

Imam Khomeini: A Short Biography

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Introduction

By Hamid Algar [1](#)

It is in many ways remarkable that ten years after his death and twenty years after the triumph of the revolution that he led no serious, comprehensive biography of Imam Ruhullah al-Musawi al-Khomeini has yet been written, whether in Persian or any other language. He was, after all, the pre-eminent figure of recent Islamic history, for his impact, considerable enough in Iran itself, has also reverberated throughout much of the Muslim world and helped to transform the worldview and consciousness of many Muslims.

Indeed, it may be precisely this magnitude of the Imam's achievement, together with the complexity of his spiritual, intellectual, and political personality that has so far discouraged potential biographers. The materials available for the task are, however, as abundant as his accomplishments were varied, and the present writer hopes to take up the challenge in the near future. What follows is therefore nothing more than a preliminary sketch, intended to acquaint the reader with the outlines of the Imam's life and the main aspects of his person as an Islamic leader of exceptional stature.

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Religion and State in Iran, 1785–1906 and Mirza Malkum Khan: A Biographical Study in Iranian Modernism. He has been following the Islamic movement in Iran with interest for many years. In an article published in 1972, he assessed the situation there and forecast the Revolution “more accurately than all the U.S. government’s political officers and intelligence analysts,” in the words of Nicholas Wade, Science magazine. Dr. Algar has translated numerous books from Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, including the book Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini.

Childhood And Early Education

Ruhullah Musawi Khomeini was born on 20 Jamadi al-Akhir 1320/ 24 September 1902, the anniversary of the birth of Hazrat Fatima, in the small town of Khumayn, some 160 kilometers to the southwest of Qum. He was the child of a family with a long tradition of religious scholarship. His ancestors, descendants of Imam Musa al-Kazim, the seventh Imam of the Ahl al-Bayt, had migrated towards the end of the eighteenth century from their original home in Nishapur to the Lucknow region of northern India.

There they settled in the small town of Kintur and began devoting themselves to the religious instruction and guidance of the region’s predominantly Shi’i population. The most celebrated member of the family was Mir Hamid Husayn (d. 1880), author of *‘Abaqat al-Anwar fi Imam al-A’immat al-Athar*, a voluminous work on the topics traditionally disputed by Sunni and Shi’i Muslims. [1](#)

Imam Khomeini’s grandfather, Sayyid Ahmad, a contemporary of Mir Hamid Husayn, left Lucknow some time in the middle of the nineteenth century on pilgrimage to the tomb of Hazrat ‘Ali in Najaf. [2](#)

While in Najaf, Sayyid Ahmad made the acquaintance of a certain Yusuf Khan, a prominent citizen of Khumayn. Accepting his invitation, he decided to settle in Khumayn to assume responsibility for the religious needs of its citizens and also took Yusuf Khan’s daughter in marriage. Although Sayyid Ahmad’s links with India were cut by this decision, he continued to be known to his contemporaries as “Hindi,” an appellation, which was inherited by his descendants; we see even that Imam Khomeini used “Hindi” as penname in some of his ghazals.[3](#)

Shortly before the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in February 1978, the Shah’s regime attempted to use this Indian element in the Imam’s family background to depict him as an alien and traitorous element in Iranian society, an attempt that as will be seen backfired on its author. By the time of his death, the date of which is unknown, Sayyid Ahmad had fathered two children: a daughter by the name of Sahiba, and Sayyid Mustafa Hindi, born in 1885, the father of Imam Khomeini.

Sayyid Mustafa began his religious education in Isfahan with Mir Muhammad Taqi Mudarrisi before continuing his studies in Najaf and Samarra under the guidance of Mirza Hasan Shirazi (d.1894), the

principal authority of the age in Shi'i jurisprudence. This corresponded to a pattern of preliminary study in Iran followed by advanced study in the *'atabat*, the shrine cities of Iraq, which for long remained normative; Imam Khomeini was in fact the first religious leader of prominence whose formation took place entirely in Iran.

In Dhu'l-Hijja 1320/ March 1903, some five months after the Imam's birth, Sayyid Mustafa was attacked and killed while traveling on the road between Khumayn and the neighboring city of Arak. The identity of the assassin immediately became known; it was Ja'far-quli Khan, the cousin of a certain Bahram Khan, one of the richest landowners of the region. The cause of the assassination is, however, difficult to establish with certainty.

According to an account that became standard after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, Sayyid Mustafa had aroused the anger of the local landowners because of his defense of the impoverished peasantry. However, Sayyid Mustafa himself, in addition to the religious functions he fulfilled, was also a farmer of moderate prosperity, and it is possible that he fell victim to one of the disputes over irrigation rights that were common at the time. A third explanation is that Sayyid Mustafa, in his capacity of *shari'a* judge of Khumayn, had punished someone for a public violation of the fast of Ramadan and that the family of the offender then exacted a deadly revenge.⁴

The attempts of Sahiba, Sayyid Mustafa's sister, to have the killer punished in Khumayn proved fruitless, so his widow, Hajar, went to Tehran to appeal for justice, according to one account carrying the infant Ruhullah in her arms. She was followed there by her two elder sons, Murtaza and Nur al-*Din*, and finally, in Rabi' al-Awwal 1323/ May 1925, Ja'far-quli Khan was publicly executed in Tehran on the orders of 'Ayn al-Dawla, the prime minister of the day.

In 1918, the Imam lost both his aunt, Sahiba, who had played a great role in his early upbringing, and his mother, Hajar. Responsibility for the family then devolved on the eldest brother, Sayyid Murtaza (later to be known as Ayatullah Pasandida). The material welfare of the brothers seems to have been ensured by their father's estate, but the insecurity and lawlessness that had cost him his life continued. In addition to the incessant feuds among landowners, Khumayn was plagued by the raids mounted on the town by the Bakhtiyari and Lurr tribesmen whenever they had the chance. Once when a Bakhtiyari chieftain by the name of Rajab 'Ali came raiding, the young Imam was obliged to take up a rifle together with his brothers and defend the family home.

When recounting these events many years later, the Imam remarked, "I have been at war since my childhood."⁵ Among the scenes, he witnessed during his youth and that remained in his memory to help shape his later political activity mention may also be made of the arbitrary and oppressive deeds of landowners and provincial governors. Thus, he recalled in later years how a newly arrived governor had arrested and bastinadoed the chief of the merchants' guild of Gulpaygan for no other purpose than the intimidation of its citizens.⁶

Imam Khomeini began his education by memorizing the Qur'an at a maktab operated near his home by a certain Mullah Abu 'l-Qasim; he became a hafiz by the age of seven. He next embarked on the study of Arabic with Shaykh Ja'far, one of his mother's cousins, and took lessons on other subjects first from Mirza Mahmud Iftikhar al-'*Ulama*' and then from his maternal uncle, Hajji Mirza Muhammad Mahdi. His first teacher in logic was Mirza Riza Najafi, his brother-in-law. Finally, among his instructors in Khumayn mention may be made of the Imam's elder brother, Murtaza, who taught him Najm al-*Din* Katib Qazvini's *al-Mutawwal on badi' and ma'ani* and one of the treatises of al-Suyuti on grammar and syntax.

(Although Sayyid Murtaza – who took the surname Pasandida after the law mandating the choice of a surname in 1928 – studied for a while in Isfahan, he never completed the higher levels of religious education; after working for a while in the registrar's office in Khumayn, he moved to Qum where he was to spend the rest of his life).

In 1339/1920–21, Sayyid Murtaza sent the Imam to the city of Arak (or Sultanabad, as it was then known) in order for him to benefit from the more ample educational resources available there. Arak had become an important center of religious learning because of the presence of Ayatullah 'Abd al-Karim Ha'iri (d. 1936), one of the principal scholars of the day. He had arrived there in 1332/1914 at the invitation of the townspeople, and some three hundred students – a relatively large number – attended his lectures at the Mirza Yusuf Khan Madrasa.

