

## **The Iranian Revolution, 1979: Memory, Desire, and a Search for Identity**

JESSICA SINGH

*The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is sometimes illustrated as a religiously motivated movement. This article attempts to deconstruct the notion of the Iranian Revolution as a “religious revolution.” It further reveals that the various religious actors who were ultimately able to topple the Shah in 1979 through their protests were not able to do so without the help of other actors. In this way, the Islamic Republic of Iran did not emerge from a drive for an ‘Islamic’ economic and social order as is sometimes presupposed. Rather, in addition to particular religious aspirations, the Revolution was transpired through various cultural, political, and ideological motives as well. This article will examine the multiplicity of reasons for which there emerged a mass revolutionary movement in Iran. In particular, it will focus on the effects that the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 and the Shah’s westernization measures had on the Iranian population.*

Numerous contemporary representations of the 1979 Iranian Revolution inadvertently suggest that the Islamic Republic of Iran emerged from a “drive for an ‘Islamic’ economic and social order.”<sup>1</sup> A close analysis of the intrinsic logic of the Revolution, however, reveals that the Republic was founded through a convergence of several distinct ideologies. Motivations for the Revolution were not solely political, economic, or religious; rather, in addition to a collective desire for a legitimate state authority, many Iranians were driven towards Khomeini’s revolutionary cause through a conflicting search for their own individual identity. In the years leading up the Revolution, the Pahlavi Dynasty’s westernization and modernization processes

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen R. Humphreys, *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, updated ed., (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005). 35.

had resulted in conflicting views on the essence of “Iranian” culture and, in effect, they had created divides between the country’s “modern” and “traditional” residents.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, many Iranians were driven towards Khomeini’s revolution because they desired to be part of a community that not only represented their interests, but one that fought the kind of oppression that had ultimately led to Iran’s demise. For example, Ali Shariati had asserted that Shia Islam was “in its essence a religion of revolution and social transformation, of struggle against tyranny and economic oppression.”<sup>3</sup> In this way, Iranians who desired a collective sense of belonging to a distinct community, and those who opposed particular “modern” and Western elements found fertile ground in Khomeini’s revolutionary cause; the Shia Islamic activists’ notion of Shi’ism as a “religion of protest” stimulated many Iranians to pursue the kind of national identity that Khomeini’s movement was propagating. Concurrently, however, many of the individual actors who had united under Khomeini’s “anti-imperialist” and “anti-Western” umbrella sought an Iran in which one could simultaneously be “Iranian, Muslim, and modern.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, the Iranian Revolution is a example of how the fusing together of different political, cultural, and ethnic identities with religion, by virtue of the overarching banner of a particular “national identity,” creates complexities that are far beyond the reaches of resolution even to this day. Since 1979, Iran’s political and religious authorities have, for the most part, had divergent visions of what an “Islamic social order” should look like.<sup>5</sup> As this paper

---

<sup>2</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in its Region*, (London and New York: Zed, 2010), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Humphreys, *Memory and Desire*, 201.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 37.

will illustrate, the Islamic Republic of Iran's very existence was possible only through the "ideological confusions" that engulfed Iranian society around the time of the Revolution; more fundamentally, the Revolution transpired through a complex convergence of particular "memories and desires" in which different political, cultural, and ideological aspirations became problematized.<sup>6</sup>

The Iranian Revolution exemplified an instance in which secular nationalism became intertwined with religious activism to ultimately create a particular kind of religious nationalism. As Benedict Anderson has famously asserted, a nation is an "imagined community" in that it is artificially created and does not have ontological being.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the notion of "Iranianness" became imagined, re-imagined, and ultimately shaped and transformed into an entity that comprised the very nucleus of the revolutionary movement. For example, before 1979, "Iranian identity" was not one dimensional; it was a developing phenomenon that held a multiplicity of meanings for different groups of people, based on their unique individual interests. As Ansari asserts, fluidity and dynamism exist not only in the construction and composition of social groups, but also in the ideas that drive them.<sup>8</sup> It is true that for most Shia in Iran and elsewhere, Islam is an integral part of their individual identity. At the time of the Revolution, however, not all Iranians were striving solely for a national identity that represented Shi'ism above all. Rather, the Islamic Republic was born out of a multifaceted "mass popular protest movement" that, amongst other ideals,

---

<sup>6</sup> Humphreys, *Memory and Desire*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 13.

demanded an Iranian identity rooted in democracy, the severing of the state's ties with imperialism, and economic strength.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, two prominent ideologies were driving the 1979 Revolution: Islamic activism, as illustrated through Shariati's intellectual work and its influence within Khomeini's movement, and secular nationalism, as illustrated through the desires of many of the politically, socio-economically, culturally, and religiously diverse actors involved. Although most of these diverse groups ultimately converged under Khomeini's attractive anti-imperialist and anti-Shah umbrella, each one of them, including "the middle-class intellectuals, bazaar merchants, students, workers, left-wing activists, and Muslim clerics," originally had unique ideals for the kind of national identity that they hoped to see emerge through a successful uprising.<sup>10</sup>

In essence, many of the actors involved in Khomeini's movement had originally envisioned religion as a complementary rather than core component of "Iranian" identity. For example, most of the working class and the impoverished rural migrants in the cities had been driven by economic interests; through their involvement in the Revolution, these groups hoped to bring forth a governing body that would improve the abominable conditions of employment availability in the newly modernized cities, as well as alleviate the class and cultural divides that had emerged as a result of the incompetent policies of the Pahlavi Dynasty. For these actors, an Iran that gave them food, shelter, and employment was much more important than one that illustrated a unity of Shia brethren. Further, the young adult generation desired a fluid and progressive yet religiously textured Iran that would

