

Introduction

The life of Ayatollah Khomeini was so shadowy, so overlain with myth and rumor, that there was a lingering disagreement or uncertainty about his ancestry, his true name and his date of birth. But when he returned in triumph on February 1, 1979—after 15 years of exile—the old man left little doubt who he was, or what he wanted for his ancient land. . . . [H]e was inflexibly bent on expanding his brand of revolutionary fundamentalism across the Arab world.

*Ayatollah Khomeini's obituary,
New York Times, 4 June 1989*

Perceptions of Khomeini

The stern image of Ayatollah Khomeini struck the consciousness of the West much like the grade-B horror movies that appear on American screens early each summer. Sinister and alien looking, he at first aroused awe, fascination, and consternation. But when the season was over, his bearded image had become blurred and easily confused with competing horror shows. And now, more than a decade later, the West associates his name, when it cares to remember him, with “fanaticism,” “radicalism,” and, most prevalent of all, “religious fundamentalism.” Western journalists consider him synonymous with religious atavism and search for similar figures in such far-afield places as Israel, Nigeria, and Indonesia.

It is not hard to fathom why the fundamentalist label has gained such wide currency. For conservatives, the term is associated with xenophobia, militancy, and radicalism. For liberals, it means extremism, fanaticism, and traditionalism. For radicals, it evokes theological obscurantism, political atavism, and the rejection of science, history, modernity, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. Meanwhile, for Orientalists—still a big influence in Middle Eastern studies—the term is useful precisely because it implies that the Muslim world is intrinsically timeless, unchanging, irrational, backward looking, and programmed merely to replay old scripts from the time of the Prophet, the early caliphate, and the medieval Crusades. Typically, the *New York Times*, in reviewing the most influential book that portrays Khomeini as a clerical atavist, praised the work as a “major contribution” and thanked the author for showing how in the “mystifying” Iranian revolution the people rose up to “demand less freedom and fewer material things.”¹ When the subject matter did not behave as expected, the same author coined the term “pragmatic fundamentalism”—an oxymoron if there ever was one.²

The central thesis of this book is that “populism” is a more apt term for describing Khomeini, his ideas, and his movement because this term is associated with ideological adaptability and intellectual flexibility, with political protests against the established order, and with socioeconomic issues that fuel mass opposition to the status quo. The label “fundamentalism,” in contrast, implies religious inflexibility, intellectual purity, political traditionalism, even social conservatism, and the centrality of scriptural-doctrinal principles. “Fundamentalism” implies the rejection of the modern world; “populism” connotes attempts made by nation-states to enter that world.

There is more at issue here than semantics. On the one hand, if Khomeinism is a form of fundamentalism, then the whole movement is inherently incapable of adapting to the modern age and is trapped in an ideological closed circuit. On the other hand, if Khomeinism is a form of populism, it contains the potential for change and acceptance of modernity—even eventually of political pluralism, gender equality, individual rights, and social democ-

racy. In arguing against the term “fundamentalism,” I do not deny its existence in other countries or even among some Khomeini supporters in Iran. Nor do I deny the importance of religion to Khomeini himself. My argument is that Khomeinism should be seen as a flexible political movement expressing socio-economic grievances, not simply as a religious crusade obsessed with scriptural texts, spiritual purity, and theological dogma.

Each of the five chapters of this book elaborates on this central theme. Chapter 1 describes how Khomeini broke sharply with Shii traditions, borrowed radical rhetoric from foreign sources, including Marxism, and presented a bold appeal to the public based not on theological themes but on real economic, social, and political grievances. In short, he transformed Shiism from a conservative quietist faith into a militant political ideology that challenged both the imperial powers and the country’s upper class. The final product has more in common with Third World populism—especially that of Latin America—than with conventional Shiism.³

Chapter 2 analyzes Khomeini’s perceptions of private property, society, and the state. It describes how he adopted radical themes, inflamed social antagonisms, promised to redistribute wealth, and appealed blatantly to class sentiments—sentiments that some social scientists insist do not exist in Iran. At times he sounded more radical than the Marxists. But while adopting radical themes, he remained staunchly committed to the preservation of middle-class property. This form of middle-class radicalism again made him akin to Latin American populists, especially the Peronists.