It is probable that Imam Khomeini was not yet advanced enough to study directly under Ha'iri; instead, he worked on logic with Shaykh Muhammad Gulpayagani, read the *Sharh al-Lum'a* of Shaykh Zayn al-Din al-Amili (d. 996/1558), one of the principal texts of Ja'fari jurisprudence, with Aqa-yi 'Abbas Araki, and continued his study of al-Mutawwal with Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali Burujirdi. Roughly a year after the Imam's arrival in Arak, Ha'iri accepted a summons from the *Ulama* of Qum to join them and preside over their activity.

One of the earliest strongholds of Shi'ism in Iran, Qum had traditionally been a major center of religious learning as well as pilgrimage to the shrine of Hazrat-l Ma'suma, a daughter of Imam Musa al-Kazim, but it had been overshadowed for many decades by the shrine cities of Iraq with their superior resources of erudition. The arrival of Ha'iri in Qum not only brought about a revival of its madrasas but also began a process whereby the city became in effect the spiritual capital of Iran, a process that was completed by the political struggle launched there by Imam Khomeini some forty years later.

The Imam followed Ha'iri to Qum after an interval of roughly four months. This move was the first important turning point in his life. It was in Qum that he received all his advanced spiritual and intellectual training, and he was to retain a deep sense of identification with the city throughout the rest of his life. It is possible, indeed, although not in a reductive sense, to describe him as a product of Qum. In 1980, when addressing a group of visitors from Qum, he declared, "Wherever I may be, I am a citizen

of Qum, and take pride in the fact. My heart is always with Qum and its people.”⁷

- ¹. See Muhammad Riza Hakimi, Mir Hamid Husayn, Qum, 1362 Sh./1983.
- ². However, according to a statement by the Imam’s elder brother, Sayyid Murtaza Pasandida, his point of departure was Kashmir, not Lucknow; see ‘Ali Davani, *Nahzat-i Ruhaniyun-I Iran*, Tehran, n.d., VI, p. 760).
- ³. See *Divan-I Imam*, Tehran, 1372 Sh./1993, p. 50.
- ⁴. Interview of the present writer with Hajj Sayyid Ahmad Khomeini, son of the Imam, Tehran, 12 September, 1982.
- ⁵. Imam Khomeini, *Sahifa-yi Nur*, Tehran, 1361 Sh., /1982, X p. 63.
- ⁶. *Sahifa-yi Nur*, XVI, p. 121.
- ⁷. *Sahifa-yi Nur*, XII, p. 51.

The Years of Spiritual and Intellectual Formation in Qum, 1923 to 1962

After his arrival in Qum in 1922 or 1923, the Imam first devoted himself to completing the preliminary stage of madrasa education known as *sutuh*; this he did by studying with teachers such as Shaykh Muhammad Riza Najafi Masjid-i Shahi, Mirza Muhammad Taqi Khwansari, and Sayyid ‘Ali Yasribi Kashani. However, from his early days in Qum, the Imam gave an indication that he was destined to become more than another great authority on Ja’fari jurisprudence.

He showed an exceptional interest in subjects that not only were usually absent from the madrasa curriculum, but were often an object of hostility and suspicion: philosophy, in its various traditional schools, and Gnosticism (*irfan*). He began cultivating this interest by studying the *Tafsir-i Safi*, a commentary on the Qur’an by the Sufistically-inclined Mullah Muhsin Fayz-i Kashani (d. 1091/1680), together with the late Ayatullah ‘Ali Araki (d. 1994), then a young student like himself. His formal instruction in gnosticism and the related discipline of ethics began with classes taught by Hajji Mirza Javad Maliki-Tabrizi, but this scholar died in 1304/1925.

Similarly, the Imam was not able to benefit for long from his first teacher in philosophy, Mirza ‘Ali Akbar *Hakim* Yazdi, a pupil of the great master Mullah Hadi Sabzavari (d. 1295/1878), for Yazdi passed away in 1305/1926. Another of the Imam’s early instructors in philosophy was Sayyid Abu ‘I-Hasan Qazvini (d. 1355/1976), a scholar of both peripatetic and illuminationist philosophy; the Imam attended his circle until Qazvini’s departure from Qum in 1310/1931.

The teacher who had the most profound influence on Imam Khomeini’s spiritual development was, however, Mirza Muhammad ‘Ali Shahabadi (d. 1328 Sh. /1950); to him the Imam refers in a number of

his works as shaykhuna and 'arif-I kamil, and his relationship with him was that of a murid with his murshid. When Shahabadi first came to Qum in 1307 Sh. /1928, the young Imam asked him a question concerning the nature of revelation, and was captivated by the answer he received.

At his insistent request, Shahabadi consented to teach him and a few other select students the *Fusus al-Hikam* of Ibn 'Arabi. Although the basis of instruction was Da'ud Qaysari's commentary on the *Fusus*, the Imam testified that Shahabadi also presented his own original insights on the text. Among the other texts that Imam Khomeini studied with Shahabadi were the *Manazil al-Sa'irin* of the Hanbali Sufi, Khwaja 'Abdullah Ansari (d.482/1089), and the *Misbah al-Uns* of Muhammad b. Hamza Fanari (d. 834/1431), a commentary on the *Mafatih al-Ghayb* of Sadr al-Din Qunavi (d. 673/1274).

It is conceivable that the Imam derived from Shahabadi, at least in part, whether consciously or not, the fusion of gnostic and political concerns that came to characterize his life. For this spiritual master of the Imam was one of the relatively few *ulama* in the time of Riza Shah to preach publicly against the misdeeds of the regime, and in his *Shadharat al-Ma'arif*, a work primarily gnostic in character, described Islam as "most certainly a political religion."¹

Gnosis and ethics were also the subject of the first classes taught by the Imam. The class on ethics taught by Hajji Javad Aqa Maliki Tabrizi were resumed, three years after his death, by Shahabadi, and when Shahabadi left for Tehran in 1936, he assigned the class to Imam Khomeini. The class consisted in the first place of a careful reading of Ansari's *Manazil al-Sa'irin*, but ranged beyond the text to touch on a wide variety of contemporary concerns. It proved popular to the extent that the townsfolk of Qum as well as the students of the religious sciences attended, and people are related to have come from as far a field as Tehran and Isfahan simply to listen to the Imam.

This popularity of the Imam's lectures ran contrary to the policies of the Pahlavi regime, which wished to limit the influence of the *ulama* outside the religious teaching institution. The government therefore secured the transfer of the lectures from the prestigious location of the Fayziya madrasa to the Mullah Sadiq madrasa, which was unable to accommodate large crowds. However, after the deposition of Riza Shah in 1941, the lectures returned to the Fayziya madrasa and instantly regained their former popularity. The ability to address the people at large, not simply his own colleagues within the religious institution, which the Imam displayed for the first time in these lectures on ethics, was to play an important role in the political struggles he led in later years.

While teaching ethics to a wide and diverse audience, Imam Khomeini began teaching important texts of gnosis, such as the section on the soul in *al-Asfar al-Arba'a* of Mullah Sadra (d. 1050/1640) and Sabzavari's *Sharh-I Manzuma*, to a select group of young scholars that included Murtaza Mutahhari and Husayn 'Ali Muntaziri, who subsequently became two of his principal collaborators in the revolutionary movement he launched some three decades later.

