
Book Review

What are Iran's mullahs really?

by Thierry Lalevée

This world is but a passage, not a world in which we ought to live. . . . It is the narrow path. What is called Life in this world is not Life, but Death. True life is that offered only in the Hereafter. . . .

—Ruhollah Khomeini, October 1977

Though Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini didn't take control of Iran before February 1979, he had gained overwhelming control of the Iranian mind by Nov. 27, 1978, through a cheap trick of mass psychological manipulation. On that date, Khomeini's Goebbels-like associate, Ayatollah Beheshti, put out the word that in a final challenge to the authority of the Shah, the face of Khomeini would appear on the Moon that very night. Ever cautious, Beheshti warned that "only miscreants and unbelievers will not see him."

By the middle of the same night, no one dared acknowledge they had not seen him. On the following day, the newspapers of the Tudeh Communist Party, committed to Khomeini's victory since August 1978, heralded: "No one can deny what an entire nation has seen with its own eyes."

An attempt by one Grand Ayatollah Qomi to ridicule the "Moon trick," as he called it, ended in failure. Qomi now lives in exile in Paris.

Amir Taheri has written an apparently thorough biography of Khomeini, *The Spirit of Allah* (London: 1985). As we learn, Khomeini was steeped in the obscurantist tradition reflected in the "Moon trick," a tradition handed down from old Persia's Magi. It was not such cheap manipulation that brought Khomeini to power, but the anecdote underlines the moral degradation imposed on a nation which, since the early 1920s when the Qadjar dynasty was overthrown, had been striving to become a full-fledged member of the 20th century.

Important to understanding the present Iranian regime, and what is expected to follow after Khomeini's death, are some three periods in Khomeini's life: his period of education during the political battles between those in favor of a constitutional republic (Mashuteh) and the Theocratics (Mashru'ehs); his activities prior to World War II in Najaf, Iraq, and during the war in Iran; and the period of his rise from a mere Hojat al Islam to a leading Ayatollah, having

eliminated politically, and sometimes physically, his opponents in his drive to establish a theocratic state.

Khomeini had been committed to building a theocratic state since the late 1910s, when he studied under the leadership of Ayatollah Araki and Abdul Karim Ha'eri, two leading Mashru'eh who opposed a constitution. Indicative for later years is that the movement for a constitution was primarily engineered by the British who had successfully fostered a "Young Turk" coup in 1909. Then, as today, the religious theocrats were backed by Imperial Russia. Khomeini's early opposition to a constitutional movement was blunt enough: Islam cannot accept a constitution because it cannot recognize the principle of human rights. "There is no equality in Islam," the theocrats argued, "as much as there can be no race nor nationality."

For a Khomeini who looks at the Middle East as Islamic tribal provinces such as the Shamat (Syria and Lebanon), Mesopotamia (Iraq), and the Hejaz and the Najd (Saudi Arabia), "Nations are heretics."

Later, one reason for Khomeini's hatred of the modernizing regime of the Shah concerned the fact that Iran had signed the U.N. Charter of Human Rights.

During his stay in Najaf, Iraq in 1938, he mixed with the pro-Nazi elements, who thought that Hitler's real name was *Haider*, the Brave One, and, as the Grand Mufti al Husseini of Jerusalem was later to claim, that Hitler was in fact a Muslim. Khomeini is reported not to have committed himself to Hitler's cause, as, throughout his life, he committed himself to no other cause than his own.

It was from this period in Iraq, to which he later returned in the mid-1960s as an exile, that he began building a political apparatus around himself. His main support came from the Fedayeen-e-Islami, the Shi'ite brand of the British-created Muslim Brotherhood. As Taheri reports, from the beginning, this organization was closer to Hassan Ibn al Sabbah's 13th-century *Hashashins*, or *Assassins*, than to the *Ikhwan* of Hassan al Banna. Overtly pro-Nazi and working with Nazi intelligence, Nawab Safavi, the founder of the Fedayeen, worked with Khomeini as well as Iran's then leading mullah, Ayatollah Kashani.

By 1955, most of Khomeini's present advisers had already assembled around him: Ali Hossein Montazeri, Jawad

Bahonar, Sadeq Khalkhali, and Mortaza Motahari. Assassinated in 1979, Motahari throughout the years was an official functionary of the Iranian regime, having even joined the imperial commission on science and education. But it was Motahari who convened the December 1977 assembly of a few loyal supporters ginning of the Islamic revolution.

Enter Carter and the British

That Motahari had been told by Khomeini to hold such an assembly, was no coincidence; as Taheri reports, the mullahs were rightly convinced that Carter's election in the United States meant that the Shah was finished.