Chapter 3 explores why the Islamic Republic celebrates May Day. It describes how the Khomeinists, while claiming to reject the West, have adopted International Workers’ Day despite the fact that its themes, symbols, and language are all rooted in the traditions of European socialism. The meshing of religion and politics, of Islam and socialistic themes, can be seen every year in this annual celebration. These celebrations can also be used to measure how the regime has toned down its populist rhetoric over the decade. In short, the unfolding of the Iranian Thermidor can be seen every year on May Day.

Chapter 4 looks at the Islamic Republic's treatment of Iranian history. It argues that the regime has systematically manipulated history through televised "recantations," newspapers, postage stamps, and school textbooks to bolster the clergy's reputation both as the long-time champions of the downtrodden masses against the rich and as the defenders of the nation against foreign powers. In other words, the Islamic Republic, like other ideologically charged states in the contemporary world, has used and abused history in an effort to win the "hearts and minds" of the general population.

Chapter 5 describes the paranoia prevalent throughout the political spectrum in Iran—among royalists and leftists as well as Khomeinists. It argues that the age of imperialism, as well as the traditional gap between state and society, has created the widespread notion that political actors on the Iranian stage are mere puppets manipulated from behind the scene (*posht-e pardeh*). To qualify as an intelligent analyst, one is expected to ignore the stage distractions and instead detect the invisible hands. According to Khomeini, the imperial powers are constantly "plotting" (*tuteah*) to divide the population by means of "spies" (*jasouz-ha*), "servants" (*nokar-ha*), "dependents" (*vabasteh-ha*), "traitors" (*khain-ha*), and "fifth columnists" (*sotune-e panjom*). The nation, thus, needs to be ever vigilant against external conspirators and their internal agents. In this, as in many other aspects, Khomeini is strikingly similar to populists elsewhere.

These five analyses do not, of course, exhaust all aspects of Khomeinism. They skim over such important issues as women, religious and linguistic minorities, civil society, individual liberties, school curriculum, and due process of law. But an investigation of these topics would, I am sure, also reveal that the behavior of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic has been determined less by scriptural principles than by immediate political, social, and economic needs. The more we dig under the surface, the less we find of fundamentalism and the more of pragmatic—even opportunistic—populism. To analyze Khomeini's ideas, I have avoided secondary sources, relying as much as possible on his own works. Although rarely used by Western authors, these works are readily available in Persian.⁴

Khomeini's Life and Writings

The Islamic Republic has done its very best to portray Ayatollah Khomeini as the quintessential “man of the people.” He is depicted as having been born into a humble family; losing his father in infancy, like the Prophet Mohammad; rising meteorically through the clerical hierarchy purely because of his scholastic abilities; devoting his whole adult life to the struggle against the Pahlavi tyrants; and leaving behind for his surviving son only one worldly possession—a family prayer rug. The truth is somewhat more complicated.

Ruhollah Khomeini was born in 1902 into a well-to-do family in Khomein, a small town located between Qom and Dezful, Arak, and Khonsar.⁵ Both parents came from landed and clerical families well known in central Iran. His mother (who died in 1917) was the sister of a local landlord and the daughter of Akhund Hajj Mulla Hosayn Khonsari, a highly respected *mojtahed* (high-ranking cleric) in Isfahan. The Khonsaris monopolized the religious institutions of Arak and were related to Shaykh Fazlollah Nuri, the conservative *mojtahed* executed by the constitutional revolutionaries in 1909. Khomeini's father, Sayyid Mostafa (1861–1902), studied first in Isfahan with the Khonsari family and then in Najaf, in the Ottoman Empire, where he obtained his *ejtehad* (higher theology degree). Sayyid Mostafa had a retinue of servants and armed guards and used the title Fakhr al-Mojtahedin—it is not clear whether this was conferred on him by the monarch or was merely a title used by the local population.