As for the earliest writings of the Imam, they also indicate that his primary interest during his early years in Qum was gnosis. In 1928, for example, he completed the *Sharh Du'a' al-Sahar*, a detailed commentary on the supplicatory prayers recited throughout Ramadan by Imam Muhammad al-Baqir; as with all Imam Khomeini's works on gnosis, the terminology of Ibn 'Arabi is frequently encountered in this book. Two years later, he completed *Misbah al-Hidaya ila 'l-Khilafa wa 'l-Wilaya*, a dense and systematic treatise on the main topics of gnosis. Another product of the same years of concentration on gnosis was a series of glosses on Qaysari's commentary on the *Fusus*.

In a brief autobiography written for inclusion in a book published in 1934, the Imam wrote that he spent most of his time studying and teaching the works of Mullah Sadra; that he had for several years been studying gnosis with Shahabadi; and that at the same time he was attending the classes of Ayatullah Ha'iri on *fiqh*.²

The sequence of these statements suggests that *fiqh* was as yet secondary among his concerns. This situation was to change, but gnosis was for the Imam never simply a topic for study, teaching, and writing. It remained an integral part of his intellectual and spiritual personality, and as such infused many of his ostensibly political activities in later years with an unmistakably gnostic element.

The Imam did not engage in any overt political activities during the 1930's. He always believed that the leadership of political activities should be in the hands of the foremost religious scholars, and he was therefore obliged to accept the decision of Ha'iri to remain relatively passive toward the measures taken by Riza Shah against the traditions and culture of Islam in Iran.

In any event, as a still junior figure in the religious institution in Qum, he would have been in no position to mobilize popular opinion on a national scale. He was nonetheless in contact with those few *ulama* who did openly challenge Riza Shah, not only Shahabadi, but also men such as Hajji Nurullah Isfahani, Mirza Sadiq Aqa Tabrizi, Aqazada Kifai, and Sayyid Hasan Mudarris. He expressed his own opinions of the Pahlavi regime, the leading characteristics of which he identified as oppression and hostility to religion, as yet only allusively, in privately circulated poems.³

He assumed a public political stance for the first time in a proclamation dated 15 Urdibihisht 1323/ 4 May 1944 that called for action to deliver the Muslims of Iran and the entire Islamic world from the tyranny of foreign powers and their domestic accomplices. The Imam begins by citing Qur'an, 34:46:

"Say: 'I enjoin but one thing upon you, that you rise up for Allah, in pairs and singly, and then reflect'".

This is the same verse that opens the chapter on awakening (bab al-yaqza) at the very beginning of Ansari's *Manazil al-Sa'irin*, the handbook of spiritual wayfaring first taught to the Imam by Shahabadi. The Imam's interpretation of "rising up" is, however, both spiritual and political, both individual and

collective, a rebellion against lassitude in the self and corruption in society.

The same spirit of comprehensive revolt inspires the first work written by the Imam for publication, *Kashf al-Asrar* (Tehran, 1324 Sh. /1945). He is said to have completed the book in forty-eight days from a sense of urgency, and that it indeed met a need is proven by the fact that it went through two impressions in its first year. The principal aim of the book, as reflected in its title, was to refute 'Ali Akbar Hakamizada's *Asrar-i Hazarsala*, a work calling for a "reform" of Shi'i Islam. Similar attacks on Shi'i tradition were being made in the same period by *Shari'at* Sanglaji (d. 1944), an admirer of Wahhabism despite that sect's marked hostility to Shi'ism, and Ahmad Kasravi (d. 1946), competent as a historian but mediocre as a thinker.

The Imam's vindication of such aspects of Shi'i practice as the mourning ceremonies of Muharram, pilgrimage (*ziyara*) to the tombs of the Imams, and the recitation of the supplicatory prayers composed by the Imams, was therefore a response to the criticisms made by all three. Imam Khomeini connected their assaults on tradition with the anti-religious policies of Riza Shah and bitterly criticized the Pahlavi regime for destroying public morality.

He stopped short, however, of demanding the abolition of the monarchy, proposing instead that an assembly of competent mujtahids should choose "a just monarch who will not violate God's laws and will shun oppression and wrongdoing, who will not transgress against men's property, lives, and honor."⁴

Even this conditional legitimacy of monarchy was to last "only so long as a better system could not be established."⁵ There can be no doubt that the "better system" already envisaged by Imam Khomeini in 1944 was *vilayat-i faqih*, which became the constitutional cornerstone of the Islamic Republic of Iran established in 1979.

When Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim Ha'iri died in 1936, the supervision of the religious institution in Qum had been jointly assumed by Ayatullah Khwansari, Ayatullah Sadr, and Ayatullah Hujjat. A sense of lack was nonetheless felt. When Ayatullah Abu 'l-Hasan Isfahani, the principal *marja'-i taqlid* of the age residing in Najaf, died in 1946, the need for a centralized leadership of Shi'i Muslims became more felt more acutely, and a search began for a single individual capable of fulfilling the duties and functions of both Ha'iri and Isfahani.

Ayatullah Burujirdi, then resident in Hamadan, was seen to be the most suitable person available, and Imam Khomeini is said to have played an important role in persuading him to come to Qum. In this he was no doubt motivated in part by the hope that Burujirdi would adopt a firm position vis-a-vis Muhammad Riza Shah, the second Pahlavi ruler. This hope was to remain largely unfulfilled. In April 1949, Imam Khomeini learned that Burujirdi was engaged in negotiations with the government concerning possible emendations to the constitution then in force, and he wrote him a letter expressing his anxieties about the possible consequences.

In 1955, a nationwide campaign against the Baha'i sect was launched, for which the Imam sought to recruit Burujirdi's support, but he had little success. As for religious personalities who were militantly active in the political sphere at the time, notably Ayatullah Abu 'l-Qasim Kashani and Navvab Safavi, the leader of the Fida'iyān-i Islam, the Imam's contacts with them were sporadic and inconclusive.

His reluctance for direct political involvement in this period was probably due to his belief that any movement for radical change ought to be led by the senior echelons of the religious establishment. In addition, the most influential personage on the crowded and confused political scene of the day was the secular nationalist, Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq.

Imam Khomeini therefore concentrated during the years of Burujirdi's leadership in Qum on giving instruction in *fiqh* and gathering round him students who later became his associates in the movement that led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, not only Mutahhari and Muntaziri, but younger men such as Muhammad Javad Bahrani and 'Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. In 1946, he began teaching *usul al-fiqh* at the *kharij* level, taking as his text the chapter on rational proofs from the second volume of the *Kifayat al-Usul* of Akhund Muhammad Kazim Khurasani (d. 1329/1911).

Initially attended by no more than thirty students, the class became so popular in Qum that five hundred were in attendance the third time it was offered. According to the reminiscences of some of those who took the class, it was distinguished from other classes taught in Qum on the same subject by the critical spirit the Imam instilled in his students, as well as his ability to connect *fiqh* with all the other dimensions of Islam – ethical, gnostic, philosophical, political, and social.

[1.](#) Shadharat al-Ma'arif, Tehran, 1360 Sh./1982, pp. 6–7.

[2.](#) Sayyid 'Ali Riza Yazdi Husayni, Aina-yi Danishvaran, Tehran, 1353/1934, pp. 65–7.

[3.](#) Sayyid Hamid Ruhani, Barrasi va Tahlili az Nahzat-i Imam Khomeini, I, Najaf, n.d., pp. 55–9.

[4.](#) Kashf al-Asrar, p. 185.

[5.](#) Kashf al-Asrar, p. 186.

The Years of Struggle and Exile, 1962–1978

The emphases of the Imam's activity began to change with the death of Burujirdi on March 31, 1961, for he now emerged as one of the successors to Burujirdi's position of leadership. This emergence was signaled by the publication of some of his writings on *fiqh*, most importantly the basic handbook of religious practice entitled, like others of its genre, *Tauzih al-Masa'il*. He was soon accepted as *marja'-i taqlid* by a large number of Iranian Shi'is. His leadership role was, however, destined to go far beyond

that traditional for a *marja'-i taqlid* and to attain a comprehensiveness unique in the history of the Shi'i *ulama*.

