



THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN, 1979-1989

by Shaul Bakhash

Ever since they made a revolution and seized power 10 years ago, Iran's clerical leaders have considered themselves to be engaged in a unique experiment to create an exemplary Islamic state, based on Islamic law and superior to both capitalism and communism. "We should be a model to the world," Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, former speaker of Iran's Majles, or parliament, said two years ago.* "We should be able to present Islam as an alternate model for human society." According to the Chief Justice, Abdolkarim Musavi-Ardabili, the establishment of a true Islamic state has not been attempted for 14 centuries, not since the Prophet established his exemplary community in seventh-century Arabia.

Other Muslim states today also espouse the concept of Islamicization. But the Ira-

*Rafsanjani was elected president of Iran on July 28, 1989, eight weeks after Ayatollah Khomeini's death on June 3.

nian experiment is unique. In Egypt, secular leaders may pay lip service to Islamic law, but they run a basically secular state. In the Pakistan of Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988), the soldiers ruled, although Zia banned alcohol, reimposed canonical Islamic punishments, and introduced non-interest banking to win the support of the religious leaders. In Iran, however, it is the clerics who rule. A cleric is the *faqih*, the supreme leader. Clerics dominate the chief offices of the state, the security agencies, and the judiciary. They and their followers determine and enforce the norms of social morality, of dress, and of female modesty. The clerics are responsible for state ideology. They make the laws, and on the basis of Islamic criteria, senior Islamic jurists judge their acceptability. The very legitimacy of the state is said to derive from the authority vested in the clerics and the vice-regency they enjoy, as heirs to the mantle of the

Prophet. During his lifetime, Ayatollah Khomeini was said to derive his authority as the *faqih* from this divine mandate.

But the Islamic Republic was also born out of revolution. And it is this combination of religion and revolution, by now so inextricably woven together as to be indistinguishable, that explains the character of the Islamic Republic and of the Islam which its leaders articulate. The interweaving of religion and revolution is reflected in the very names the revolutionaries have chosen to give to the institutions of the revolution: the Foundation of the Disinherited and the Martyrs' Foundation, the revolutionary committees, the Revolutionary Guards, and—a kind of morals police—the Mobile Units of God's Vengeance. It is reflected also in the new names given the great squares and main avenues of Tehran during the post-revolution frenzy of renaming: Freedom Square, Revolution Avenue, and the Square of the Imam of the Age.

Both religious and revolutionary zeal explain the puritanical impulse of the revolution, the social conformity demanded of Iranians in public. In winter, in the ski resorts north of Tehran, men and women must ski on different slopes. Practically speaking, women can no longer swim on the Caspian coast, the playground of the middle class under the Shah. Women may not even appear in bathing suits in their own homes if they can be seen by neighbors. One wealthy Tehran homeowner has shut down his private pool, feeling it unfair for himself and his son to swim when his wife and daughter cannot do so. Women cannot appear unveiled in public. An excessive show of hair or lipstick or a dress too tight

around the hips may earn a woman a reprimand or bar her from entry into a store or government office. In periods when the puritanical impulse is running high, a woman even risks arrest and sentencing to a specified number of lashes. Male members of Iran's soccer teams must wear shorts that cover their knees. It required several rulings from Khomeini himself last year to permit light music to be played on the radio, Western entertainment programs and films to be shown on television, and chess to be accepted as a religiously permissible pastime.

For apolitical members of the middle class, the worst of the revolutionary fervor is over. People no longer expect revolutionary committee members unexpectedly to enter homes to search for liquor and playing cards or to round up guests if men and women are mixing at a party in ways considered immodest. Upper-middle-class women wear make-up, more daring clothes, and people drink in the privacy of their own homes. But a lingering fear of the knock on the door remains. A chasm has opened between public and private life. A popular saying in Tehran has it that under the Shah, Iranians prayed in private and drank in public; under the Islamic Repub-



On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran after 15 years in exile (and 16 days after the flight of the Shah). Khomeini became Iran's supreme spiritual leader in December 1979.

lic, they pray in public and drink in private.

