

## The Islamic Revolution, 1978–79

The chain of events that ended in February 1979 with the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime and the foundation of the Islamic Republic began with the death in Najaf on October 23, 1977 of Hajj Sayyid Mustafa Khomeini, unexpectedly and under mysterious circumstances. This death was widely attributed to the Iranian security police, SAVAK, and protest meetings took place in Qum, Tehran, Yazd, Mashhad, Shiraz, and Tabriz. Imam Khomeini himself, with the equanimity he customarily displayed in the face of personal loss, described the death of his son as one of the “hidden favors” (*altaf-i khafiya*) of God, and advised the Muslims of Iran to show fortitude and hope.<sup>1</sup>

The esteem in which Imam Khomeini was held and the reckless determination of the Shah’s regime to undermine that esteem were demonstrated once again on January 7, 1978 when an article appeared in the semi-official newspaper *Ittila’at* attacking him in scurrilous terms as a traitor working together with foreign enemies of the country.

The next day a furious mass protest took place in Qum; it was suppressed by the security forces with heavy loss of life. This was the first in a series of popular confrontations that, gathering momentum throughout 1978, soon turned into a vast revolutionary movement, demanding the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime and the installation of an Islamic government.

The martyrs of Qum were commemorated forty days later with demonstrations and shop closures in every major city of Iran. Particularly grave were the disturbances in Tabriz, which ended only after more than 100 people had been killed by the Shah’s troops. On March 29, the fortieth day after the killings in Tabriz was marked by a further round of demonstrations, in some fifty-five Iranian cities; this time the heaviest casualties occurred in Yazd, where security forces opened fire on a gathering in the main mosque. In early May, it was Tehran itself that saw the principal violence; armored columns appeared on the streets for the first time since June 1963 in order to contain the trend to revolution.

In June, the Shah found it politic to make a number of superficial concessions – such as the repeal of the “imperial calendar” – to the forces opposing him, but repression also continued. When the

government lost control of Isfahan on August 17, the army assaulted the city and killed hundreds of unarmed demonstrators.

Two days later, 410 people were burned to death behind the locked doors of a cinema in Abadan, and the government was plausibly held responsible. On 'Id al-fitr, which that year fell on September 4, marches took place in all major cities, with an estimated total of four million participants. The demand was loudly voiced for the abolition of monarchy and the foundation of an Islamic government under the leadership of Imam Khomeini. Faced with the mounting tide of revolution, the Shah decreed martial law and forbade further demonstrations.

On September 9, a crowd gathered at the *Maydan-i Zhala* (subsequently renamed *Maydan-i Shuhada'*) in Tehran was attacked by troops that had blocked all exits from the square, and some 2000 people were killed at this location alone. Another 2000 were killed elsewhere in Tehran by American-supplied military helicopters hovering overhead. This day of massacre, which came to be known as Black Friday, marked the point of no return. Too much blood had been spilt for the Shah to have any hope of survival, and the army itself began to tire of the task of slaughter.

As these events were unfolding in Iran, Imam Khomeini delivered a whole series of messages and speeches, which reached his homeland not only in printed form but also increasingly on tape cassettes. His voice could be heard congratulating the people for their sacrifices, denouncing the Shah in categorical fashion as a criminal, and underlining the responsibility of the United States for the killings and the repression. (Ironically, US President Carter had visited Tehran on New Year's Eve 1977 and lauded the Shah for creating "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world.")<sup>2</sup>

As the façade of stability dissolved, the United States continued its military and political support of the Shah uninterrupted by anything but the most superficial hesitation). Most importantly, the Imam recognized that a unique juncture had been reached in Iranian history, that a genuinely revolutionary momentum had come into being which if dissipated would be impossible to rebuild. He therefore warned against any tendency to compromise or to be deceived by the sporadic conciliatory gestures of the Shah.