This became apparent soon after the death of Burujirdi when Muhammad Riza Shah, secure in his possession of power after the CIA-organized coup of August 1953, embarked on a series of measures designed to eliminate all sources of opposition, actual or potential, and to incorporate Iran firmly into American patterns of strategic and economic domination. In the autumn of 1962, the government promulgated new laws governing elections to local and provincial councils, which deleted the former requirement that those elected be sworn into office on the Qur'an.

Seeing in this a plan to permit the infiltration of public life by the Baha'is, Imam Khomeini telegraphed both the Shah and the prime minister of the day, warning them to desist from violating both the law of Islam and the Iranian Constitution of 1907, failing which the *ulama* would engage in a sustained campaign of protest. Rejecting all compromise measures, the Imam was able to force the repeal of the laws in question seven weeks after they had been promulgated. This achievement marked his emergence on the scene as the principal voice of opposition to the Shah.

A more serious confrontation was not long in coming. In January 1963, the Shah announced a six-point program of reform that he termed the White Revolution, an American-inspired package of measures designed to give his regime a liberal and progressive facade. Imam Khomeini summoned a meeting of his colleagues in Qum to press upon them the necessity of opposing the Shah's plans, but they were initially hesitant. They sent one of their number, Ayatullah Kamalvand, to see the Shah and gauge his intentions.

Although the Shah showed no inclination to retreat or compromise, it took further pressure by Imam Khomeini on the other senior *ulama* of Qum to persuade them to decree a boycott of the referendum that the Shah had planned to obtain the appearance of popular approval for his White Revolution. For his own part, Imam Khomeini issued on January 22, 1963 a strongly worded declaration denouncing the Shah and his plans. In imitation, perhaps, of his father, who had taken an armored column to Qum in 1928 in order to intimidate certain outspoken *ulama*, the Shah came to Qum two days later. Faced with a boycott by all the dignitaries of the city, he delivered a speech harshly attacking the *ulama* as a class.

On January 26, the referendum was held, with a low turnout that reflected the growing heed paid by the Iranian people to Imam Khomeini's directives. He continued his denunciation of the Shah's programs, issuing a manifesto that also bore the signatures of eight other senior scholars.

In it he listed the various ways in which the Shah had violated the constituent, condemned the spread of moral corruption in the country, and accused the Shah of comprehensive submission to America and Israel: "I see the solution to lie in this tyrannical government being removed, for the crime of violating the ordinances of Islam and trampling the constitution, and in a government taking its place that adheres to

Islam and has concern for the Iranian nation.”¹ He also decreed that the Nauruz celebrations for the Iranian year 1342 (which fell on March 21, 1963) be cancelled as a sign of protest against government policies.

The very next day, paratroopers were sent to the Fayziya madrasa in Qum, the site where the Imam delivered his public speeches. They killed a number of students, beat and arrested a number of others, and ransacked the building. Unintimidated, the Imam continued his attacks on the regime.

On April 1, he denounced the persistent silence of certain apolitical *ulama* as “tantamount to collaboration with the tyrannical regime,” and one day later proclaimed political neutrality under the guise of *taqiya* to be *haram*.² When the Shah sent his emissaries to the houses of the *ulama* in Qum to threaten them with the destruction of their homes, the Imam reacted contemptuously by referring to the Shah as “that little man (mardak).”

Then, on April 3, 1963, the fortieth day after the attack on the Fayziya madrasa, he described the Iranian government as being determined to eradicate Islam at the behest of America, Israel, and himself as resolved to combat it.

Confrontation turned to insurrection some two months later. The beginning of Muharram, always a time of heightened religious awareness and sensitivity, saw demonstrators in Tehran carrying pictures of the Imam and denouncing the Shah in front of his own palace. On the afternoon of ‘Ashura (June 3, 1963), Imam Khomeini delivered a speech at the Fayziya madrasa in which he drew parallels between the Umayyad caliph Yazid and the Shah and warned the Shah that if he did not change his ways the day would come when the people would offer up thanks for his departure from the country.³

This warning was remarkably prescient, for on January 16, 1979, the Shah was indeed obliged to leave Iran amidst scenes of popular rejoicing. The immediate effect of the Imam’s speech was, however, his arrest two days later at 3 o’clock in the morning by a group of commandos who hastily transferred him to the Qasr prison in Tehran.

As dawn broke on June 3, the news of his arrest spread first through Qum and then to other cities. In Qum, Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad and Varamin, masses of angry demonstrators were confronted by tanks and ruthlessly slaughtered. It was not until six days later that order was fully restored. This uprising of 15 Khurdad 1342 (the day in the Iranian calendar on which it began) marked a turning point in Iranian history. Henceforth the repressive and dictatorial nature of the Shah’s regime, reinforced by the unwavering support of the United States, was constantly intensified, and with it the prestige of Imam Khomeini as the only figure of note – whether religious or secular – willing to challenge him.

The arrogance imbuing the Shah’s policies also caused a growing number of the *ulama* to abandon their quietism and align themselves with the radical goals set forth by the Imam. The movement of 15 Khurdad may therefore be characterized as the prelude to the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79; the goals

of that revolution and its leadership had already been determined.

After nineteen days in the Qasr prison, Imam Khomeini was moved first, to the 'Isfahabad military base and then to a house in the Davudiya section of Tehran where he was kept under surveillance. Despite the killings that had taken place during the uprising, mass demonstrations were held in Tehran and elsewhere demanding his release and some of his colleagues came to the capital from Qum to lend their support to the demand. It was not, however, until April 7, 1964 that he was released, no doubt on the assumption that imprisonment had tempered his views and that the movement he had led would quietly subside.

Three days after his release and return to Qum, he dispelled such illusions by refuting officially inspired rumors that he had come to an understanding with the Shah's regime and by declaring that the movement inaugurated on 15 Khurdad would continue. Aware of the persisting differences in approach between the Imam and some of the other senior religious scholars, the regime had also attempted to discredit him by creating dissension in Qum. These attempts, too, were unsuccessful, for early in June 1964 all the major *ulama* put their signatures to declarations commemorating the first anniversary of the uprising of 15 Khurdad.

Despite its failure to sideline or silence Imam Khomeini, the Shah's regime continued its pro-American policies unwaveringly. In the autumn of 1964, it concluded a status of forces agreement with the United States that provided immunity from prosecution for all American personnel in Iran and their dependents.

This occasioned the Imam to deliver what was perhaps the most vehement speech of the entire struggle against the Shah; certainly one of his close associates, Ayatullah Muhammad Mufattih, had never seen him so agitated.⁴ He denounced the agreement as a surrender of Iranian independence and sovereignty, made in exchange for a \$200 million loan that would be of benefit only to the Shah and his associates, and described as traitors all those in the *Majlis* who voted in favor of it; the government lacked all legitimacy, he concluded.⁵

Shortly before dawn on November 4, 1964, again a detachment of commandos surrounded the Imam's house in Qum, arrested him, and this time took him directly to Mehrabad airport in Tehran for immediate banishment to Turkey. The decision to deport rather than arrest Imam Khomeini and imprison him in Iran was based no doubt on the hope that in exile he would fade from popular memory. Physical elimination would have been fraught with the danger of an uncontrollable popular uprising. As for the choice of Turkey, this reflected the security cooperation existing between the Shah's regime and Turkey.

The Imam was first lodged in room 514 of Bulvar Palas Oteli in Ankara, a moderately comfortable hotel in the Turkish capital, under the joint surveillance of Iranian and Turkish security officials. On November 12, he was moved from Ankara to Bursa, where he was to reside another eleven months.

