt.\(^{28}\) As previously mentioned, Said will not be alone when it comes to those who will be commemorated in graffiti, but he is one of the first symbols of the revolution that motivated and reminds people of what is taking place in their country. The other martyrs will follow him in time, but their images are used the same way.

Bouazizi and Said both become symbols against their governments. They become the symbols of their people. They are the symbols that mobilize the people of their countries to greater action after they fall victim to the unjust policies of their governments.\(^{29}\) Both of these men do not simply hold meaning in their own countries. They become “pan-Arab” martyrs.\(^{30}\) They mobilize others throughout the Middle East and the Arab World. Khalil says that without

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 380.
\(^{27}\) Ibid, 379 & 380.
\(^{29}\) Buckner and Khatib, \textit{Martyr’s Revolution}, 380.
\(^{30}\) Ibid, 382.
Bouazizi’s death and the subsequent toppling of the Tunisian government there would have been no revolution in Egypt.\textsuperscript{31}

**Graffiti**

Prior to the beginning of revolution there is none too little graffiti in Cairo; no graffiti in one the world’s largest cities.\textsuperscript{32} The revolution’s “art attack”\textsuperscript{33} is not a safe activity for the artists. Even before the revolution those who are caught painting the walls with political messages could be given five years in prison along with a fine for “defamation of national leadership”.\textsuperscript{34} While being caught in the act of graffiti carried fines the images are often not traceable to a particular person. Following the beginning of the revolution the graffiti was continuously being white-washed and covered up.\textsuperscript{35} All of the elements of graffiti place it in a unique position for use in a revolutionary context. While murals take time to create and are complex stencil images are quickly and easily reproduced should they be painted over.

Kristine Somerville claims that graffiti is hardwired into society. She says that people have an instinct to mark where they have been and what belongs to them.\textsuperscript{36} “Victors of war have used it as territorial markers and gangs to stake out their turf. Politicians use it to spread their ideology, while subversives use it to talk back to authorities without fear of reproach”\textsuperscript{37}; all of these uses can be applied to graffiti in Egypt during their war against their government.

\textsuperscript{31} Khalil, *Liberation*, 123.
\textsuperscript{32} Mia Gröndahl, *Revolution Graffiti: Street Art of the New Egypt*, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), ix-x.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 1.
\textsuperscript{34} Gasma Hamdy and Don Karl, *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution* (Berlin: From Here to Fame Publishing, 2014), 9.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
When the revolutionaries have control of Tahir Square they paint it with images that will be whitewashed when the police or army take the square back. The images spread the ideology of freedom and democracy as a reminder of what they are fighting for. By using the images of martyrs in particular they are using an image that is ideologically familiar to the people of Egypt.

Images are frequently painted over by the authorities and other artists. By painting over the images they are asserting their authority over the space.38 Lewis Sanders IV writes that graffiti interrupts a citizen’s routine of how they interact with their surroundings; it takes the revolution into ‘head space’ as well as physical space.39 When the murals and images are continually changing the narrative of the images is continuing to evolve and develop. The faces of the martyrs interrupt citizens when they are walking around their neighborhood or to work. In *Walls of Freedom* Rana Jabour says, “I will know what has changed by reading the graffiti. . . . After all, the writing is on the wall.”40

While graffiti and its continual production and erasure claims physical space the control of the physical space affects the citizens and how their view their city, hence, head space.41 It is this space where the meaning of the martyrs play out for the everyday citizen of Cairo or Egypt. Artists like Alaa Awad and Ammar Abo Bakr turned Mohamed Mahmoud Street – a place that witnesses many deaths – into a memorial space.42 Regimes use bodies in pain as a way of

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39 Ibid.
41 Sanders, *Reclaiming*, 150.
enforcing their power over the people that they govern. However, when these images are used by the people and for the people they are being reclaimed. The people are narrating their own national history. The history is what the people want it to be rather than what would be deemed preferable by the government based on what makes them look good or what reaffirms the narratives that they actively support.

