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## The Iranian Revolution and Shia Islam: The Role of Islam in the Iranian Revolution\*

*İran Devrimi ve Şii İslam: İran Devriminde İslam'ın Rolü Ne Oldu?*

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**Abstract:** This article examines the role of Islam in the Iranian revolution. It is safe to say the Iranian Revolution had a deep connection with the different socio-economic problems that encumbered Iranian society under Mohammed Reza Shah (r.1941-79). And that Shi'a Islam played a crucial role in this historical event. Using the mourning day of the Imam Hussein (the Karbala event) and the ceremonies associated with it, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to transform the Iranian people's discontent into a revolutionary crisis by providing an effective channel of communication between the participant activists and the leaders of the Iranian Revolution. At the same time Khomeini was able to provide a mechanism for the political mobilisation of the masses against the Shah's regime.

**Key Words:** Iran, Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, Mohammed Reza Shah

**Özet:** Bu makale, İran devriminde Şia İslam'ın rolünü açıklamaktadır. Ayetullah Humeyni'nin ömr-ü hayatındaki din adamı olarak popülaritesi ve dini inançlarına olan güçlü bağı onu İran devriminin doğal lideri haline getirdi. Bahse konu devrim hareketinin Muhammed Rıza Şah döneminde İran toplumunda yaşanan farklı sosyo-ekonomik sorunlar ile derin bir bağlantısı oldu. Ve Humeyni Shia İslam'dan gelen karizmatik kimliği bu tarihsel olayın ortaya çıkmasındaki farklı sosyo-ekonomik sorunların kullanılmasında çok önemli bir rol oynadı. İmam Hüseyin efsanesi (Kerbela) ve törenlerini yas günlerinde kullanarak Ayetullah Humeyni katılımcı aktivist ve toplumsal liderler arasında etkili bir iletişim kanalı sağlayarak İran halkının hoşnutsuzluğunu devrimci bir harekete dönüştürmeyi başardı. Aynı zamanda Humeyni'nin Şah'ın rejimine karşı olan kitleleri siyasi bir seferberlik anlayışı içerisinde harekete geçirecek bir mekanizmayı sağlamada başarılı oldu.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İran, Şia İslam, İran Devrimi, Ayetullah Humeyni, Muhammed Rıza Şah

### INTRODUCTION

During the last half of the 20th Century the Iranian people experienced two very different kinds of revolutions, but with one powerful connection to each other: The White Revolution and the Islamic Revolution. Historically, every revolutionary movement needs a dominant leader with strong ideas to show their followers the way to a better, more equitable life. For example, in the early part of the last century the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin played a significant role in the Russian Revolution. Likewise, thirty-four years ago, Ayatollah Khomeini played a similar role in the Iranian Revolution. During his life time Khomeini's

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popularity and strong religious convictions made him the natural leader of the Iranian revolution.

Before explaining the role of Islam in the Iranian Revolution and the part Ayatollah Khomeini's played in it, let's first deal with the tyrant this historical revolution brought down, Mohammed Reza Shah.

### **I- MOHAMMED REZA SHAH**

Throughout recorded history mankind has witnessed the rise and fall of numerous revolutionary leaders; some good, some bad, but always controversial. Many of these leaders rose to international fame only to fall from grace dramatically in a short period of time. Mohammed Reza Shah, the last of the Pahlavi dynasty of Iranian rulers, was this kind of revolutionary leader. During his two-decade period of rule the Iranian people experienced two totally different kinds of revolutions, but with a single commonality between them.

Mohammad Reza Shah (1919-80) was born in Tehran on October 26, 1919, the eldest son of Reza Shah. He replaced his father, Reza Shah, on the throne on September 16, 1941, shortly before his 22nd birthday. The White Revolution began with Mohammed Reza Shah's rise to power in 1941. His some 39 year reign (1941-1979) poses two distinct questions: 1- What was the White Revolution all about? 2- And what was the Shah's main objective for the future of Iran? Before we answer these questions it is important to cover briefly Iran's political situation in the early part of the 20th Century.