The stay in Turkey cannot have been congenial, for Turkish law forbade Imam Khomeini to wear the cloak and turban of the Muslim scholar, an identity which was integral to his being; the sole photographs in existence to show him bareheaded all belong to the period of exile in Turkey.⁶

However, on December 3, 1964, he was joined in Bursa by his eldest son, Hajj Mustafa Khomeini; he was also permitted to receive occasional visitors from Iran, and was supplied with a number of books on *fiqh*. He made use of his forced stay in Bursa to compile *Tahrir al-Wasila*, a two-volume compendium on questions of jurisprudence. Important and distinctive are the fatwas this volume contains, grouped under the headings of *al-amr bi 'l-ma'ruf wa 'l-nahy 'an al-munkar* and *difa'*.

The Imam decrees, for example, that "if it is feared that the political and economic domination (by foreigners) over an Islamic land will lead to the enslavement and weakening of the Muslims, then such domination must be repelled by appropriate means, including passive resistance, the boycott of foreign goods, and the abandonment of all dealings and association with the foreigners in question." Similarly, "if an attack by foreigners on one of the Islamic states is anticipated, it is incumbent on all Islamic states to repel the attack by all possible means; indeed, this is incumbent on the Muslims as a whole."⁷

On September 5, 1965, Imam Khomeini left Turkey for Najaf in Iraq, where he was destined to spend thirteen years. As a traditional center of Shi'i learning and pilgrimage, Najaf was clearly a preferable and more congenial place of exile. It had moreover already functioned as a stronghold of *ulama* opposition to the Iranian monarchy during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1909. But it was not in order to accommodate the Imam that the Shah arranged for his transfer to Najaf.

First, there was continuing disquiet among the Imam's followers at his forced residence in Bursa, away from the traditional milieu of the Shi'i madrasa; such objections could be met by moving him to Najaf. Second, it was hoped that once in Najaf, the Imam would either be overshadowed by the prestigious *ulama* there, men such as Ayatullah Abu 'l-Qasim Khu'i (d. 1995), or that he would challenge their distaste for political activism and squander his energies on confronting them.

He skirted this dual danger by proffering them his respect while continuing to pursue the goals he had set himself before leaving Iran. Another pitfall he avoided was association with the Iraqi government, which occasionally had its own differences with the Shah's regime and was of a mind to use the Imam's presence in Najaf for its own purposes. The Imam declined the opportunity to be interviewed on Iraqi television soon after his arrival, and resolutely kept his distance from succeeding Iraqi administrations.

Once settled in Najaf, Imam Khomeini began teaching *fiqh* at the Shaykh Murtaza Ansari madrasa. His lectures were well attended, by students not only from Iran but also from Iraq, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf states. In fact, a mass migration to Najaf from Qum and other centers of religious learning in Iran was proposed to the Imam, but he advised against it as a measure bound to depopulate Qum and weaken it as a center of religious guidance.

It was also at the Shaykh Murtaza Ansari madrasa that he delivered, between January 21 and February 8, 1970, his celebrated lectures on *vilayat-i faqih*, the theory of governance that was to be implemented after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution. (The text of these lectures was published in Najaf, not long after their delivery, under the title *Vilayat-i Faqih ya Hukumat-i Islami*; a slightly abbreviated Arabic translation soon followed).

This theory, which may be summarized as the assumption by suitably qualified *ulama* of the political and juridical functions of the Twelfth Imam during his occultation, had already been put forward, somewhat tentatively, in his first published work, *Kashf al-Asrar*. Now he presented it as the self-evident and incontestable consequence of the Shi'i doctrine of the Imamate, citing and analyzing in support of it all relevant texts from the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet (S)⁸ and the Twelve Imams (A)⁹

He emphasized also the harm that had come to Iran (as well as other Muslim countries) from abandoning Islamic law and government and relinquishing the political realm to the enemies of Islam. Finally, he delineated a program for the establishment of an Islamic government, laying particular stress on the responsibilities of the *ulama* to transcend their petty concerns and to address the people fearlessly: "It is the duty of all of us to overthrow the *taghut*, the illegitimate political powers that now rule the entire Islamic world."¹⁰

The text of the lectures on *vilayat-i faqih* was smuggled back to Iran by visitors who came to see the Imam in Najaf, as well as by ordinary Iranians who came on pilgrimage to the shrine of Hazrat 'Ali (A). The same channels were used to convey to Iran the numerous letters and proclamations in which the Imam commented on the events that took place in his homeland during the long years of exile.

The first such document, a letter to the Iranian *ulama* assuring them of the ultimate downfall of the Shah's regime, is dated April 16, 1967. On the same day he also wrote to prime minister Amir 'Abbas Huvayda accusing him of running "a regime of terror and thievery."¹¹ On the occasion of the Six Day War in June 1967, the Imam issued a declaration forbidding any type of dealing with Israel as well as the consumption of Israeli goods.

This declaration was widely and openly publicized in Iran, which led to the ransacking of Imam Khomeini's house in Qum and the arrest of Hajj Sayyid Ahmad Khomeini, his second son, who had been living there. (Some of the unpublished works of the Imam were lost or destroyed on this occasion). It was also at this time that the Shah's regime contemplated moving the Imam from Iraq to India; a location from which communications with Iran would have been far more difficult, but the plan was thwarted.

Other developments on which the Imam commented from Najaf were the extravagant celebrations of 2500 years of Iranian monarchy in October 1971 ("it is the duty of the Iranian people to refrain from participation in this illegitimate festival"); the formal establishment of a one-party system in Iran in February 1975 (the Imam prohibited membership in the party, the *Hizb-i Rastakhiz*, in a *fatwa* issued the

following month); and the substitution, in the same month, of the imperial (shahanshahi) calendar for the solar Hijri calendar that had been official in Iran until that time.

Some developments were met with fatwas rather than proclamations: for example, the Imam rejected as incompatible with Islam the Family Protection Law of 1967 and classified as adulteresses women who remarried after obtaining a divorce under its provisions. [12](#)

Imam Khomeini had also to deal with changing circumstances in Iraq. The Ba'th Party, fundamentally hostile to religion, had come to power in July 1967 and soon began exerting pressure on the scholars of Najaf, both Iraqi and Iranian. In 1971, as Iraq and Iran entered a state of sporadic and undeclared war with each other, the Iraqi regime began expelling from its territory Iranians whose forebears had in some cases been residing there for generations. The Imam, who until that point had scrupulously kept his distance from Iraqi officialdom, now addressed himself directly to the Iraqi leadership condemning its actions.

Imam Khomeini was, in fact, constantly, and acutely aware of the connections between Iranian affairs and those of the Muslim world in general and the Arab lands in particular. This awareness led him to issue from Najaf a proclamation to the Muslims of the world on the occasion of the hajj in 1971, and to comment, with special frequency and emphasis, on the problems posed by Israel for the Muslim world.

The Imam's strong concern for the Palestine question led him to issue a *fatwa* on August 27, 1968 authorizing the use of religious monies (*vujuh-i shar'i*) to support the nascent activities of *al-Asifa*, the armed wing of the Palestine Liberation Organization; this was confirmed by a similar and more detailed ruling issued after a meeting with the Baghdad representative of the PLO. [13](#)

The distribution in Iran, on however limited a scale, of the proclamations and fatwas of Imam Khomeini was in itself enough to ensure that his name not be forgotten during the years of exile. Equally important, the movement of Islamic opposition to the Shah's regime that had been inaugurated by the uprising of 15 Khurdad continued to develop despite the brutality unhesitatingly dispensed by the Shah. Numerous groups and individuals explicitly owed their allegiance to the Imam. Soon after his exiling there came into being an organization called *Hay'atha-yi Mu'talifa-yi Islami* (the Allied Islamic Associations), headquartered in Tehran but with branches throughout Iran.