France's revolutionaries sent the enemies of the revolution to the guillotine. Iran's revolutionaries have sent thousands before the firing squad for similar counter-revolutionary crimes and "crimes against the people." But the revolutionary courts in Iran have also charged their victims with crimes that revive a dimly-remembered Qur'anic vocabulary. Hundreds were executed for "making war against God" and "spreading corruption on earth"; hundreds more on charges of blasphemy or for being *taghutis*, worshipers of Mammon. Still others were sentenced for sharing in "the crimes of Lot," like inhabitants of a present-day Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the Islamic Republic, as was the case in Paris during the French Revolution, the year is now punctuated by a seemingly endless chain of public festivals (or mourning days) that celebrate and mark religious and revolutionary events and, most often, a combination of both. Iran of the Islamic Republic mourns the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, who died on the plains of Karbalā' in the seventh century, on one day; it celebrates the takeover of the American embassy in Tehran and shouts "death to America" on another. On Fridays, the Muslim sabbath, tens of thousands attend Friday prayers in open spaces in cities across the country. The mass Friday prayer meetings are a combination of family outing, communal get-together, and political and religious rally. The government uses the Friday sermons to expound and elaborate on government policy and religious practice, although it is often difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. The

same themes are treated in Friday sermons throughout the country. In Tehran, the sermon is delivered by one of the leading clerics of the regime. Dressed in clerical robes and turban, he delivers the sermon while resting one hand on the barrel of a rifle—a symbol, as he is meant to be, of piety and power, authority deriving from divine sanction and the barrel of a gun.

Like much else, history, too, has been turned upside down. If under the Shah official history was a celebration of monarchy, in the Iran of the ayatollahs the object of celebration is the sacred history of religious resistance to the Shah's supposedly autocratic, impious, and excessively Western-inspired rule. The Shah in 1971 celebrated 2,500 years of monarchy and depicted himself as the latest in a line of illustrious Iranian kings. In the new history books of the Islamic Republic, the kings are denigrated, while turbaned religious teachers, mystics, Islamic jurists, and martyrs for the faith are proclaimed heroes. Under the Shah, Women's Day celebrated the abolition of the veil in 1936. Today, the veil is back with a vengeance, and Women's Day coincides with the birthday of the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, depicted as the symbol of both female modesty and revolutionary commitment. Some criminal laws of the Islamic Republic apply specifically and only to those who held office under the Shah after June 5, 1962, the day on which Khomeini was first arrested—as if the only modern history that really matters began when the Islamic forces girded themselves to overthrow the Shah's secular state.

The Shah's technocrats discussed public policy in the language of development economics. Today, public discourse and debate

***Shaul Bakhash**, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is Clarence Robinson Professor of History at George Mason University. Born in Tehran, Iran, he received an A.B. (1959) and M.A. (1968) from Harvard and a D.Phil. (1970) from Oxford. A journalist in Iran from 1960 to 1977, he is the author of *Iran: Monarchy, Bureaucracy, and Reform under the Qajars, 1858–1896* (1977) and *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and The Islamic Republic* (1984). Copyright © 1989 by Shaul Bakhash.*

is usually framed in the vocabulary of Islam. In debating a tax law some years ago, the Majles (about half of whose 270 members were then mullahs) argued whether a tax imposed by the Imam Ali on horses and mules in the seventh century constituted a precedent for income taxes. In 1986, Mehdi Bazargan, Khomeini's first prime minister, now in the opposition, urged Khomeini in an open letter to make peace with Iraq. He based his argument on the example of peace treaties signed by the Prophet 13 centuries ago; Khomeini, in turn, rejected his suggestion by citing the example of the unrelenting struggle of the Old Testament Prophets against idolatry and unbelief.

Like the French and Russian revolutions, the Iranian Revolution had from the beginning an international dimension, but this too bore an Islamic imprint. In the first year of the revolution, Mohammad Montazeri, one of the younger, militant clerical leaders, and his numerous gun-toting followers insisted on leaving Iran and entering other Islamic countries without passports or visas: Islam, Montazeri said, has no borders. Iran did not initiate the bitter eight-year-old war with Iraq. But once the Iraqis invaded in September 1980, and especially after the tide turned in Iran's favor two years later, the war, too, was treated as a religious war, of Islam against unbelief. The teenage volunteers of the paramilitary forces—known as the Mobilization of the Disinherited—wore bandanas emblazoned with dedications to the Imam of the Age, whose coming will inaugurate the reign of Truth and Justice. The Iranian offensives were given names that resonated with the great mo-

ments of Islamic and Shiite history: Badr, Karbalā', Muharram, Dawn of the New Age.

