



## Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran

By Roxanne Varzi



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With the first Fulbright grant for research in Iran to be awarded since the Iranian revolution in 1979, Roxanne Varzi returned to the country her family left before the Iran-Iraq war. Drawing on ethnographic research she conducted in Tehran between 1991 and 2000, she provides an eloquent account of the beliefs and experiences of young, middle-class, urban Iranians. As the first generation to have come of age entirely in the period since the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, twenty-something Iranians comprise a vital index of the success of the nation's Islamic Revolution. Varzi describes how, since 1979, the Iranian state has attempted to produce and enforce an Islamic public sphere by governing behavior and by manipulating images—particularly images related to religious martyrdom and the bloody war with Iraq during the 1980s—through films, murals, and television shows. Yet many of the young Iranians Varzi studied quietly resist the government's conflation of religious faith and political identity.

Highlighting trends that belie the government's claim that Islamic values have taken hold—including rising rates of suicide, drug use, and sex outside of marriage—Varzi argues that by concentrating on images and the performance of proper behavior, the government's campaign to produce model Islamic citizens has affected only the appearance of religious orthodoxy, and that the strictly religious public sphere is partly a mirage masking a profound crisis of faith among many Iranians. *Warring Souls* is a powerful account of contemporary Iran made more vivid by Varzi's inclusion of excerpts from the diaries she maintained during her research and from journal entries written by Iranian university students with whom she formed a study group.

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## Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran By Roxanne Varzi Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #986730 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Duke University Press Books
- Published on: 2006-05-31
- Released on: 2006-05-31
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x .76" w x 5.50" l, .85 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 304 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“*Warring Souls* is an outstanding and nuanced addition to the literature on contemporary Iranian culture, media, and society.”—Hamid Naficy, author of *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*

“A lovely piece of writing, *Warring Souls* is one of the first credible accounts of secular Iranians in their twenties, the post-Revolution generation.”—Michael M. J. Fischer, author of *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry*

“Inside and outside the pulse of war in Iran, close up and far away, Roxanne Varzi weaves her spell; two parts anthropology, one part poetry and film theory, three parts a soaring imagination and a big heart. How could you not reach out for a book which situates itself at the intersection of religion, vision, and power, asking whether the individual ultimately has the power to turn the image off? A tour de force.”—Michael Taussig, Professor of Anthropology, Columbia University

“[*Warring Souls*] is an excellent ethnographic study and worth recommending for academics as well as laymen interested in post-revolutionary Iranian society, in general, and Iranian youth, in particular.”  
(Razi Ahmad, Iranian Studies)

“[T]he book is successful as a portrayal of turn-of-the-century Iranian culture. The author’s extension of her studies from urban, secular, middle-class youth to veterans of the Iraq war, the testimonials of martyrs, and films and visual images, as well as to literature and intellectual traditions, give this book both a breadth and a depth not matched by other accounts of contemporary Iran. How to study culture on a national scale, and present the results effectively, have long bedeviled anthropologists. Hence, to have done this so well is no small achievement.”  
(Patricia J. Higgins *American Anthropologist*)

“Varzi’s analysis of Iranian culture and creative application of Western theories bring to the fore mystical, mythological, historical, and sociological characters of Iranian culture and psyche. Her engaging language weaves the dispersed narratives of her subjects with diverse Persian cultural designs, psycho-historical elements, and literary traits into a sophisticated cultural portrait.”  
(Ali Akbar Mahdi *Middle East Journal*)

“*Warring Souls* is the most interesting book analysing youth cultures in post-revolution Iran that I have read. . . . [It] is a tour de force that presents novel theoretical perspectives regarding the influence of the Islamic revolution, the Iran–Iraq War and the media (especially visual media) on today’s urban middle-class youth’s culture, lifestyle and future prospects. . . . *Warring Souls* is an outstanding addition to the anthropological literature on Iranian youth in a schizophrenic age with lost hopes and paradoxical signals from the leaders of society.”  
(Firouz Gaini *Social Anthropology*)

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

Roxanne Varzi is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine.

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