Active in it were many who had been students of the Imam in Qum and who came to assume important responsibilities after the revolution, men such as Hashimi-Rafsanjani and Javad Bahonar. In January 1965, four members of the organization assassinated Hasan 'Ali Mansur, the prime minister who had been responsible for the exiling of the Imam.

There were no individuals designated, even clandestinely, as Imam Khomeini's authorized representatives in Iran while he was in exile.

However, senior *ulama* such as Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari, Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Bihishti (d. 1981), and Ayatullah Husayn ‘Ali Muntaziri, were in contact with him, directly and indirectly, and were known to speak on his behalf in important matters. Like their younger counterparts in the *Hay’atha-yi Mu’talafa-yi Islami*, all three went on to perform important functions during and after the revolution.

The continued growth of the Islamic movement during Imam Khomeini’s exile should not be attributed exclusively to his abiding influence or to the activity of *ulama* associated with him. Important, too, were the lectures and books of ‘Ali Shari’ati (d. 1977), a university-educated intellectual whose understanding and presentation of Islam were influenced by Western ideologies, including Marxism, to a degree that many *ulama* regarded as dangerously syncretistic.

When the Imam was asked to comment on the theories of Shari’ati, both by those who supported them and by those who opposed them, he discreetly refrained from doing so, in order not to create a division within the Islamic movement that would have benefited the Shah’s regime.

The most visible sign of the persisting popularity of Imam Khomeini in the pre-revolutionary years, above all at the heart of the religious institution in Qum, came in June 1975 on the anniversary of the uprising of 15 Khurdad. Students at the Fayziya madrasa began holding a demonstration within the confines of the building, and a sympathetic crowd assembled outside.

Both gatherings continued for three days until they were attacked on the ground by commandos and from the air by a military helicopter, with numerous deaths resulting. The Imam reacted with a message in which he declared the events in Qum and similar disturbances elsewhere to be a sign of hope that “freedom and liberation from the bonds of imperialism” were at hand.¹⁴ The beginning of the revolution came indeed some two and a half years later.

¹. Sahifa-yi Nur, I, p. 27.

². Kauthar, I, p. 67; Sahifa-yi Nur, I, p. 39.

³. Sahifa-yi Nur, I, p. 46.

⁴. Interview with the present writer, Tehran, December 1979.

⁵. Kauthar, I, pp. 169–178.

⁶. See Ansari, Hadis-I Bidari, p. 67.

⁷. Tahrir al-Wasila, I, p. 486.

⁸. For maintaining readability, (S) which is an acronym for “Salla (a)llahu alayhi wa aalihi wa sallam” is used throughout the book to denote “May peace and benedictions of God be upon him and his family.” It is used for Prophet Muhammad.

⁹. For maintaining readability, (A) which is an acronym for “Alayhi (alayhim) al-salaam” is used throughout the book to denote “May peace of God be upon him/her/them.” It is used for the Prophets, Imams, and saints.

¹⁰. Vilayat-i Faqih, Najaf, n.d., p. 204.

¹¹. Sahifa-yi Nur, I, pp. 129, 132.

¹². Imam Khomeini, Risala-yi Ahkam, p. 328.

¹³. Sahifa-yi Nur, I, pp. 144–5.

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” (*alṭaf-i khafiya*) of God, and advised the Muslims of Iran to show fortitude and hope.^{[1](#)}

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.")²

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."³

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.^{[4](#)}

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.^{[5](#)}

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.”[6](#)

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.⁷ 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 unfailing 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.

¹. Shahidi digar az ruhaniyat, Najaf, n.d., p. 27.

². New York Times, January 2, 1978.

³. Sahifa-yi Nur, I, p. 97.

⁴. 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.

1979–89: first decade of the Islamic Republic, last decade of the Imam's life

Imam Khomeini's role was also central in shaping the new political order that emerged from the revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran. At first it appeared that he might exercise his directive role from Qum, for he moved there from Tehran on February 29, causing Qum to become in effect a second capital of Iran.

On March 30 and 31, a nationwide referendum resulted in a massive vote in favor of the establishment of an Islamic Republic. The Imam proclaimed the next day, April 1, 1979, as the “first day of God's government.”¹ The institutionalization of the new order continued with the election, on August 3, of an Assembly of Experts (*Majlis-i Khubragan*), entrusted with the task of reviewing a draft constitution that had been put forward on June 18; fifty-five of the seventy-three persons elected were religious scholars.

It was not however to be expected that a smooth transition from the old regime would prove possible. The powers and duties of the Council of the Islamic Revolutionary, which was intended to serve as an interim legislature, were not clearly delineated from those of the provisional government headed by Bazargan.

More importantly, significant differences of outlook and approach separated the two bodies from each other. The council, composed predominantly of *ulama*, favored immediate and radical change and sought to strengthen the revolutionary organs that had come into being – the revolutionary committees, the revolutionary courts charged with punishing members of the former regime charged with serious crimes, and the Corps of Guards of the Islamic Revolution (*Sipah-i Pasdaran-i Inqilab-i Islami*), established on May 5, 1979. The government, headed by Bazargan and comprising mainly liberal technocrats of Islamic orientation, sought as swift a normalization of the situation as possible and the gradual phasing out of the revolutionary institutions.

Although Imam Khomeini encouraged members of the two bodies to cooperate and refrained, on most occasions, from arbitrating their differences, his sympathies were clearly with the Council of the Islamic Revolution.

On July 1, Bazargan offered the Imam his resignation. It was refused, and four members of the council – Rafsanjani, Bahunar, Mahdavi-Kani, and Ayatullah Sayyid 'Ali Khamna'i – joined Bazargan's cabinet in an effort to improve the coordination of the two bodies. In addition to these frictions at the governmental level, a further element of instability was provided by the terrorist activities of shadowy groups that were determined to rob the nascent Islamic republic of some of its most capable personalities.

Thus on May 1, 1979, Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari, a leading member of the Council of the Islamic Revolution and a former pupil close to the Imam's heart, was assassinated in Tehran. For once, the Imam wept in an open display of grief.

The final break between Bazargan and the revolution came as a consequence of the occupation of the United States embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979 by a coalition of students from the universities of Tehran. Despite declarations of willingness to "honor the will of the Iranian people" and its recognition of the Islamic Republic, the American government had admitted the Shah to the United States on October 22, 1979.

The pretext was his need for medical treatment, but it was widely feared in Iran that his arrival in America, where large numbers of high-ranking officials of the previous regime had gathered, might be the prelude to an American-sponsored attempt to restore him to power, on the lines of the successful CIA coup of August 1953. The Shah's extradition to Iran was therefore demanded by the students occupying the embassy as a condition for their liberating the hostages they were holding there.

It is probable that the students had cleared their action in advance with close associates of Imam Khomeini, for he swiftly extended his protection to them, proclaiming their action "a greater revolution than the first."² Two days later, he predicted that confronted by this "second revolution," America would be "unable to do a damned thing (*Amrika hich ghalati namitavanad bukunad*)."³

This prediction seemed extravagant to many in Iran, but a military expedition mounted by the United States on April 22, 1980 to rescue the American hostages and possibly, too, to attack sensitive sites in Tehran, came to an abrupt and humiliating end when the American gunship crashed into each other in a sandstorm near Tabas in southeastern Iran.

On April 7, the United States had formally broken diplomatic ties with Iran, a move welcomed by Imam Khomeini as an occasion of rejoicing for the Iranian nation.⁴ It was not until January 21, 1981 that the American hostages were finally released.

Two days after the occupation of the US embassy, Bazargan once again offered his resignation, and this time it was accepted. In addition, the provisional government was dissolved, and the Council of the Islamic Revolution temporarily assumed the task of running the country.