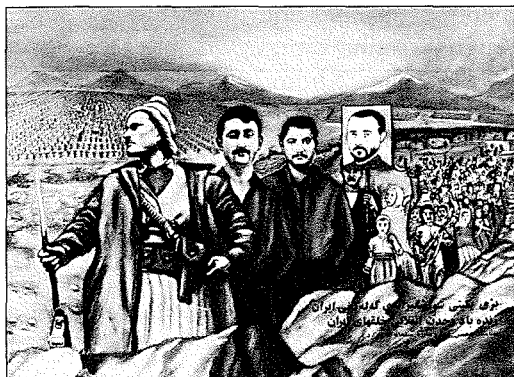
Iran's aim, Khomeini said, was to see an Islamic state established at Baghdad—and beyond. The war also became a crusade to restore Muslim rule to the Holy Land. "The road to Jerusalem lies through Baghdad" was one of the slogans of Iran's revolutionary armies. The war reinforced the belief that the tide of Iran's Islamic revolution would sweep the Middle East and the rest of the Islamic world. "Our revolution is not tied to Iran," Khomeini remarked last year.



During the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, up to one million Iranian women took one month of military training to ready themselves as reserves. Here, a chador-clad "bassidji sister" takes aim.

"The Iranian people's revolution was the starting point for the great revolution of the Islamic world."

Iran's leaders have maintained that Iran will "export" its revolution only by means of example and ideology and not by means of force. In fact, the clerics have not been above sponsoring clandestine opposition groups in other Muslim states and encouraging bombing, assassination, and hostage-taking as a means of extending the reach of the Islamic Republic. But even the export of ideology and Islamic propaganda have exacerbated Iran's strained relations with



"Unite in one aim, Iranian Revolution: Long live Iran's people revolution," says this propaganda poster from around 1979.

other Muslim states. Khomeini each year encouraged the 150,000 Iranians who made the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca to join in demonstrations to "disavow the unbelievers." This great gathering of Muslims, he insisted, had a political as well as a religious purpose—to unite Muslims against the "world-devouring" great powers and the autocratic, un-Islamic rulers of Islamic states. He and his lieutenants had no reservations about publicly denouncing other heads of state. It was, they held, an Islamic duty to denounce the wrongdoer.

Iran's leaders have claimed not only a universal significance for their revolution but also leadership of all Muslims for Khomeini himself. "Today, the Imam [Khomeini] has regency over 50 million Muslims," Ayatollah Ali Meshgini said last year. "Tomorrow, God willing, he will rule over one billion Muslims." It was as spiritual leader of the Muslim world, and defender of the interests of the worldwide Islamic community, that Khomeini in February 1989 pronounced a death sentence upon Salman Rushdie, whose book, *The Satanic Verses*, contained material deemed insulting to Muslims. Rafsanjani made an official visit to the Soviet Union in June, shortly after the Ayatollah's death, where he addressed Muslim audiences in the Caucasus.

He reported on his return that even Soviet Muslims wept when he mentioned Khomeini's name.

But ultimately, as Iran's leaders themselves emphasize, the most powerful message of the Islamic revolution will derive from the exemplary model of the Islamic Republic itself. The eyes of the entire Muslim world, Chief Justice Musavi-Ardabili has said, are on Iran. "Failure for the Islamic Republic," according to the former president Ali Khamenei, "means failure for Islam." Iran's clerics measure their success in part by the degree to which they have succeeded in asserting Iran's independence, standing up to the great powers, and reaffirming Iran's Islamic identity in the face of a threatening and alien Western culture. But they also made a revolution in the name of social justice, equality, and prosperity, and their superior ability to manage the economy.

The Iranian revolution was a reaction to excessive signs of Westernization under the Shah. But it was also a reaction among upwardly mobile young men and women to what they rightly or wrongly perceived as inequities not only of wealth and privilege but also of access to jobs, housing, and education.