The end of World War I in 1918 brought numerous problems to the Middle East, including Iran. Much of Iran had been a major battlefield during the war. Many Iranians suffered from national disunity, political conflict, economic disruption, poverty, social insecurity, administrative corruption, etc. Further, the central authority of Iran had eroded so drastically during the war that its rapid decline had a major impact on the entire nation.<sup>1</sup> Local land owners and tribal chiefs easily managed to reassert their independence and rebuild their power structures. These perpetual troubles of the Iranian people continued to grow under the oppressive rule of Mohammed Reza Shah.<sup>2</sup>

Mohammed Reza Shah had briefly fled to abroad during the Nationalist Muhammad Musaddag government (1951-53) and returned back after a British and American-backed coup ousted Musaddag.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the Iranian *ulema* largely supported the coup against Musaddag. After the Shah returned from exile, he announced that by the end of 1990s Iran would be the second Japan and catch up with France both economically and militarily.<sup>4</sup> How would Iran be an industrialized country? The Shah announced his master project, the White Revolution in 1963. It consisted of land reform, nationalization of forests, sale of state factories to private entrepreneurs, profit-sharing for industrial workers, extension of the vote to women, establishment of a rural literacy corps, establishment of schools and hospitals. The

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<sup>1</sup> H. Katpuzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran, Despotism and Postmodernism, 1926-1979*, (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1981), p.75.

<sup>2</sup> N. Keddie, *Root of Revolution: An Interpretative History of Modern Iran*, (USA: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> More on this see, Christopher de Bellaigue (22 July 2012). "Patriot of Persia: Muhammad Mossadegh and a Tragic Anglo-American Coup". Washington Post. Retrieved 23 July 2012.

<sup>4</sup> C. Benard-Khalilzad, Z, *"The Government of God" Iran's Islamic Republic*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 12.

White Revolution aimed to create a new society, which would westernize the Iranian people and they would be as modern as the people in the western countries.<sup>5</sup>

During the White Revolution Iran's socio-economic and socio-political situation changed drastically. The number of schools increased from 24,126 to over 48,000; health clinics grew from a mere 700 to 2,800; under the Shah's policies Iran's GNP grew more than 50% between 1973 and 1976; per capita income reached a third world record high of \$2,000; and the urban area population increased dramatically from 5 million to 10 million people. During this great change the population in big cities doubled in a relatively short period of time. The population of Tehran grew from 2,719,730 to 4,496,159.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as a result of the Shah's policies thousands of Iranian students were able to travel abroad to study in Western universities, especially in the USA and Europe.<sup>7</sup>

This rapid modernization and urbanization that took place between 1963 and 1978 brought a new structure to Iranian society. However, the Shah failed to modernize the existing political system in Iran, and continued to base his power structure on the three Pahlavi pillars: 1- The armed forces, 2- the court patronage network, 3- the overwhelming waste in ever growing government bureaucracies.<sup>8</sup> Reza Shah used the entire Iranian military establishment as his central support in maintaining his power. He spent an obscenely high percentage of Iran's national budget on military weapons and equipment. By 1977 Iran had the largest navy in the Middle East, and one of the most powerful military forces in the world.<sup>9</sup> In a relatively short period of time Reza Shah had achieved one of his major goals; the founding of a powerful Iranian state within the volatile Middle East. However, all of the Shah's ambitious policies brought a number of new problems to Iranian society. In the 1960s opposition groups had already started to criticize the economic and political conditions in Iran. In the 1970s, the Shah invited further criticism by nullifying the multi-party system and went so far as to establish a one party system ignoring all religious factions. He also tried to make the *ulema* the official employees of the state. The struggle between Mohammed Reza Shah and Iranian religious factions had started.<sup>10</sup>

## II- SHI'A ISLAM AND RELIGIOUS SIDE

The majority of Iran's population is Shi'a Islam. Therefore, it's important to know the Iranian religious people's views about Reza Shah's administration. The Islamic leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, based his revolution totally on the foundation of Shi'a religion, with special emphasis on the doctrine of imamate.<sup>11</sup> What was the doctrine of imamate? In Khomeini's own words,

“Ahle sunnet and the whole Muslim community believe a prophet or messenger is not appointed or elected by the Ummat or community, but ordained by God. The Shi'as believe that after the Prophet (Mohammed) died, his successor (a

<sup>5</sup> E. Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 424.