Khomeini's paternal grandfather, Sayyid Ahmad, who died in 1868, was known as Hendi (the Indian), because he had been born in Kashmir, where his own father, originally from Nishapour, taught and traded under the name of Sayyid Din Ali Shah. Sayyid Ahmad studied in Najaf before laying down roots in Khomein in the 1830s. He bought land in the region and married the sister of a local notable. It is said that his future father-in-law, Yussef Khan, encouraged him to settle in the region so as to have another educated cleric in his domains. In the words of Khomeini's elder brother, Ayatollah Morteza Pasandideh, Sayyid Ahmad Hendi could well be described as “prosperous” since he kept an open

house and owned substantial amounts of farmland in the nearby villages as well as a caravansary, fruit garden, and large house within Khomein.⁶ Much of this was passed on to the grandchildren. Pasandideh, who appears to be highly status conscious, describes Yussef Khan as a local *a^cyan* (notable) with a retinue of servants and armed guards. The title *ayatollah* was not in current usage in the nineteenth century, but recent works use the term to refer to both Sayyid Ahmad and Sayyid Mostafa.⁷ However, it seems that these two concentrated more on business ventures, leaving religious matters to the Khonsari side of the family.

In 1902, four months after Khomeini's birth, his father, Sayyid Mostafa, was ambushed and killed on the road to Arak. During the Islamic Revolution, much was made of this murder. Some claimed that he had been killed defending downtrodden peasants, and others that he had been assassinated by Reza Khan, the future Pahlavi shah of Iran. But Reza Khan at the time was no more than a Cossack cadet in Tehran, and the confrontation had arisen out of a family vendetta with the al-Ri^cyas, the other notable household in the locality. The al-Ri^cyas had imprisoned one of Sayyid Mostafa's men. Sayyid Mostafa had retaliated by imprisoning an al-Ri^cya man, who had then died. The al-Ri^cyas took revenge by killing Sayyid Mostafa. According to Pasandideh, well-attended memorial services were held for him in Najaf, Isfahan, and Tehran, as well as in Khomein, Arak, and Golpayegan.

To obtain justice, Sayyid Mostafa's widow traveled to Tehran and, after lobbying there for three years, mainly through a leading court minister, succeeded in getting the shah to execute one of the assassins. He was publicly hanged and his head was displayed in the main bazaar. After the execution, she returned to Khomein, where she had left her infant son in the care of a wet nurse. Pasandideh writes that Khomeini was extremely fond of his nurse. Khomeini's mother died when he was fifteen.

Khomeini received much of his early education in his home town. He went first to a local *maktab* school, which received funds from his family, and then studied calligraphy, Arabic, and Persian literature with older relatives. In 1920, at the age of eighteen, he moved to Arak to study theology with the famous Shaykh

Abdul-Karim Ha'eri, a leading *marja^C-e taqlid* (a cleric of the highest rank). He was famous not only for his learning but also for his scrupulous avoidance of politics—even during the turbulent 1910s. Ha'eri became Khomeini's chief mentor for the next sixteen years. Khomeini's stay in Arak, however, did not last long. A year later, Ha'eri, together with his students, moved to Qom to revive the Fayzieh, a decaying nineteenth-century seminary.

In the next decade, Qom became Iran's major scholastic center, in part because of Ha'eri, in part because clerical refugees from Iraq settled there, and in part because Reza Shah patronized the center to reward the clerical scholars there for staying out of politics. Qom remained conspicuously quiet for much of Reza Shah's reign—in contrast to other religious centers, such as Mashad, which periodically burst into open opposition against Reza Shah's secular reforms. Yahya Dawlatabadi, the historian and politician, wrote that Reza Shah supported Ha'eri to counter the growth of republicanism, communism, and other forms of radicalism.⁸ The notion that Qom is an ancient scholastic center is an invented tradition, and the claim that it was the hotbed of resistance against Reza Shah is self-serving fiction.