The revolution did result in a transformation of the ruling classes. The old ruling elite of court and government under the Shah was decimated by execution, purge, forced retirement, and self-imposed exile. The great industrialists and businessmen lost their factories and banks; today they are mostly abroad. In the bazaar, new men with access to the ruling clerics and the valuable import and investment permits that only the government can issue have edged out the old merchant families. Even within the clerical community, middle-rank clerics, hungry for power and ready to espouse a revolutionary agenda, have

edged out the old clerical families and dominate the new regime. Many young men have made their way up through the revolutionary organizations and by way of revolutionary activity to positions of great prominence. Mohammad Ali Raja'i was a street peddler and school teacher before he became prime minister of the Islamic Republic. Another unknown, a member of "the students of the Imam's line" who occupied the American embassy and took American hostages in 1979, became a deputy foreign minister. Khamenei, now Khomeini's successor as supreme leader, was a middling cleric in the provincial capital of Mashhad before the revolution. In the army, senior military command is often in the hands of officers who were lieutenants under the Shah.

The revolution, however, promised material rewards to the masses, not only to members of a new ruling elite and their allies. These promises are embedded in the constitution. They are echoed in revolutionary rhetoric. Members of parliament, Friday prayer leaders, and government officials routinely castigate businessmen as "capitalists," "leeches," and "bloodsuckers." They speak of the working class and of the downtrodden as the true and deserving children of the revolution. On the eve of the 1988 parliamentary elections, Khomeini urged voters to elect deputies devoted to "the Islam of the barefoot people, the Islam of the deprived and the meek," and to reject candidates favoring "capitalist Islam, the Islam of the arrogant . . . in other words, American-style Islam."

But war, revolutionary turmoil, mismanagement, a swollen and cumbersome state sector, the flight of talent and capital, and plunging oil revenues have played havoc with the economy. Huge cranes still hover, as they did when the Shah was overthrown 10 years ago, over uncompleted apartment and office blocks. The revolu-

tionaries believed they would create a new economy, free of the Western imports, machinery, and technology that the Shah relied on. In fact, they have promoted the same projects—steel, gas, petrochemicals, consumer durables, copper, automobile assembly—as did the Shah.

The choice, then as now, has been dictated by Iranian strengths and realities rather than by servility to the West, as the revolutionaries believed. Even in areas where Iran should excel, progress has been meager. As in other Third World revolutions, the Iranian revolution has created, through expropriation and nationalization, a huge, cumbersome, and inefficient state sector in industry and in other areas of the economy. Productivity is generally down. The government subsidizes basic commodities, but meat, butter, sugar, and tea are all rationed. And even rationed goods are not always available. Middle-class families supplement their needs on the open black market, where supplies exist but are much more expensive. The arrival of a fresh supply of chickens is likely to send housewives and husbands scurrying to the neighborhood grocery. Inflation has been high, unemployment widespread, and housing shortages severe.

Moreover, there has been very little agreement among the senior jurists on the issues of social justice, the role of private business in the economy, and the degree to which, under Islamic law, the state can tamper with private property in order to ensure the more equal distribution of wealth. Over the past three years, the Majles has passed a series of laws touching on these issues. All were struck down by the 12-member Council of Guardians, a body of senior jurists empowered to veto legislation it considers in violation of the constitution or Islamic law. The Council struck down laws that would have permitted the distribution of arable land, the na-

THE SUNNI-SHIITE SCHISM

The greatest rift within the Muslim faith originated during the seventh century and remains open to this day. Historian Stephen Humphreys here offers a brief account of the schism:

After the Prophet's death in 632, the majority of the Muslim community in Medina chose as their leader one of Muhammad's oldest companions, 'Abū Bakr. He took a title which emphasized his political functions—Deputy of the Messenger of God ("caliph"). 'Abū Bakr, however, did not claim supreme authority to interpret revelation. God had vouchsafed guidance and salvation to the community of believers as a whole. As the community's plenipotentiary agent, the caliph, Bakr believed, must try to ensure sound faith and conduct among Muslims. But he was in no way to be a final arbiter of religious truth. This point of view (much elaborated during later centuries) became the kernel of Sunni Islam.