A similar external factor had played an important role in Khomeini's decision to lead the revolt against the land reforms of the Shah in the early 1960s, considered an attack on the rights of the clergy to own most of the lands. Preparing the campaign against the Shah, the staff of Khomeini had contacted British agents for support. Khomeini judged as a positive answer, the winter 1962 appearance of a lengthy article by British academician Ann Lambton. It was a long and positive review of the works and ideas of Khomeini and his associates on direct known to be an old Persia hand for British intelligence.

By early 1963, Khomeini was leading the revolts of the mullahs against the Shah, and, by 1964, he ordered two of his associates, Motahari and Ayatollah Beheshti, to reactivate the Fedayeen under the strange name of the "Hayat-e-Motalegeh-e-Islami" (Coalescing Islamic Mission). Learning from the experience of the Fedayeen, members of the "Hayat" had to submit to a test of readiness to kill and be killed, and were ordered to infiltrate on behalf of Khomeini all religious organizations. As Khomeini left Iran for a long exile in November 1964, first to Turkey, then to Najaf, the Hayat became his underground organization within Iran. It was from Najaf that, together with Beheshti, who assumed the secret leadership of the Hayat, Khomeini ordered the assassination of those who had forced him into exile. As Beheshti accepted the Iranian government offer to become imam of the mosque in Hamburg, the leadership of Hayat passed to Motahari.

From the mid-1970s on, Khomeini ordered members of the Hayat to join Al-Fatah and the PLO to receive military training. As a respectable functionary, Motahari and his associates sought contact with SAVAK. Blinded by what they perceived as the growing communist threat, SAVAK was eager to receive such clerical help. SAVAK stayed blind up to the last months of 1978, as Motahari and his associates deliberately stayed in the background, on orders of Khomeini. Gullible Iranian politicians thought they were fighting for a constitutional democracy.

Thanks to the education he had received from Abdel Karim Ha'eri, Khomeini was always an expert in the art of Taqieh, the Islamic art of dissimulation. Very rarely did he utter publicly the kind of citation we have above. Very few

had the intellectual courage to read Khomeini's writings and to draw the conclusions, just as with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which few read until it was too late. This is not a mere comparison. Many times, Khomeini has warned, "I fear that like Hitler, we may enter history as people who achieved quick victories, only to be followed by defeat."

The post-Khomeini

Prospects for the survival of his regime, after his death, are indeed grim. In December, the grand ayatollahs rejected his appointment of Montazeri as his heir. This act by the ayatollahs was a challenge to Khomeini's wisdom: He could not appoint a successor before his death. This rebuff also questioned Khomeini's position as a "living Imam," as his supporters consider him. The ayatollahs, who have challenged Khomeini's authority repeatedly, never could accept such a title.

Iran today is a theocracy of a special kind. The actual power structure is based on a precise hierarchy. Khomeini is one of many thousands of Sayyeds, those who can claim descendancy from the family of the Prophet, but he is also a Mussavi, a family descendant of the seventh Imam, Mussa Ibn Jaffar; here lies his power. Beside members of Khomeini's own family, who have been put in key positions, the center of what Khomeini believes to be the World Islamic Revolution is first led by the Mussavi Sayyeds, to the exclusion of all others. Of the 1,000 acknowledged key positions within Khomeini's regime, 600 are in their hands: some 53 within parliament, 7 regional governors, 75 enterprise chiefs out of 120. Then comes the general network of Sayyeds followed by the higher levels of the mullah-crazy, then those Shi'ites belonging to those particularly blessed regions of Isfahan, Fars and Yazd, and the remaining Shi'ites.

In seven years, a tremendous political apparatus has been put at the disposal of the Mussawi Sayyeds; 120,000 members of the Pasdarans (Revolutionary Guards), several hundred thousand members of the local and city komitehs overlapping with the strength of such institutions as the Foundation of the Martyrs of Ayatollah Karroubi, the Foundation of the Down-trodden, the Imam Committees, and so forth.

However, among these many thousands of Sayyeds within the leadership are numerous Soviet fellow travelers such as Prime Minister Mir-Moussawi, who is implementing full-fledge socialist-style economic reforms, or the new general prosecutor, Hojat al Islam Moussawi Khoeinia. These are also said to have opposed Montazeri's appointment. After Khomeini, there will be no "living Imam." Actual power will lie in the organization of mass repression. The grand ayatollahs who, for personal reasons, had rejected Khomeini's leadership in the 1970s, but bowed to his manipulation of the mobs in 1979, will again prove helpless against such a political machine. They will be a mere pawn in a Soviet drive for power in Teheran which, no doubt, will be done in the name of Islam, with the same fervor as the Tudeh Party displayed on Nov. 27, 1978.