<sup>6</sup> C. Benard-Z. Khalilzad, *The Government of God*, p.12.

<sup>7</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 431.

<sup>8</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 435.

<sup>9</sup> H. Algar, *The Roots of Islamic Revolution*, (London 1983), pp. 141-142; Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, pp. 435-6.

<sup>10</sup> S. Arjomand, "Shi'i Islam and Revolution in Iran", *Government and Opposition*, 16/1981, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> M. Manzoor Nomani, *The Life of Ayatullah Khomeini*, (London 1986), p. 17.

Caliph or Imam) was also appointed by God. Like the Prophet, the Imams are considered innocent and must be obeyed. This obedience is unquestionable and obligatory for all Muslims. They are equal to the last of prophets, prophet Mohammed in rank position, but superior to all other prophets and messenger. They are the religious and lawful heads of the Muslims in all affairs and they, alone, are entitled to rule not only over the entire Muslim community, but the whole world. Only innocent Imams nominated by God can rule, and no one else has this authority. The ultimate proof of God over his creatures cannot be established without an Imam. It is through the Imam that men may obtain knowledge and awareness of Islam".<sup>12</sup>

Someone once asked Imam Jafer Sadig whether the earth can exist without an Imam. Imam Sadig replied "If the earth is left without an Imam it will sink".<sup>13</sup> When Imam Bagar was asked this same question he responded "If the Imam is taken away from the earth even for an hour, the earth and all that is on it will shake like waves that rise in the ocean".<sup>14</sup> According to Shi'a belief, then, if the world is left without the Imam, even for a short period of time, the earth will sink and the whole universe will be destroyed.<sup>15</sup> After the death of the last prophet, till the end of world, according to Shi'a Islam, God has appointed twelve Imams. They were nominated by God through prophet Muhammed. The first Imam was Hazrat Ali, the second was his eldest son, Imam Hasan, the third, Imam Hasan's younger brother Imam Hussain, and eleven of the twelve Imams i.e from Hazrat Ali to Imam Askari died and his son, Muhammad al-Mahdi, mysteriously disappeared. The Shi'as believe this son will return and be the salvation for all Muslim people's problems.<sup>16</sup> According to Shi'a Islam believers, the twelve Imams represent truth and are infallible. Understanding this aspect of Shi'a Islam tradition is necessary to understand the Khomeini revolution.

### III- KHOMEINI

Ayatollah Khomeini was born in 1902 in Khomain, a small village south of Tehran. As a boy he was sent to Fayzieh Madrasah in Qum to study with Ayatollah Abdulkarim Ha'iri, the leading Shi'a Islam theologian of the time. After completing his education Khomeini remained at this same school as a teacher. In 1943 he published his first major work, titled *Kashf-i Asrar*, (*Discovery of Secrets*) in which he argued for establishing an Islamic system of government, but without rejecting the principle of the monarchy.<sup>17</sup> However, in 1962-1963 Khomeini changed his thinking and began to speak out against Reza Shah's monarchy. While many clerics were criticizing the Shah over land reform, Khomeini denounced the regime with a long list of abuses: overt corruption; election rigging; violation of constitutional laws; destroying the independence of the university; neglecting the economic needs of merchants, workers, and peasants; undermining Iran's Islamic beliefs; continued capitulation to foreigners; selling oil to Israel; and constantly expanding the size of central government bureaucracies.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> M. Manzoor Nomani, *The Life of Ayatullah Khomeini*, (London 1986), p.75.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> E. Abrahamian, "Khomeini: Fundamentalist or populist?" *New Left Review*, No:186/1991, p. 107; Nomani, *The Life of Ayatullah Khomeini*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> H. Algar, *The Roots of Islamic Revolution*, p.207; Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 425.

<sup>18</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 425.