A minority, however, rejected both the election of 'Abū Bakr and the frame of mind which underlay it. This group held that Muhammad's closest kinsman by blood and marriage, his

cousin and son-in-law 'Ali, had the only rightful claim to leadership over the Muslim community. They also asserted that Muhammad had designated 'Ali as his successor and that 'Ali had religious priority as the first male convert to Islam. Among the partisans of 'Ali (*shi'at 'Ali*) two ideas quickly took root. First, religious and political authority must be united in one man. Second, leadership must be invested in the descendants of 'Ali himself. In the Shiite view, the essence of leadership was religious authority, and their preferred title for the head of the community, "imam," underlined this point.

Though 'Ali's adherents resented the caliphate of 'Abū Bakr and his first two successors ('Umar and 'Uthmān), they provisionally accepted their rule. But when acute political and social tensions within the community led to revolt (656) and then to the death of 'Uthmān, some of the rebels proclaimed 'Ali as the new

tionalization of foreign trade, the takeover by the state of urban private land for low-cost housing purposes, and the extension of state control over the domestic distribution of goods.

The deadlock between the Council of Guardians and the Majles does reflect the interests of different constituencies and social groups. The Council of Guardians has consistently articulated a position protective of property rights—but not exclusively. Very often, the legislation proposed by the government, approved by the Majles, and opposed by the Council of Guardians would have extended state control over the economy rather than transferring wealth from rich to poor. In addition, just as in the early American Republic there emerged broad and narrow constructionists of the Constitution, in Iran, too, there have emerged broad and narrow constructionists of Islamic law. For example, when the Majles passed a law permitting the government to seize the property of Iranians who

were abroad and failed to return to Iran within a two-month period, the Council argued that the government would have to prove on a case-by-case basis that the property targeted for expropriation was acquired illegally. When the state, alleging a critical housing shortage, wanted to take over private urban land to build low-income housing, the Council ruled the law could be applied only where the government could prove that the crisis existed.

The position on Islamic law taken by the Council of Guardians has made it difficult for the revolutionary government to legislate on even the most ordinary matters, including income tax. A special ruling from Khomeini was necessary to permit the levying of other than canonically prescribed taxes. Two years ago, under wartime conditions, the Majles sought to increase punishments for hoarding and profiteering. But the legislators discovered that, under Islamic law, hoarding applied only to six items: wheat, barley, raisins, ol-

caliph. 'Ali, however, never secured his claim to the office. Instead, a bitter but inconclusive struggle with 'Uthmān's clan (the Umayyad) ended with 'Ali's murder in 661 by a third-party extremist. The majority of Muslims now accepted the Umayyads as the heads of the community, albeit with some misgivings. 'Ali's partisans refused to accept the situation and undertook a century of struggle to regain the caliphate for his descendants.

In 750, a Shiite-inspired revolt overthrew the Umayyad dynasty, but the new caliphs, though kinsmen of the Prophet, were not descendants of 'Ali. Once established, they adopted the majoritarian (Sunni) point of view. Toward the end of the eighth century, many elements within the Shiite movement turned away from political activism toward pietism. In these circles the doctrine grew that the imam held supreme religious authority even if he could not wield political power as caliph. Moreover, the imam's teaching was now held to be divinely guided and thus infallible. By 873, the 12th imam disappeared from human view; his followers (the "Twelvers") believed

that he would ultimately return to institute a reign of justice, but until that time the proper stance was one of watchful waiting and outward submission to the powers that be.

Around 1500 a radical Shiite sect, the Safavids, seized power in Iran. Once in power, the Safavids aligned themselves with the hitherto quiescent Twelver movement and made it the official religion of Iran—a status which it holds to the present day. During the intervening centuries, the Twelver Shiite clergy have often kept their distance from the regime in Iran, but they did not actively oppose monarchy. Only in the late 19th century did certain Iranian religious leaders openly call for limits on royal power, and only during the 1960s and 1970s, largely under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, did they begin to demand the abolition of the monarchy and to assert that the clergy should take a leading political role.