**The Martyrs of the Egyptian Revolution**

During the initial uprising and the continued revolution Egypt lost many of her sons and daughters. During the initial eighteen day uprising in early 2011 eight hundred and forty Egyptians die at the hands of their own government and over six thousand are injured. This does not include those who died before an official count began on January 25th, 2011. One of the main martyrs addressed, Khaled Said, was killed in June of 2010, he was not an activist. Others, like Mina Daniel, who is killed in the Maspero Massacre on October 9th in 2011, are active revolutionaries even if they are participating in peaceful demonstrations. Many others martyrs who die at the hands of the army and police are not activists. They, like Khaled Said, are attending to their daily lives when they happen to be caught in the crossfire. There were those like Mariam Ashraf Mesiha, who was only eight years old. She was shot along with her cousin, Mariam Fahmy, on their way to a wedding in Giza by unidentified gunmen. Neither of them participate in any political demonstrations; they are not even old enough to pose a significant threat to anyone. Their images are included in *The Battle Mural* by El Zeft alongside Belal Ali

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Gaber, an activist, and his mother. (Figure 3). They are victims that fit into the Palestinian model of martyrdom. They are victims of a corrupt and unjust system. By their images being included in murals such as the one by El Zeft they become more than just victims; they gain agency and bring about change in their communities.

In the cases of Khaled Said and Mina Daniel the people carried signs saying ‘We are all Khaled Said/Mina Daniel.’ Many of those who become involved in the revolution in these cases are not doing so because of politics; they get involved because it is the right thing to do. The production of images of the martyrs make their faces recognizable. This personalizes them for the citizens of Egypt who never knew them prior to their deaths. Photo-historians say that Matthew Brady’s photographs of men who died in the Civil War was him all but laying the bodies of dead men on their doorsteps. These faces on the walls of Cairo do the same for the men, women, and children who died during the Egyptian revolution. The artists lay the dead on the doorsteps of the Egyptian people; an act that makes it very hard to pretend that they do not exist. The martyrs do not remain faceless; they are not almost nameless people that you know have died. They are receive life through the images.

Khaled Said

Khaled Said was a 28-year-old man who was killed on June 7, 2010 around 11 in the evening outside an internet café in a crowded street (Figure 1). The reason for his death is still unknown and it will likely remain unknown as it is between him and the two police officers who

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48 Ibid, 158 and Khalil, Liberation, 80.
49 Khalil, Liberation, 81.
50 Ibid, 72.
committed the crime.\textsuperscript{51} As he was the first – chronologically – it makes sense that he should be presented first. Two images of him circulate. The first is the one that was taken of him after his death where he is barely recognizable. This is not the image that spurred the revolution. It is just another bloody image of police brutality and evidence that Said suffered. The image that most Egyptians will come recognize, the one that we see repeated in graffiti, is his passport photograph that is downloaded from the internet (Figure 1). \textsuperscript{52} This image shows a young man wearing a hoodie and has a goatee. He is no different than anyone else that one may encounter on the streets while going about their business. It is this photograph that appears alongside the photograph taken by a relative after he died.\textsuperscript{53} Said becomes a typification, a standard representative, of the Egyptian people. The people felt that, “He kind of looks like you, or if not you then your brother. His mother looks like your mother.”\textsuperscript{54} Once that identification is in place it makes it easy for anyone to step into Khaled Said’s shoes. They feel that they know him or that they are him to some extent which is evidenced by the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook page. This slogan does not only appear on the internet but it appears in graffiti as well (Figure 1). \textsuperscript{55}

An often seen image of Khaled Said and other martyrs are those that are stencils that anyone can produce and reproduce without artistic skill (Figure 2). Not only do stencils not require artistic ability beyond that of the original designer, but they are cheap and easy to use. They are cheap because the only supplies required are a copy of the stencil and a can of spray

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 84.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 76.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 75-76.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 72.
\textsuperscript{55} Gröndahl, Revolution Graffiti, 23, the bottom image.
paint. Neither one of these objects are expensive which places them firmly the realm of being accessible to all citizens who wish to produce his image. Stencils are easy because a stencil is placed on the wall and held in place for the short amount of time that it takes to fill the spaces in with paint. These stencils are a traditional means to reproducing a martyr’s image for commemoration because there is no limit of times that a stencil can be created and used.\textsuperscript{56}