Shortly after making these public criticisms of the Shah, Khomeini published his most important book, titled *Welayet-i Fagih* (Government of the Islamic Jurist), which was consistent with his political ideas. In his book Khomeini explains that the Islamic government should be based on the Quran and the traditions and ideas of the twelve Imams.<sup>19</sup> He went further by stating that the real governors of Iran are the Islamic jurists themselves.<sup>20</sup> Khomeini even went so far as to declare "If you want to be a true Muslim you have to believe in the authority of the ulema." He reminded people that the ulema had been passed down from the Prophet and the twelve Imams centuries ago. Finally, Khomeini publicly asked Iranians "Why were we once a happy generation when we were young? What happened to us as a people?" Quickly and emphatically Khomeini now declared he wanted a government that would respect religious authorities. Within a short period of time Khomeini had raised the radical cry calling for the destruction of the monarchy and the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>21</sup>

In 1963 alone there were countless numbers of strikes and riots against the Shah's regime. Reza Shah responded by exiling Khomeini to Bursa, a prominent historical city in the eastern Marmara region of Turkey. Eventually, Khomeini went to Iraq where he gave lectures and continued to communicate with his students in Iran. Finally, Khomeini took up residence in Paris, where he remained until the Revolution began in 1979.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV- ALI SHARIATI

Coincidentally, Ali Shariati was studying for a doctorate degree in sociology at a university in Paris during this same time period. He was also attending political discussion groups and joined the movement of God Worshipping Sociologists.<sup>23</sup> When Ali Shariati finally returned to Iran in 1965 he began giving lectures to high level educated people. In his lectures he continuously stressed that the people of the third world could not fight imperialism unless they first regained their cultural identity, which in many countries was interwoven with popular religious traditions. It was important for these people to return to their religious roots before they could challenge imperialistic western nations.<sup>24</sup> It was not long before Shariati was arrested and spent six months in jail. After being denied a teaching position at Tehran University he went to Khorosan, where he first taught in a village school and later at Mashed University. In 1967 Ali Shariati moved to Tehran to take up a lectureship at Husseineh-i'ershad. In 1972, fearful of Shariati's growing popularity and his all too frequent references to the many existing problems under the Shah, the *Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar* (Organization of Intelligence and National Security or SAVAK)<sup>25</sup> closed down Husseinieh and arrested Shariati. SAVAK immediately banned most of Shariati's works from further publication and distribution. Ali Shariati remained imprisoned until 1975. But it was not until 1977 that he was allowed to leave Iran and travel to London, where he died within a month of

<sup>19</sup> Nomani, *The life of Ayatullah Khomeini*, p. 146.

<sup>20</sup> Nomani, *The life of Ayatullah Khomeini*, p. 157.

<sup>21</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 426.

<sup>22</sup> Algar, *The Roots of Islamic Revolution*, pp. 207-210.

<sup>23</sup> Assef Bayat, "Shariati and Marx: A Critique of an 'Islamic' Critique of Marxism", *Alif* 10 (1990):19-41. [https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/9774/12\\_606\\_015.pdf?sequence=1](https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/9774/12_606_015.pdf?sequence=1)

<sup>24</sup> Algar, *The Roots of Islamic Revolutions*, p. 215; Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 465.

<sup>25</sup> The Iranian security and intelligence service from 1957 to 1979.

arriving there. Even though Ali Shariati did not live to see the Shah's downfall, he must be justly credited as the main intellectual of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>26</sup>

According to the teachings of Ali Shariati, the prophet had come to establish not just a community, but a Muslim *ummat-Nizam-i-tawhid*; a social order that would be completely united by the virtues of equity, human brotherhood, justice, public ownership of wealth, etc. But more importantly the basis of this social order would be a classless society.<sup>27</sup> Shariati had found immediate success among the young generation of intelligentsia, especially university graduates and high school students.<sup>28</sup> According to Shariati's followers, true Shi'ism is a dynamic religion that speaks the language of the masses and inspired them to revolt not only against Reza Shah, but the Iranian upper classes and western imperialists. Shi'ism would also enable Iran to move rapidly toward the future by adopting western technology and even some western social sciences without losing its national identity; that is to say, Iran would modernize itself without becoming westernized. In Shariati's view there were many types of threats with which Iran had to be concerned: world and cultural imperialism, international Zionism, colonialism, exploitation, oppression, class inequality, cartels, multinational corporations, and racism.<sup>29</sup>

