

IRAN SCENES

Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery, Teheran

Picture: Jeremy Thomas



Of the many reminders in the world of the depths to which man can stoop, this cemetery must be one of the most graphic. Behesht means 'paradise', referring to the delights of the afterlife preached by Islam, but it is difficult to imagine a more inappropriate name, for here lie the bodies of 200,000 of the dead of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, which, staggeringly, claimed the lives of perhaps 1,500,000 people. As far as the eye can see stretch row after row of tightly-packed graves, each one accompanied by a small shrine containing keepsakes of the deceased—always a photo (of the dead and injured as well as of the living), often a personal memento like a wrist watch or a last letter to a loved one.

Although the war between Iraq and Iran echoes the conflict between Babylon and Medo-Persia in Bible times, here one is more likely to contemplate what kind of madness could drive human beings to such extremes. Saddam Hussain's invasion of an oil-producing province of Iran during the instability that followed the Islamic revolution was seized on by the government of Ayatollah Khomeini to rally the nation and whip up patriotic feeling against a common enemy. But with children as young as thirteen volunteering to clear enemy minefields by walking through them, assured by religious leaders (on both sides) of a martyr's place in heaven, the only conclusion an outsider can come to is that 1979 merely replaced one corrupt régime with an equally evil one.

This extreme case of sin, against God and man, provides a shocking illustration of what the world needs saving from; and the contrast with the joys of the coming Kingdom could not be greater. God's judgements on the wicked at the return of the Lord will be severe, but will in His wisdom lead to a day when men "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:4).