Some 85 to 90 percent of Muslims in the world today regard themselves as Sunnis. The largest Shiite community is that of Iran, but large communities are also found in Iraq, Lebanon, and Pakistan.

ives, oil, and dates—a list clearly deriving from the staples of the common diet in an earlier Islamic era. Today, though, dates and olives are not an important item of the Iranian diet; and as one deputy pointed out, raisins were plentiful. The items in short supply and liable to hoarding and profiteering, he said, were pharmaceuticals, automobile spare parts, and consumer durables. In another case, the Guardianship Council refused to allow the Majles to set punishments for certain crimes, arguing that under Islamic law each individual judge is free to set the punishments he deems suitable. Not long ago, the Council of Guardians struck down a new labor law that provided for minimum wages, rights of collective bargaining, maternity leave, and employer contributions to workmen's compensation. Such provisions were common provisions of labor laws under the monarchy. But the Council now argued that the state could not interfere in contracts between consenting adults.

The advocates of a broad interpretation of Islamic law attempted to resolve this impasse by appealing to Khomeini himself, and by seeking from him rulings on matters of property, social justice, and state authority that would allow them to overcome the objections of the Guardianship Council. Occasionally, Khomeini issued such rulings. For example, he declared that the state could collect income taxes in addition to



At the Qur'anic school of Faizieh in Qum two Muslim scholars read and discuss the holy text. Ayatollah Khomeini himself studied at Faizieh.

the canonically prescribed levies. In a ruling of January last year, he claimed unusually broad authority for the Islamic state. Such a state, he asserted, could suspend agreements or even the primary requirements of Islamic law, if the interests of the Islamic community required it. The broad constructionists latched on to these rulings to claim for Khomeini the right to unquestioned authority as the *faqih*, or supreme jurist. In the absence of the Hidden Imam (see box, p. 60), Khomeini said last year, the rule of the *faqih* is God's rule. "When the supreme jurist issues an order based on the interests of Islam and the society, that order is an order from God, a religious edict." It must, therefore, be carried out.

Khomeini, however, was generally reluctant to issue rulings on specific items of legislation on which the senior clerics and the leadership had been divided. He preferred to propose mechanisms for resolving differences and to leave the difficult decisions to his own quarreling lieutenants. Last year, for example, he appointed a special committee composed of senior jurists of the Council of Guardians and the three branches of government to mediate differences between the Council and the Majles. Earlier, he had suggested that a two-thirds majority vote in the Majles would suffice to establish the necessity for laws appearing to contravene Islamic dictates. But these mechanisms did not resolve parliament's difficulties with the Council of Guardians over matters of property and Islamic law. Khomeini himself subsequently retreated somewhat from his extreme formulation regarding the virtually unlimited authority of the Islamic state.

As late as Khomeini's death on June 3, 1989, many items of controversial legislation were still pending. The major doctrinal issues regarding the application of Islamic

law to questions of property and social justice remained unresolved. Khomeini, however, had articulated a fairly clear position on these issues, even if, in the end, he proved unable to win consensus among the senior clerics behind his view. He believed that the preservation and continuity of the Islamic community itself overrode all other considerations, that Islamic law could be applied to the problem of governing modern societies, and that jurists must find in the law solutions to modern-day problems. Shortly before he died, in "a fatherly reminder" to the jurists of the Council of Guardians, Khomeini wrote that the problems of today's world could not be resolved by the hairsplitting theological and legal disputes of the religious seminaries. It was incumbent on the jurists, he said, to show that Islam could resolve complex social, political, and economic problems and administer the affairs of this world. A similar plea was expressed earlier by Chief Justice Musavi-Ardabili, when he argued for "a dynamic and living" jurisprudence that would change with the times.

During the first decade of the revolution, Iran's clerics and leaders argued the seemingly arcane points of Islamic law regarding raisins and hoarding, freedom of contract, and maternity rights. They pursued such matters with energy and conviction because they believed that larger questions of social justice, property rights, and state authority were at stake. Their conflicts over Islamic law are a reminder that, in the Iranian case, revolution and religion go hand in hand. The revolution is constantly being shaped and defined by the Islamic movement that helped to bring it about. Islam—variously defined—remains the ultimate source of legitimacy.