Ironically, the Mujahidin's and Shariati's ideas were so closely related that years later Shariati helped the Mujahidin with their prolific literary works. Mostly focusing on the revolutionary aspects of Shi'ism: they believed it was the duty of all Muslims to continue to struggle to create a classless society and to destroy all forms of oppression, which, in the modern age included imperialism, capitalism, despotism, and conservative clericalism. The Mujahidin summed up their attitude toward religion in these words;

After years of extensive study into Islamic history and Shi'i ideology, we have reached the firm conclusion that Islam, especially Shi'i Islam, will play a major role in inspiring the masses to join the revolution, it will do so because Shi'ism has both a revolutionary message for the masses and a special place in our popular culture.<sup>30</sup>

## **V- GUERRILLA ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR CONNECTION WITH THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT**

The guerilla movement in Iran emerged at the same time that the middle class was starting to enjoy their new found prosperity; ever-growing employment opportunities (particularly for college graduates), rising salaries, home ownership, etc. The middle class, then, joined the guerilla organizations against the Shah not out of economic deprivation, but because of social discontent, moral indignation and political frustration. It is interesting to note that both Mujahidin and Fadayan had come from middle class families. Both were anti-western culture and both despised imperialism.<sup>31</sup>

During the struggles between the guerilla organizations and the Shah's forces - SAVAK killed thousands of people. Guerilla leaders were imprisoned, exiled, or executed. As a result many of these organizations lost their power and were forced to disband. But many sought collaboration with Islamic factions. Both Muslims and Marxists agreed that Iran was dominated by American imperialism. The White Revolution changed Iran from a feudal

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<sup>26</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 472.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 472.

<sup>28</sup> Nomani, *The life of Ayatullah Khomeini*, p. 152-153.

<sup>29</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 473.

<sup>30</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 490-491.

<sup>31</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 480.

society into a bourgeois one, heavily dependent on western capital, mostly from the USA. Also, Iran was being threatened by a cultural imperialism as well as by militarily, economically. and politically. The only way to shatter this atmosphere of terror was through heroic acts of violence. And when the Shah's regime finally collapsed the revolutionaries carried out the following radical changes: ending Iran's dependence on the west, building an independent economy, giving a free voice to the masses, redistributing the wealth of Iran, and generally creating the classless Nezam-i-Tawshid.<sup>32</sup> The Mujahidin summed up the attitude of both Muslim and Marxist followers;

There is only one major enemy, the imperialists and their local collaborators. When SAVAK shoots, they kill both Muslim and Marxist. Consequently, in the present situation there is an organic unity between Muslim revolutionaries and Marxist revolutionaries. Obviously, Marxism and Islam are not the same. However, Islam is definitely closer to Marxism than to Pahlevism. After all, Islam and Marxism teach the same lessons in the fight against injustice.<sup>33</sup>

## VI- THE REVOLUTION

In the 1970s heavy inflation consumed Iran. The rising cost-of-living index rose from 100 points in 1970 to over 190 points in 1976. According to *The London Economist's* 1976 report, the rent in residential areas of Tehran rose 300% in five years. And by 1975 a middle class family was spending as much as 50% of its annual income on housing.<sup>34</sup> Ironically this economic crisis coincided with numerous foreign nations pressuring the Shah to relax police controls on the Iranian people. According to London based Amnesty International, Iran was one of the world's "worst violators of human rights." At that time a number of highly visible demonstrations were taking place in western European countries and the USA. These overt activities brought an immediate response from a number of influential western newspapers. Many of these newspapers which had previously praised the Shah, now started to criticize the Shah's extreme political methods. One highly respected newspaper, *The Sunday Times of London*, ran a series of exposés on SAVAK, stating "there was a clear pattern" of torture used by SAVAK against active dissidents, as well as intellectuals who dared to criticize the Shah's regime. An even bigger problem for the Shah was that American congressmen were beginning to question the wisdom of the USA selling sophisticated weaponry to a regime that depended entirely on one man. Eventually the US Congress declared the Shah's regime could no longer be considered stable until it permitted "popular input" from the Iranian people by creating proper parliamentary procedures, allowing freedom of press, speech, and assembly.<sup>35</sup>