This marked the definitive departure of Bazargan and like-minded individuals from the scene; henceforth the term "liberal" became a pejorative designation for those who questioned the fundamental tendencies of the revolution. In addition, the students occupying the embassy had access to extensive files the Americans had kept on various Iranian personalities who had frequented the embassy over the years; these documents were now published and discredited the personalities involved.

Most importantly, the occupation of the embassy constituted a “second revolution” in that Iran now offered a unique example of defiance of the American superpower and became established for American policymakers as their principal adversary in the Middle East.

The enthusiasm aroused by the occupation of the embassy also helped to ensure a large turnout for the referendum that was held on December 2 and 3, 1979 to ratify the constitution that had been approved by the Assembly of Experts on November 15. The constitution, which was overwhelmingly approved, differed greatly from the original draft, above all through its inclusion of the principle of *vilayat-i faqih* as its basic and determining principle. Mentioned briefly in the preamble, it was spelled out in full in Article Five:

“During the Occultation of the Lord of the Age (Sahib al-Zaman; i.e., the Twelfth Imam)... the governance and leadership of the nation devolve upon the just and pious *faqih* who is acquainted with the circumstances of his age; courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability; and recognized and accepted as leader (rahbar) by the majority of the people. In the event that no *faqih* should be so recognized by the majority, the leader, or leadership council, composed of *fuqaha*’ possessing the aforementioned qualifications, will assume these responsibilities.”

Article 109 specified the qualifications and attributes of the leader as “suitability with respect to learning and piety, as required for the functions of mufti and marja’.” Article 110 listed his powers, which include supreme command of the armed forces, appointment of the head of the judiciary, signing the decree formalizing the election of the president of the republic, and – under certain conditions – dismissing him.⁵

These articles formed the constitutional basis for Imam Khomeini’s leadership role. In addition, from July 1979 onwards, he had been appointing Imam Jum’a’s for every major city, who not only delivered the Friday sermon but also acted as his personal representatives. Most government institutions also had a representative of the Imam assigned to them. However, the ultimate source of his influence was his vast moral and spiritual prestige, which led to him being designated primarily as Imam, in the sense of one dispensing comprehensive leadership to the community.⁶

On January 23, 1980, Imam Khomeini was brought from Qum to Tehran to receive treatment for a heart ailment. After thirty-nine days in hospital, he took up residence in the north Tehran suburb of Darband, and on April 22 he moved into a modest house in Jamaran, another suburb to the north of the capital. A closely guarded compound grew up around the house, and it was there that he was destined to spend the rest of his life.

On January 25, during the Imam’s hospitalization, Abu’l-Hasan Bani Sadr, a French-educated economist, was elected first president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. His success had been made

possible in part by the Imam's decision that it was not opportune to have a religious scholar stand for election. This event, followed on March 14 by the first elections to the *Majlis*, might have counted as a further step to the institutionalization and stabilization of the political system.

However, Bani Sadr's tenure, together with the tensions that soon arose between him and a majority of the deputies in the *Majlis*, occasioned a severe crisis that led ultimately to Bani Sadr's dismissal. For the president, his inherent megalomania aggravated by his victory at the polls, was reluctant to concede supremacy to Imam Khomeini, and he therefore attempted to build up a personal following, consisting largely of former leftists who owed their positions exclusively to him.

In this enterprise, he inevitably clashed with the newly formed Islamic Republic Party (*Hizb-i Jumhuri-yi Islami*), headed by Ayatullah Bihishti, which dominated the *Majlis* and was loyal to what was referred to as "the line of the Imam" (*khatt-i Imam*). As he had earlier done with the disputes between the provisional government and the Council of the Islamic Revolution, the Imam sought to reconcile the parties, and on September 11 1980 appealed to all branches of government and their members to set aside their differences.

While this new governmental crisis was brewing, on September 22, 1980, Iraq sent its forces across the Iranian border and launched a war of aggression that was to last for almost eight years. Iraq enjoyed financial support in this venture from the Arab states lining the Persian Gulf, above all from Saudi Arabia.

Imam Khomeini, however, correctly regarded the United States as the principal instigator of the war from the outset, and American involvement became increasingly visible as the war wore on. Although Iraq advanced territorial claims against Iran, the barely disguised purpose of the aggression was to take advantage of the dislocations caused in Iran by the revolution, particularly the weakening of the army through purges of disloyal officers, and to destroy the Islamic Republic.

As he had done during the revolution, Imam Khomeini insisted on an uncompromising stance and inspired a steadfast resistance, which prevented the easy Iraqi victory many foreign observers had confidently foretold. Initially, however, Iraq enjoyed some success, capturing the port city of Khurramshahr and encircling Abadan.

The conduct of the war became one more issue at dispute between Bani Sadr and his opponents. Continuing his efforts at reconciling the factions, Imam Khomeini established a three-man commission to investigate the complaints each had against the other. The commission reported on June 1, 1981 that Bani Sadr was guilty of violating the constitution and contravening the Imam's instructions. He was accordingly declared incompetent by the *Majlis* to function as president, and the next day, in accordance with Article 110 section (e) of the constitution, Imam Khomeini dismissed him. He went into hiding, and on July 28 fled to Paris, disguised as a woman.

Toward the end of his presidency, Bani Sadr had allied himself with the *Sazman-i Mujahidin-i Khalq* (Organization of People's Strugglers; however, the group is commonly known in Iran as munafiqin, "hypocrites," not mujahidin, because of its members' hostility to the Islamic Republic). An organization with a tortuous ideological and political history, it had hoped, like Bani Sadr, to displace Imam Khomeini and capture power for itself.

After Bani Sadr went into exile, members of the organization embarked on a campaign of assassinating government leaders in the hope that the Islamic Republic would collapse. Even before Bani Sadr fled, a massive explosion had destroyed the headquarters of the Islamic Republic Party, killing more than seventy people including Ayatullah Bihishti.

On August 30, 1981, Muhammad 'Ali Raja'i, Bani Sadr's successor as president, was killed in another explosion. Other assassinations followed over the next two years, including five Imam Jum'a's as well as a host of lesser figures. Throughout these disasters, Imam Khomeini maintained his customary composure, declaring, for example, after the assassination of Raja'i that the killings would change nothing and in fact showed Iran to be "the most stable country in the world," given the ability of the government to continue functioning in an orderly manner.⁷

The fact that Iran was able to withstand such blows internally while continuing the war of defense against Iraq was indeed testimony to the roots the new order had struck and to the undiminished prestige of Imam Khomeini as the leader of the nation.

Ayatullah Khamna'i, a longtime associate and devotee of the Imam, was elected president on October 2, 1981, and he remained in this position until he succeeded him as leader of the Islamic Republic on his death in 1989. No governmental crises comparable to those of the first years of the Islamic Republic occurred during his tenure. Nonetheless, structural problems persisted.

The constitution provided that legislation passed by the *Majlis* should be reviewed by a body of senior *fuqaha'* known as the Council of Guardians (*Shaura-yi Nagahban*) to ensure its conformity with the provisions of Ja'fari *fiqh*. This frequently led to a stalemate on a variety of important legislative issues.

On at least two occasions, in October 1981 and January 1983, Hashimi-Rafsanjani, then chairman of the *Majlis*, requested the Imam to arbitrate decisively, drawing on the prerogatives inherent in the doctrine of vilayat-i *faqih*, in order to break the deadlock. He was reluctant to do so, always preferring that a consensus should emerge.

However, on January 6, 1988, in a letter addressed to Khamna'i, the Imam put forward a far-reaching definition of vilayat-i *faqih*, now termed "absolute" (*mutlaqa*), which made it theoretically possible for the leadership to override all conceivable objections to the policies it supported. Governance, Imam Khomeini proclaimed, is the most important of all divine ordinances (*ahkam-i ilahi*) and it takes precedence over secondary divine ordinances (*ahkam-i far'iyah-yi ilahiya*).