Thus on the occasion of 'Id al-Fitr, when mass demonstrations had passed off with deceptive peacefulness in Tehran, he issued the following declaration: "Noble people of Iran! Press forward with your movement and do not slacken for a minute, as I know full well you will not! Let no one imagine that after the blessed month of Ramadan his God-given duties have changed. These demonstrations that break down tyranny and advance the goals of Islam are a form of worship that is not confined to certain months or days, for the aim is to save the nation, to enact Islamic justice, and to establish a form of divine government based on justice."<sup>3</sup>

In one of the numerous miscalculations that marked his attempts to destroy the revolution, the Shah

decided to seek the deportation of Imam Khomeini from Iraq, on the assumption, no doubt, that once removed from the prestigious location of Najaf and its proximity to Iran, his voice would somehow be silenced. The agreement of the Iraqi government was obtained at a meeting between the Iraqi and Iranian foreign ministers in New York, and on September 24, 1978, the Imam's house in Najaf was surrounded by troops.

He was informed that his continued residence in Iraq was contingent on his abandoning political activity, a condition he was sure to reject. On October 3, he left Iraq for Kuwait, but was refused entry at the border. After a period of hesitation in which Algeria, Lebanon and Syria were considered as possible destinations, Imam Khomeini embarked for Paris, on the advice of his second son, Hajj Sayyid Ahmad Khomeini, who by now had joined him. Once arrived in Paris, the Imam took up residence in the suburb of Neauphle-le-Chateau in a house that had been rented for him by Iranian exiles in France.

Residence in a non-Muslim land was no doubt experienced by Imam Khomeini as irksome, and in the declaration he issued from Neauphle-le-Chateau on October 11, 1978, the fortieth day after the massacres of Black Friday, he announced his intention of moving to any Muslim country that assured him freedom of speech.<sup>4</sup>

No such assurance ever materialized. In addition, his forced removal from Najaf increased popular anger in Iran still further. It was, however, the Shah's regime that turned out to be the ultimate loser from this move. Telephonic communications with Tehran were far easier from Paris than they had been from Najaf, thanks to the Shah's determination to link Iran with the West in every possible way, and the messages and instructions the Imam issued flowed forth uninterrupted from the modest command center he established in a small house opposite his residence. Moreover, a host of journalists from across the world now made their way to France, and the image and the words of the Imam soon became a daily feature in the world's media.

In Iran meanwhile, the Shah was continuously reshaping his government. First he brought in as prime minister Sharif-Imami, an individual supposedly close to conservative elements among the *'ulama*. Then, on November 6, he formed a military government under General Ghulam-Riza Azhari, a move explicitly recommended by the United States. These political maneuverings had essentially no effect on the progress of the revolution.

On November 23, one week before the beginning of Muharram, the Imam issued a declaration in which he likened the month to "a divine sword in the hands of the soldiers of Islam, our great religious leaders, and respected preachers, and all the followers of Imam Husayn, Sayyid al-shuhada'." They must, he continued, "make maximum use of it; trusting in the power of God, they must tear out the remaining roots of this tree of oppression and treachery." As for the military government, it was contrary to the *Shari'ah* and opposition to it a religious duty.<sup>5</sup>

Vast demonstrations unfurled across Iran as soon as Muharram began. Thousands of people donned white shrouds as a token of readiness for martyrdom and were cut down as they defied the nightly curfew. On Muharram 9, a million people marched in Tehran demanding the overthrow of the monarchy, and the following day, 'Ashura, more than two million demonstrators approved by acclamation a seventeen-point declaration of which the most important demand was the formation of an Islamic government headed by the Imam.

Killings by the army continued, but military discipline began to crumble, and the revolution acquired an economic dimension with the proclamation of a national strike on December 18. With his regime crumbling, the Shah now attempted to co-opt secular, liberal-nationalist politicians in order to forestall the foundation of an Islamic government.

On January 3, 1979, Shahpur Bakhtiyar of the National Front (*Jabha-yi Milli*) was appointed prime minister to replace General Azhari, and plans were drawn up for the Shah to leave the country for what was advertised as a temporary absence. On January 12, the formation of a nine-member regency council was announced; headed by Jalal al-Din Tihrani, an individual proclaimed to have religious credentials, it was to represent the Shah's authority in his absence. None of these maneuvers distracted the Imam from the goal now increasingly within reach.