Opposition in Iran grew more vocal during the summer of 1977. In early July, a number of writers and publishers formed a group to promote distribution of free books (freedom of thought) to the public. At the same time a national organization of university teachers started demonstrating for academic freedom. And theology students in Qum formed an educational society demanding the following: immediate return to Iran of Ayatollah Khomeini; the end of censorship; the re-opening of Faysieh seminary and Tehran University; freedom of the press; right to assembly; dissolution of the Resurgence Party; an independent judiciary; financial help for the agriculture sector; and "true sovereignty for Iran" by severing

<sup>32</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 492.

<sup>33</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 493.

<sup>34</sup> Algar, *The Roots of Islamic Revolution*, p. 177; Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 498.

<sup>35</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 499.

all ties with imperialist powers.<sup>36</sup> The Iranian people began to recognize the impact these professional and human rights groups were having on the political situation in Iran. This caused old and new political organizations to join the struggle against the Shah.<sup>37</sup> However, it is significant that at this early stage of the revolution none of the major opposition groups openly called for the establishment of either a republic or an Islamic republic. On the contrary, their immediate goal was to re-establish the 1906-09 fundamental laws that had originally created a constitutional monarchy.<sup>38</sup> Up until mid-November 1977, the opposition had focused all of its energies on passive resistance activities of writing letters, forming new groups, and publishing newspapers. After November, however, the opposition overflowed into the streets of all major cities, including Tehran. This marked the start of a new stage in the revolutionary process.<sup>39</sup>

In January 1978, street protests increased in size and intensity. Over 4,000 theology students from the various seminaries closed down the bazaars while their sympathizers clashed with police as they took to the streets shouting numerous demands for change; "We don't want the Yazid government!" And "We want our constitution back!" And "We demand the return of Ayatullah Khomeini!". In the following days Khomeini called for even more demonstrations. And he publicly congratulated Qum and the progressive clergy for their heroic stand against paganism. He even accused the Shah of collaborating with America to undermine Islam, destroying Iranian agriculture, and turning the country into a dumping ground for foreign goods.<sup>40</sup> For Khomeini's followers Qum provided a magnificent opportunity to unify the many city and village mullahs across the country in defence of Islam.<sup>41</sup>

In 1978 a joint protest made up of middle and working classes was held in Tehran. This historic entry of the working class joining the struggle made possible the eventual triumph of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>42</sup> On September 4<sup>th</sup>, over 100,000 protesters converged on the major mosques and Husseinieh's spacious Shahyad Square shouting "free all political prisoners" and "we want Khomeini back".<sup>43</sup> The September 7<sup>th</sup> demonstration in Tehran attracted more than a half a million participants, the largest gathering of protesters ever held in Iran. And this crowd was even more radical in their chants against the Shah, shouting "death to Pehlevis" and "the Shah is a bastard" and "throw out America" and "Hussein is our guide, Khomeini is our leader" and "independence, freedom and Islam." This was the first time Iranians had publicly made a demand for an Islamic regime.

The Iranian people joined in these demonstrations because of all the chaotic problems they had been facing: escalating unemployment, overwhelming poverty, and economic insecurity. Fifteen years of broken promises had finally taken its toll on the Iranian people. They had been promised much: their own land, proper wages, and a decent life. They had received none of these. Not surprisingly they knew they had much to gain and nothing to lose in joining the fight to overthrow the Shah. And Khomeini was all the while turning up the

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<sup>36</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 502-504.

<sup>37</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p.504.

<sup>38</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 504.