Not only does the Islamic state permissibly enforce a large number of laws not mentioned specifically in the sources of the *shari'a*, such as the prohibition of narcotics and the levying of customs dues; it can also suspend the performance of a fundamental religious duty, the hajj, when this is necessitated by the higher interest of the Muslims.[8](#)

At first sight, the theory of *vilayat-i mutlaqa-yi faqih* might appear to be a justification for unlimited individual rule by the leader (rahbar). One month later, however, Imam Khomeini delegated these broadly defined prerogatives to a commission named the Assembly for the Determination of the Interest of the Islamic Order (*Majma'-i Tashkhis-i Maslahat-i Nizam-i Islami*.) This standing body has the power to settle decisively all differences on legislation between the *Majlis* and the Council of Guardians.

The war against Iraq continued to preoccupy Iran until July 1988. Iran had come to define its war aims as not simply the liberation of all parts of its territory occupied by Iraq, but also the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Husayn. A number of military victories made this goal appear attainable.

On November 29, 1981, Imam Khomeini congratulated his military commanders on successes achieved in Khuzestan, remarking that the Iraqis had been obliged to retreat before the faith of the Iranian troops and their eagerness for martyrdom.[9](#)

The following year, on May 24, Khurramshahr, which had been held by the Iraqis since shortly after the outbreak of war, was liberated, and only small pockets of Iranian territory remained in Iraqi hands. The Imam marked the occasion by condemning anew the Persian Gulf states that supported Saddam Husayn and describing the victory as a divine gift.[10](#)

Iran failed, however, to follow up swiftly on its surprise victory and the momentum, which might have made possible the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime, was lost as the tide of war flowed back and forth. The United States was, in any event, determined to deny Iran a decisive victory and stepped up its intervention in the conflict in a variety of ways.

Finally, on July 2, 1988, the US navy stationed in the Persian Gulf shot down a civilian Iranian airliner, with the loss of 290 passengers. With the utmost reluctance, Imam Khomeini agreed to end the war on the terms specified in Resolution 598 of the United Nations Security Council, comparing his decision in a lengthy statement issued on July 20 to the drinking of poison.[11](#)

Any notion that the acceptance of a ceasefire with Iraq signaled a diminution in the Imam's readiness to confront the enemies of Islam was dispelled when, on February 14, 1989, he issued a *fatwa* calling for the execution of Salman Rushdie, author of the obscene and blasphemous novel, *The Satanic Verses*, as well as those responsible for the publication and dissemination of the work.

The *fatwa* received a great deal of support in the Muslim world as the most authoritative articulation of popular outrage at Rushdie's gross insult to Islam. Although its demand remained unfulfilled, it

demonstrated plainly the consequences that would have to be faced by any aspiring imitator of Rushdie, and thus had an important deterrent effect.

Generally overlooked at the time was the firm grounding of the Imam's *fatwa* in the existing provisions of both Shi'i and Sunni jurisprudence; it was not therefore innovative. What lent the *fatwa* particular significance was rather its issuance by the Imam as a figure of great moral authority.

The Imam had also gained the attention of the outside world, albeit in a less spectacular way, on January 4, 1989, when he sent Mikhail Gorbachev, then general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a letter in which he predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of communism: "Henceforth it will be necessary to look for communism in the museums of political history of the world."

He also warned Gorbachev and the Russian people against replacing communism with Western-style materialism: "The basic problem of your country has nothing to do with ownership, the economy, or freedom; it is the lack of a true belief in God, the same problem that has drawn the West into a blind alley of triviality and purposelessness."¹²

Internally, however, the most important development in the last year of Imam Khomeini's life was, without doubt, his dismissal of Ayatullah Muntaziri from the position of successor to the leadership of the Islamic Republic.

Once a student and close associate of the Imam, who had gone so far as to call him "the fruit of my life," Muntaziri had had among his associates over the years persons executed for counterrevolutionary activity, including a son-in-law, Mahdi Hashimi, and made far-reaching criticisms of the Islamic Republic, particularly with regard to judicial matters.

On July 31, 1988, he wrote a letter to the Imam questioning what he regarded as unjustified executions of members of the Sazman-i Mujahidin-I Khalq held in Iranian prisons after the organization, from its base in Iraq, had made a large-scale incursion into Iranian territory in the closing stages of the Iran-Iraq war. Matters came to a head the following year, and on March 28, 1989, the Imam wrote to Muntaziri accepting his resignation from the succession, a resignation that under the circumstances he was compelled to offer.¹³

On June 3, 1989, after eleven days in hospital for an operation to stop internal bleeding, Imam Khomeini lapsed into a critical condition and died. The outpouring of grief was massive and spontaneous, the exact counterpoint to the vast demonstrations of joy that had greeted his return to Iran a little over ten years earlier.

Such was the press of mourners, estimated at some nine million that the body ultimately had to be transported by helicopter to its place of burial to the south of Tehran on the road leading to Qum. A still

expanding complex of structures has grown up around the shrine of the Imam, making it likely that it will become the center of an entire new city devoted to ziyara and religious learning.

The testament of Imam Khomeini was published soon after his death. A lengthy document, it addresses itself principally to the various classes of Iranian society, urging them to do whatever is necessary for the preservation and strengthening of the Islamic Republic. Significantly, however, it begins with an extended meditation on the *hadith-i thaqalayn*: “I leave among you two great and precious things: the Book of God and my progeny; they will never be separated from each other until they meet me at the pool.”

The Imam interprets the misfortunes that have befallen Muslims throughout history and more particularly in the present age as the result of efforts precisely to disengage the Qur’an from the progeny of the Prophet (S).

The legacy of Imam Khomeini was considerable. He had bequeathed to Iran not only a political system enshrining the principles both of religious leadership and of an elected legislature and head of the executive branch, but also a whole new ethos and self-image, a dignified stance of independence vis-à-vis the West are in the Muslim world.

He was deeply imbued with the traditions and worldview of Shi’i Islam, but he viewed the revolution he had led and the republic he had founded as the nucleus for a worldwide awakening of all Muslims. He had sought to attain this goal by, among other things, issuing proclamations to the hujjaj on a number of occasions, and alerting them to the dangers arising from American dominance of the Middle East, the tireless activity of Israel for subverting the Muslim world, and the subservience to America and Israel of numerous Middle Eastern governments.

Unity between Shi’is and Sunnis was one of his lasting concerns; he was, indeed, the first Shi’i authority to declare unconditionally valid prayers performed by Shi’is behind a Sunni imam. [14](#)

It must finally be stressed that despite the amplitude of his political achievements, Imam Khomeini’s personality was essentially that of a gnostic for whom political activity was but the natural outgrowth of an intense inner life of devotion. The comprehensive vision of Islam that he both articulated and exemplified is, indeed, his most significant legacy.

[1.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, V, p. 233.

[2.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, X, p. 141.

[3.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, X, p. 149.

[4.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XII, p. 40.

[5.](#) Qanun-i Asasi-yi Jumhuri-yi Islami-yi Iran, Tehran, 1370 Sh./1991, pp. 23–24, 53–58.

[6.](#) Suggestions that the use of this title assimilated him to the Twelve Imams of Shi’i belief and hence attributed infallibility to him are groundless.

[7.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XV, p. 130.

- [8.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XX, pp. 170–71.
- [9.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XV, p. 234.
- [10.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XVI, pp. 154–5.
- [11.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XXI, pp. 227–44.
- [12.](#) Ava-yi Tauhid, Tehran, 1367 Sh./1989, pp. 3–5.
- [13.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XXI, p. 112.
- [14.](#) Istifta'at, I, p. 279.

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