In the 1920s, Khomeini studied not only with Ha'eri but also with the other leading clergymen of Qom: Mirza Mohammad Ali, Hajji Sayyid Mohammad Taqi Khonsari, Sayyid Ali Yasabi Kashani, and, most important of all, Mirza Mohammad Ali Shahabadi, a prominent authority on the controversial subject of mysticism (*ʿerfan*). His tutorials with Shahabadi lasted some six years. Mysticism was controversial for the simple reason that it claimed to link the true believer directly with God, thereby undermining the clerical establishment. Aga Mohammad Behbehani, a leading nineteenth-century *mojtahed*, had been so opposed to mysticism that he had been nicknamed the Sufi Killer (*sufi-kush*).

In the 1930s, Khomeini joined the Fayzieh faculty and published commentaries on hadiths, ethics, and mysticism. These books, all in Arabic, are *Misbah al-Hidaya* (Book of guidance), *Shahar Do'ay al-Sahar* (Interpretation of the dawn prayer), *Shahar Arbe'en* (Hadith explanations), and *Adab al-Salat* (Prayer literature). Some were elaborations of Shahabadi's lecture notes

on mysticism.⁹ After the revolution, his notes from Shahabadi's tutorials on medieval mystic philosophers were published under the titles *Fasus al-Hakim* (Jewels of wisdom) and *Misbah al-Uns* (Lamp of intimacy). Also in these years, Khomeini composed mystical poems in Persian, which were published posthumously in a highly decorative volume entitled *Devan-e She^Cr* (Collection of poems). One of these poems praised al-Hallaj, the famous medieval mystic executed for his beliefs, and argued that the divine truth would never be found in the mosques and the seminaries.

In 1929 Khomeini married Batul, the daughter of Hojjat al-Islam Saqafi, a well-connected Tehran cleric. She remained his one and only wife for the rest of his life. They had seven children, five of whom—two sons and three daughters—survived infancy. His sons, Mostafa and Ahmad, spent much of their adult lives working as his assistants. Mostafa, the elder, died during the early stages of the revolution, creating rumors that he had been murdered by the regime. Ahmad continued at his father's side until his father's death in 1989 and then took charge of collecting and publishing his writings. Khomeini's three daughters married into clerical and bazaari (merchant) families. When Reza Shah decreed that everyone should take family surnames, Khomeini chose Mostafavi but in later years signed himself Ruhollah al-Mosavi al-Khomeini. His elder brother chose the name Pasan-dideh—a Persian word; his younger brother picked Hendi.

In 1937 Ha'eri died, and his place was gradually filled by Aya-tollah Mohammad Hosayn Borujerdi, another highly apolitical cleric with strong organizational abilities. He also enjoyed free access to the palace. In the 1940s, Borujerdi reached an unwritten agreement with the young Mohammad Reza Shah. The former agreed to support the monarchy and to silence his politically motivated colleagues; the latter promised to relax his father's secular policies and lift the prohibition against the veil. By the mid-1940s, Borujerdi was recognized as Iran's supreme *marja^C-e taqlid*—an honor that had not been conferred since the nineteenth century. For radical and even reform-minded Muslims, Borujerdi was the epitome of the archconservative cleric who bolstered the status quo while claiming to keep out of politics. In the words of one

religious dissident, these conservative ayatollahs turned the clerical establishment into a pillar of the Pahlavi regime.¹⁰