<sup>39</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 505.

<sup>40</sup> M. Momen, *An Introduction To Shi'i Islam*, (Yale University Press 1985), p. 284; Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, pp. 505-506.

<sup>41</sup> J. Amuzegar, *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution, The Pahlavis' Triumph and Tragedy*, (New York 1991).

<sup>42</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 510.

<sup>43</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 510.



pressure. Now calling for the overthrow of the monarchy and establishing a new government, as well as demanding the return of all exiles, protection for all religious minorities, and perhaps most important "social justice" for the deprived masses.<sup>44</sup>

Mohammed Reza Shah's response was to immediately declare martial law nationwide. On Black Friday, he ordered the army to take over all major newspapers and lock-up National Front leaders. Ironically, it was a lone oil refinery worker that put these events in perspective when he publicly challenged the Shah with this declaration: "We will export oil only after we have exported the Shah and his generals." From that moment the Shah had lost the confidence of the military. Ashure troops<sup>45</sup> in Qum refused to fire on demonstrators. Five hundred soldiers and a dozen tanks in Tabriz immediately joined the opposition. And finally, America lost all confidence in the Shah's ability to govern his own regime. Amazingly, up until the first of November, the American government had openly supported the Shah's efforts to remain in power.<sup>46</sup>

If these events were part of a game, Khomeini played it brilliantly. He used the Shah's own public relations ploys against the Shah. "Khomeini declared that once the Shah was overthrown Iran would become a reliable oil supplier to the west. Iran would not ally with the east, but would be willing to have friendly relations with the United States". But at the same time Khomeini continued his call for even more strikes and demonstrations. And the masses responded by continuing to come out in large numbers to demonstrate. On 16 January, Mohammed Reza Shah was forced to flee for his life to Cairo, Egypt. Shortly after his exit, Ayatollah Khomeini came to Iran to take personal command of his revolution.<sup>47</sup>

## VII- KHOMENI'S METHOD

According to Shaul Bakhash, Khomeini followed four main strategies during the revolution. First, he used the mourning days of the funerals (the ashure) to express his ideas to the people. Second, he encouraged the movement to overthrow the Shah. Third, he managed to maintain the momentum of the street protests. Lastly, he kept his promise to establish an Islamic government in Iran.<sup>48</sup>

In the early stages of the revolution, Khomeini had openly declared for establishing either a republic or an Islamic republic. However, he always stressed his immediate aim was to create a constitutional monarchy that would bring social justice and freedom to everyone, including non-believers. Eventually, though, Khomeini began to preach to students and pilgrims that Mohammed Reza Shah was an agent of anti-Islamic foreign imperialism. And he called on the *ulema* to assert its opposition to such an unjust authority.<sup>49</sup> Then, Khomeini very cleverly used the Hazrat Husseine myth to provide a framework for labeling reaction against the Shah as the evil, tyrannical 'yazid of the present age.' In this case the Karbala factor became the main point of the revolution. By using the Karbala factor, Khomeini's role in the revolution became the embodiment and fulfillment of numerous Shi'a themes on which the Iranian people had been raised since childhood. The struggle was easy to understand because it was the struggle of the Imams against their enemies, and in particularly, the battle of Karbala.

<sup>44</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 525.

<sup>45</sup> These troops stationed at Qum to provide security during the Ashura mourning ceremonies.

<sup>46</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 524.

<sup>47</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 525.

<sup>48</sup> S. Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, (Great Britain 1985), p. 34.

<sup>49</sup> Momen, *An Introduction To Shi'i Islam*, p. 274.