Mina Daniel\textsuperscript{57}

Mina Daniel is 20 years old when he is shot and killed on October 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2011 during the Maspero Massacre (Figures 4-7).\textsuperscript{58} He was injured during previous protests including a leg injury resulting from a live bullet that he recovered from.\textsuperscript{59} Despite the rough treatment he continues being an activist for what he believes. Mina Daniel comes to be known as the “Egyptian Che Guevara” due to his political interests and his physical resemblance to the Argentinian Marxist rebel.\textsuperscript{60} This cognomen seems to carry greater significance than just Daniel’s physical appearance and personal attributes. Che Guevara’s face is known to great numbers of people due to the number of times that his image as been produced and reproduced on t-shirts, in the media, on storefronts and in their names, along with a great number of other instances. Mina Daniel’s visage does not reach the same amount of global recognition as Khaled Said, much less Che Guevara, but his image plays a role for the country that he died for.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 153.
\textsuperscript{57} Like Khaled Said there are spelling variations of Mina Daniel’s name such as Mina Danyal which is found in Revolution Graffiti: Street Art of the New Egypt by Mia Gröndahl. Most sources used the spelling that will be used for the duration of this paper.
\textsuperscript{58} Hamdy and Karl, Walls of Freedom, 158.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
Mina Daniel is actively engaging in a peaceful protest in Maspero when he dies. The protest quickly changes from a protest about the destruction of a church to a “bloodbath”.\textsuperscript{61} Mina Daniel is one of the twenty-seven Coptic Christians who die that day. Khaled Said is important because he is the wakeup call for middle class Egyptians; Mina Daniel carries the same role for Coptic Christians in Egypt. Hossam Bahgat with 60 Minutes said, “Copts for the first time realized that the military, the army, is not going to protect them . . . In fact, the army is going to first kill them, and then tell the world that it was Christians that attacked the army. So it was a turning point in terms of the unconditional support that most Christians had expressed to the army since they replaced Mubarak.”\textsuperscript{62}

Mina Daniel (and other martyrs) are represented with wings (Figures 3 & 4). The artists Alaa Awad and Ammar Abo Bakr looked to ancient Egypt for iconographic inspiration.\textsuperscript{63} They have a rich history to draw from due to the many traditions that have existed in Egypt over the years; pharonic, Coptic, Muslim, etc. They want their art to represent the unity the people are experiencing in mourning for their martyrs.\textsuperscript{64} As a result of that desire the artists use many elements from the traditions’ varying iconographic and visual programs. In the case of Mina Daniel and others we see them represented with wings. These images harken back to images of saints in aged Coptic manuscripts (Figure 8). This intertextual reference draws a referential link between these modern martyrs and religious martyrs, famous figures, and angels of the past. By depicting Mina Daniel, Mariam Mesih, Mariam Fahmy, and others with the same wings

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Hamdy and Karl, \textit{Walls of Freedom}, 146.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, 147.
they are implying that these Egyptian citizens are saints or are, at least, on par with sainthood. They are the saints of the revolution.

Mina Daniel, in particular, is shown in religious contexts due to how and where he lost his life. He is sometimes shown with a golden halo (Figure 5). Daniel is also well known for his non-sectarian attitudes and beliefs. He has many Muslim friends and imagines an Egypt where all religious denominations live side-by-side happily and peacefully. These dreams and beliefs are carried over into some of the images of him (Figure 7). He is shown with a Muslim martyr, Sheikh Emad Effat. Together they stand and preside over a row of smaller portrait images of other martyrs. They symbolize that Egypt’s revolution and her martyrs are not restricted to any particular religious organization. The belief and reality that the revolution is all encompassing is evident in The Square as well.