Khomeini's relations with Borujerdi were extremely close—especially after Khomeini's daughter married into the latter's family. He served as Borujerdi's teaching assistant and personal secretary, at crucial times conveying confidential messages to the shah. Pasandideh writes that Borujerdi sought Khomeini's advice on most issues, including political ones.¹¹ A fellow seminary teacher recounts that Borujerdi was the only person he had seen Khomeini address in writing as *ayatollah-e 'ozma* (grand ayatollah).¹² What is more, Khomeini, on the whole, followed Borujerdi's instructions to stay out of politics. One disciple admitted later that during the Borujerdi years Khomeini had concentrated on teaching.¹³ Another claimed that Khomeini had had many political differences with Borujerdi but kept them to himself for the sake of "Islamic unity."¹⁴

In 1943, Khomeini entered politics briefly by publishing an unsigned tract titled *Kashf al-Asrar* (Secrets unveiled).¹⁵ Under the guise of defending Shiism against Wahhabism, he attacked contemporary secularists, particularly Reza Shah, Shariat Sanjalaji (a reform-minded cleric who had openly supported the previous monarch), and Ahmad Kasravi (the leading contemporary historian of Shiism and Iran). One of Kasravi's supporters, a lapsed cleric named Ali Akbar Hakimzadeh, had just published an explosive book titled *Asrar-e Hazar Saleh* (Thousand year secrets), in which he scrutinized the historical authenticity of the central Shii myths. *Kashf al-Asrar* was for the most part a response to it. Khomeini himself stated that he had taken a two-month leave of absence from teaching to write his response.¹⁶ His own title may have been borrowed from *Kashf al-Ghita* (Obscurities unveiled), a famous nineteenth-century work defending the authority of the clergy from dissidents who claimed that the faithful could find the truth by going directly to the scriptures.

After this brief foray, Khomeini again withdrew from politics—even during the turbulent years of the oil crisis, when Ayatollah Abdul-Qasem Kashani, the main political cleric, broke Borujerdi's ban on political involvement and actively supported Premier

Mohammad Mosaddeq against the British. One disciple later boasted that Khomeini had not been enticed by Mosaddeq's "anti-regime and anti-imperialist propaganda."¹⁷ Khomeini spent much of the 1950s teaching at the Fayzieh, helping Borujerdi administer the Qom endowments and working on his *Towzih al-Masa'el* (Questions clarified). (All senior clerics now needed to publish a significant work to establish their reputations as grand ayatollahs). It was published in 1961 in Arabic in Najaf.

Khomeini's real entry into politics came in 1962–63—soon after Borujerdi's death and the inauguration of a series of reforms later known as the White Revolution. These reforms were attacked by much of the religious establishment, including such grand ayatollahs as Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, Shahab al-Din Marashi-Najafi, Mohammad Reza Golpayegani, Ahmad Khonsari, and Mohammad Taqi Qomi. Khomeini's attack, however, focused not on land redistribution, the reform's central piece, but the new electoral law enfranchising women and the referendum itself endorsing the White Revolution.¹⁸ According to Khomeini's proclamation, the electoral law was un-Islamic and the referendum unconstitutional—"no less so than Mosaddeq's 1953 referendum for dissolving Parliament."¹⁹ These denunciations helped turn the June 1963 Moharram processions into violent street protests against the regime. Khomeinists date the beginning of their movement to the June Uprising (Qiyam-e Khordad). One prominent cleric has recently revealed that in the discussions preceding these protests, Khomeini insisted that the clergy stay clear of land reform on the grounds that if they denounced it the shah would be able to label them pro-landlord mullas.²⁰

In the midst of the 1963 crisis, Khomeini was arrested and detained in Tehran for two months. On his release, the regime spread the rumor that he had agreed to stay out of state affairs because he believed that "politics by its very nature is dirty and demeaning." In 1964, however, Khomeini obtained the perfect opportunity to expose these rumors. Late in that year, the shah extended diplomatic immunity to American military advisers. Khomeini promptly compared this to the notorious nineteenth-

century Capitulation Agreements, accusing the shah of betraying Iran and endangering Islam.²¹ He was immediately rearrested. This time the regime was not willing to take chances and deported him to Turkey, from where he made his way to Najaf in Iraq. His deportation, as well as his anti-Capitulations attacks, established him as the leading antiregime ayatollah. Other ayatollahs complained; he denounced. Others compromised; he persisted in his denunciations.