The very next day after the formation of the regency council, he proclaimed from Neauphle-le-Chateau the formation of the Council of the Islamic Revolution (*Shaura-yi Inqilab-i Islami*), a body entrusted with establishing a transitional government to replace the Bakhtiyar administration. On January 16, amid scenes of feverish popular rejoicing, the Shah left Iran for exile and death.

What remained now was to remove Bakhtiyar and prevent a military coup d'état enabling the Shah to return. The first of these aims came closer to realization when Sayyid Jalal al-Din Tihrani came to Paris in order to seek a compromise with Imam Khomeini. He refused to see him until he resigned from the regency council and pronounced it illegal.

As for the military, the gap between senior generals, unconditionally loyal to the Shah, and the growing number of officers and recruits sympathetic to the revolution, was constantly growing. When the United States dispatched General Huyser, commander of NATO land forces in Europe, to investigate the possibility of a military coup, he was obliged to report that it was pointless even to consider such a step.

Conditions now seemed appropriate for Imam Khomeini to return to Iran and preside over the final stages of the revolution. After a series of delays, including the military occupation of Mehrabad airport from January 24 to 30, the Imam embarked on a chartered airliner of Air France on the evening of January 31 and arrived in Tehran the following morning.

Amid unparalleled scenes of popular joy – it has been estimated that more than ten million people gathered in Tehran to welcome the Imam back to his homeland – he proceeded to the cemetery of

Bihisht-i Zahra to the south of Tehran where the martyrs of the revolution lay buried. There he decried the Bakhtiyar administration as the “last feeble gasp of the Shah’s regime” and declared his intention of appointing a government that would “punch Bakhtiyar’s government in the mouth.”<sup>6</sup>

The appointment of the provisional Islamic government the Imam had promised came on February 5. Its leadership was entrusted to Mahdi Bazargan, an individual who had been active for many years in various Islamic organizations, most notably the Freedom Movement (*Nahzat-i Azadi*).

The decisive confrontation came less than a week later. Faced with the progressive disintegration of the armed forces and the desertion of many officers and men, together with their weapons, to the Revolutionary Committees that were springing up everywhere, Bakhtiyar decreed a curfew in Tehran to take effect at 4 p.m. on February 10.

Imam Khomeini ordered that the curfew should be defied and warned that if elements in the army loyal to the Shah did not desist from killing the people, he would issue a formal *fatwa* for jihad.<sup>7</sup> The following day the Supreme Military Council withdrew its support from Bakhtiyar, and on February 12, 1979, all organs of the regime, political, administrative, and military, finally collapsed. The revolution had triumphed.

Clearly no revolution can be regarded as the work of a single man, nor can its causes be interpreted in purely ideological terms; economic and social developments had helped to prepare the ground for the revolutionary movement of 1978–79. There was also marginal involvement in the revolution, particularly during its final stages when its triumph seemed assured, by secular, liberal-nationalist, and leftist elements.

But there can be no doubting the centrality of Imam Khomeini’s role and the integrally Islamic nature of the revolution he led. Physically removed from his countrymen for fourteen years, he had an unflinching sense of the revolutionary potential that had surfaced and was able to mobilize the broad masses of the Iranian people for the attainment of what seemed to many inside the country (including his chosen premier, Bazargan) a distant and excessively ambitious goal.

His role pertained, moreover, not merely to moral inspiration and symbolic leadership; he was also the operational leader of the revolution. Occasionally he accepted advice on details of strategy from persons in Iran, but he took all key decisions himself, silencing early on all advocates of compromise with the Shah. It was the mosques that were the organizational units of the revolution and mass prayers, demonstrations and martyrdom that were – until the very last stage – its principal weapons.

<sup>1</sup>. Shahidi digar az ruhaniyat, Najaf, n.d., p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>. New York Times, January 2, 1978.

<sup>3</sup>. Sahifa-yi Nur, I, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup>. Sahifa-yi Nur, II, p. 143.

[5.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, III, p. 225.

[6.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, IV, pp. 281-6.

[7.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, V, p. 75.

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