According to traditional Shi'ism, for centuries the Shi'as looked on Prophet Mohammed's Mecca and Imam Hussein's caliphate as the golden age of Islam. This would prove to be great material for Khomeini when he declared that revolutionary Iran had already surpassed these early societies and their many unsolvable problems. For centuries Shi'as believed the Mahdi would return when the world was overburdened with injustice and tyranny. Khomeini argued that the Mahdi would reappear when Muslims returned to Islam, and created a just society for all and at the same time exported their revolution to other countries. In addition, Khomeini's students were able to persuade the Iranian people that Khomeini, even though living in Paris, was like the Hidden Imam, sending messages through special representatives. This strategy had an immediate effect on the Iranian people. It didn't take long before the crowds were shouting for "Imam Khomeini."<sup>50</sup>

Another important point about the Iranian revolution is that Khomeini succeeded in imposing his leadership on three main groups: The religious leaders, the political opposition, and the mass of social classes.<sup>51</sup> At this point one might ask, why did the opposition accept Khomeini's leadership? Two factors can help explain Khomeini's decisive role. First, Khomeini had a dynamic personality; especially his simple way of life and his refusal to compromise with the 'satanic tyrant.' In a country where most politicians live in luxury, Khomeini led a life as austere as that of a Sufi mystic, and as devoid of material opulence as that of the common people.

The second factor, in his 15 years in exile, Khomeini carefully avoided making public pronouncements, especially written ones that dealt with issues such as land reform, clerical power, and sexual equality. Khomeini blamed the Shah for all the concessions he so readily granted to the west, and the tacit alliance he made with Israel. He was also critical of many of the Shah's wasteful expenditures: like the vast stores of military arms, rampant corruption in high places, decay in the agriculture sector, rise in the cost of living, the housing shortage, the sprawling slums, the ever widening gap between rich and poor, the suppression of newspapers and political parties, the creation of a vast bureaucratic state, and all the gross violations of constitutional laws. In denouncing the Shah's regime, Khomeini promised to liberate Iran from foreign domination, extend freedom to all political parties, guarantee the rights of all religious minorities, and bring social justice to everyone, including the bazaars, the intelligentsia, the peasantry, and particularly all of the dispossessed masses.<sup>52</sup>

### **VIII- WHAT WAS SAID ABOUT THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION?**

Two very different interpretations have been offered to explain the long-term causes of the Iranian Revolution. One interpretation claims the revolution occurred because the Shah tried to modernize too much, too quickly for the traditional-minded and backward thinking Iranian people. The other argument is that the Shah did not modernize fast enough. According to Abrahamian and Ervand both these interpretations are only half correct. The revolution took place when it did because the Shah modernized the socio-economic level which expanded the status of the middle class and the industrial working class. But the Shah failed to modernize the links between the government and the structure of Iranian society. This failure blocked the channels of communication between the political system and the general population. It also widened the gap between the ruling circles and the new social forces, especially the bazaars

<sup>50</sup> Momen, *An Introduction To Shi'i Islam*, p. 289.

<sup>51</sup> Momen, *An Introduction To Shi'i Islam*, p. 287.

<sup>52</sup> Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 533.

and the religious authorities. Ervand concluded that the Iranian revolution took place not because of overdevelopment or underdevelopment, but because of uneven development. Fred Holliday supported Ervand's thesis in his article "The Iranian Revolution and its Implications." According to Holliday the revolution was a product of mass contradictions.<sup>53</sup>

The other interpretation came from Theda Skocpol, who believed that rapid modernization and industrialisation brought a huge migration of the rural masses to urban areas. She summed up her theory with "the revolution was straight forwardly the product of societal disruption, social disorientation, and universal frustration with the pace of change." In the end Shi'a Islam was organizationally and culturally crucial to the success of the Iranian Revolution in bringing down Mohammed Reza Shah.<sup>54</sup>

### IX- CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is safe to say the Iranian Revolution had a deep connection with the different socio-economic problems that encumbered Iranian society under Mohammed Reza Shah. And that Shi'a Islam played a crucial role in this historical event. Using the mourning days associated with Ashura, the Imam Hussein myth (Karbala), and the ceremonies associated with these central aspects of Shi'a belief, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to transform the Iranian people's discontent into a revolutionary crisis by providing an effective channel of communication between the participant activists and the leaders of the Iranian Revolution. At the same time Khomeini was able to provide a mechanism for the political mobilisation of the masses against the Shah's regime.

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<sup>53</sup> T. Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution", *Theory and Society*, Vol. 11/1982, p. 275.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

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