Khomeini was to spend the next thirteen years in Najaf. In the first six years of exile, he concentrated on teaching religious jurisprudence (*fiqh*), not mysticism, and writing academic works, especially *Menasek Haj* (Pilgrimage rituals) and a five-part tome entitled *Ketab-e Bey^c* (Book of trade). His classes on law were so interesting that he often lectured past the assigned hour. "Others," writes one disciple, "were flabbergasted to hear that he could keep his audience's attention well past the one-hour class period."²² In these years, he issued no more than fourteen political pronouncements.

In early 1970, Khomeini shook the religious establishment with a series of seventeen lectures denouncing the apolitical clergy as well as the whole institution of monarchy. It is thought that the target of his attack was Ayatollah Abul-Qasem Khoi, the eldest *mojtahed* in Najaf and the one most eager to continue the Ha'eri-Borujerdi tradition of keeping the faithful out of politics. These lectures, delivered in the main bazaar mosque in Najaf, were soon circulated in Iran under the title *Velayat-e Faqih: Hokumat-e Islami* (The jurist's guardianship: Islamic government). It became the main Khomeinist handbook. Some—embarrassed by its contents—claim that this edition is unreliable and that it is a poor translation of the original Arabic. But the original lectures were in Persian, and in fact Khomeini, like many Iranian senior clerics, never attained fluency in spoken Arabic.²³

In subsequent years, Khomeini issued a constant stream of decrees, sermons, messages, interviews, and political pronouncements. By late 1978, when the revolution was in full swing, he was giving daily declarations and press interviews.²⁴ From 1979 until 1986—from his return to Iran until his health deteriorated—he

gave weekly audiences and sermons.²⁵ Even after suffering a major heart attack in March 1986, he continued to write decrees, homilies, and exhortations, including a farewell message published immediately after his death in June 1989, *Matn-e Kamel-e Vasiyatnameh-e Elahi va Siyasi-ye Imam Khomeini* (The complete text of Imam Khomeini's divine will and political testament). It was later translated into English, Russian, Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu. These pronouncements contained little theology but had much to do with sociopolitical issues. Even his homilies revealed a good deal about his social attitudes. Intended for the public at large, they used simple language and were disseminated widely through the mass media, especially television. Khomeini's use of everyday language made him the butt of upper-class humor.

From 1962 until 1989, Khomeini issued more than 610 decrees, sermons, interviews, and political pronouncements. The Islamic Republic, under his son's guidance, has published many, but not all, of them in a seventeen-volume work entitled *Sahifah-e Nur: Majmu'eh Rahnavard-ha-ye Imam Khomeini* (Leaves of illumination: Collection of Imam Khomeini's messages). It has also published selected quotations in twenty-two booklets with such titles as *Zan* (Women), *Shakhsiyat-ha* (Personalities), *Shahid va Shahadat* (Martyr and martyrdom), *Jang va Jihad* (War and crusade), *Enqelab-e Islami* (Islamic revolution), *Zed-e Enqelabi* (Counterrevolutionary), *Mardom*, *Ummat*, *Mellat* (People, community, nation), *Tarikh-e Iran* (Iranian history), *Azadi* (Freedom), *Goruha-ye Siyasi* (Political groups), *Este'mar* (Imperialism), *Nahzat-ha-ye Azadibakhsh* (Liberation movements), and *Mostazafin*, *Mostakberin* (The oppressed and the oppressors).

The fact that the regime constantly reprints these booklets but not his theological works testifies to their political importance. Without them there would have been no Khomeinism. Without Khomeinism there would have been no revolution—at least, not the Islamic Revolution. And without the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini would have been no more than a footnote to Iranian history. This book, consequently, will analyze Khomeinism mainly—though not solely—through the original versions of these sermons, decrees, press interviews, and political declarations.