**Conclusion**

The martyrs of Egypt’s revolution play an undeniably important role in the continuation and strength of the people’s responses. Without the mass production of their images on the walls of the cities the martyrs may have remained faceless names soon to be forgotten for many of Egypt’s citizens. In the Egyptian revolution the images of martyrs gain an agency that the depictions of martyrs by the people have lacked in the Middle East up until this point. Their stories are not simply sad stories to be told as cautionary tales. Their narratives are meant to motivate those around them into action. They are victims, but their meaning is not defined by

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65 Ibid, 158.
66 Ibid, 192.
67 The Square, directed by Jehane Noujaim.
their victimhood nor does the Egyptian government create it. The people of Egypt chose how and where to display images of those who died. By choosing the paint faces and the rest of the images found in *Walls of Freedom and Revolution Graffiti: Street Art of the New Egypt* on the walls of their cities artists wage a war in mental and physical spaces. The martyrs are mourned publicly and by the entire community; the martyrs are embraced into the collective family and are mourned as family. When the revolutionaries control a space their images are safe from being whitewashed by the regime.

The artists who chose to represent the martyrs, rather than creating derogatory images of Mubarak, forefront the suffering of Egypt’s people. Placing the images of Egypt’s suffering people allows the people to connect in ways that may have been impossible otherwise. If politics or religion becomes the most important part of the revolution the people will be divided. This did occur when the Muslim Brotherhood took over the revolution during the election in 2011. The artists do not choose who to depict based on religion or ethnicity. Every last one of the martyrs is an Egyptian, and that is all that matters. By commemorating the martyrs the artists and the community create a greater sense of belonging. This revolution is not just for Muslims or Christians, the revolution is not for a political party. The Egyptian revolution is for the people of Egypt.

The graffiti images of the revolution brings the victims into an arena where they are impossible to ignore. A person can choose to not read newspapers; they can choose not to watch news programs on television; they can choose not to access news websites. They cannot, however, choose not to live in their communities; they cannot choose to never walk the streets. To walk next to the wall no longer means hiding from Egypt’s problems. To walk next to the
wall in major Egyptian cities today is to see images that are created to encourage engagement and participation in conversations that affect all Egyptians.
Figure 1: Walls of Freedom page 89. "Portrait of Khaled Said painted on a piece of the Berlin Wall by Case (MaClaim Crew). Writing above: 'Khaled's rights are Egypt's rights' written by Zahraa Kassem; below: 'We are all Khaled Said', calligraphy by Mohamed Gaber painted by Case."
Figure 2: Walls of Freedom page 87. “Cairo Security Directorate’ / Stencils of Khaled Said’s face appear inside a police booth, a man sits inside resting from the protests, the stickers on his shirt and above read: ‘No to emergency law, no to military rule, no to banning protests, the movement of the free Egyptian’ / Tahrir Square / 11 September 2011”

Figure 3: Walls of Freedom page 254. “The Battle Mural (part 3) . . . / Ammar Abo Bakr / Sabry Abou Alam Street, Downtown / 29 October 2013”
Figure 4: Walls of Freedom page 158. "Martyr mina Daniel / Ammar Abo Bakr / Mohamed Mahmoud Street / February 2012".

Figure 5: Walls of Freedom page 215. "Portraits of the martyrs (from left to right): Omar Salah, . . . Jika[,] . . . Alaa Abdel-Hady[,] . . . and Mina Daniel . . . / Tefo, Fr3oon, and Saiko / Sabry Abou Alam Street, Downtown".
Figure 6: Revolution Graffiti: Street Art of the New Egypt page 130. "‘We Are all the martyr Mina Danyal,’ Luxor."

Figure 7: Walls of Freedom page 193. "The Christian Mina Daniel and the Muslim Sheikh Emad Effat stand together, symbolizing that martyrs of the revolution know no religion. . . . Walid Ebeid / Mohamed Mahmoud Street"
Figure 8: Walls of Freedom page 147. "Saint Michael the Archangel, with wings and a halo, holding a spear / Coptic manuscript from Upper Egypt / 987 AD. Year 703 of the Era of the Martyrs".
Bibliography