---

<sup>9</sup> Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> David Greason, "Embracing Death: The Western Left and the Iranian Revolution, 1978-83," *Economy and Society*, v. 34, no. 1, (February 2004), 107.

hold an influential position in the Western-dominated arena of global politics. Thus, their version of an “Iranian” identity, in addition to encompassing a Shia element, held a uniquely modern and neoliberal essence.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas desired forms of national identity varied among the diverse groups of secular actors involved in the Revolution, Khomeini and his Islamic activist supporters imagined a rigidly specific form of Iranian identity. In contrast to some of the non-religious motivations driving many Iranians, Khomeini’s Islamic activist movement was primarily fuelled through religiously influenced anti-colonialist aspirations. Not only did these actors want to rescue Iran from the despotism of an incompetent monarch who had become a puppet of the West but they fundamentally wanted to reassert the region’s Shia identity which, in their eyes, had shamefully become a mere shadow under the Pahlavi Dynasty. In this way, Shariati’s notion of Islam as the “one true liberator” of a state that had suffered depravity under Western colonialism and capitalism was a key influence in the roles of the Islamic activists in the Revolution.

Iranians saw a fusion of two distinct ideologies, Islam and Marxism, within Khomeini’s religiously esoteric vision, with each ideology encompassing elements that pertained to unique individual and collective interests. Heavily influenced by Shariati’s writings regarding the supposed relationship between “Islam’s teachings on social justice” and “Marxist views on egalitarianism,” Khomeini’s ideology envisioned an Iran that not only held a legitimate Islamic identity but acted on the needs of the general population as a whole, within the fluid context of modernity.<sup>12</sup> Since 1962, Khomeini had charismatically

---

<sup>11</sup> Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*.

<sup>12</sup> Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, 30.

propagated his opposition to the Shah by condemning the decades of poverty and suffering many Iranians had experienced during his rule and by characterizing the Pahlavi regime as “undemocratic and heedless of the economic needs of the population.”<sup>13</sup> Iran was in serious financial distress in the 1970s as a result of the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 and the Shah’s incompetent economic strategies since his inauguration. The Shah’s increased oil revenues and his modernization program in several of Iran’s urban centers had resulted in the further enrichment of the country’s wealthy classes and the increased disenfranchisement of the poor. In this way, Iran’s Marxists and Marxist sympathizers found fertile ground in Khomeini’s vision even though the “majority of the population” could not identify with many of their radical leftist goals.<sup>14</sup> Further, the working classes and the traditional middle classes cemented their alliance with the Islamic activists because, as Rostami-Povey argues, the messages of the Islamic activists “expressed the feelings and aspirations” of the urban poor and working classes more effectively than did the liberal left and other political groups.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, several politically, culturally, and ethnically distinct groups of Iranians were able to unite under the unique platform of the Islamic activists not only because they saw Khomeini as a mullah who “usefully transcended” both the modern and the traditional but also because his movement expressed the same kind of anti-Shah sentiment that had engulfed Iranian society for decades.<sup>16</sup> As illustrated via the fusing together of several unique, sometimes conflicting interests under a particular banner of unity, Khomeini’s activist movement

---

<sup>13</sup> Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Ansari, *Modern Iran*, 256.

solidified and acquired strength through the very “ideological confusions” that would lead to the Republic’s social and political problems later on.

In essence, the Iranian Revolution exemplified Humphreys’ notion of “memory and desire.”<sup>17</sup> Arguably, the Islamic activism demonstrated by Shariati, Khomeini, and their supporters was fuelled through the Shia “memory” of the martyrdom of Husain and the overall grievances that the *Shi’atu Ali* suffered at the ancient Battle of Karbala in 680. As Hamid Dabashi contends, the “politics of despair” are an inherent part of Shi’ism in that the religion necessitates a ceaseless anti-oppressive struggle for its own continuity.<sup>18</sup> As many Islamic scholars have argued, Khomeini’s movement was premised on this belief; by virtue of his own interpretation of the religion, Khomeini “personalized” particular aspects of Shia doctrine to galvanize Iran’s Shia population and stimulate their “internal sense” of protest and resistance.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Khomeini’s “revival” of the Shia population’s anti-oppressive attitudes was a determining factor for the way in which Iranians self-identified during the Revolution, and it continues to influence how they self-identify to this day. In recent years, for example, the Iranian government has explicitly illustrated the nation’s Shia identity and its “anti-oppressive” core via the contentious notion of an “axis of resistance.”<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Humphreys, *Memory and Desire*.

<sup>18</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Ali M. Ansari, *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34.

<sup>20</sup> “Iran: Syria part of our ‘Axis of Resistance,’” CNN (August 7, 2012).

Accessed online on July 29, 2013 at

<http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/07/world/meast/syria-unrest/>

As illustrated, the convergence of the two very distinct ideologies of Islamic activism and secular nationalism occurred primarily through the interconnectedness and interweaving of some of the particular interests of the actors involved. As Humphreys alludes to, instead of advocating for an explicitly Shia identity, at the time of the Revolution most Iranians were “simply demanding the same rights of self-determination that European nations had long since demanded for themselves.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, many of the secular interests of the diverse groups involved came to be increasingly expressed in the Islamic activist movement, albeit for strategic reasons. Thus, in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, “memory” became intertwined with “desire” such that, “where Islamic symbols were allowed to creep in, they did so only as part of the larger cultural patrimony” of the Iranian people.<sup>22</sup> This means that beneath the overarching banner of the “Iranian” identity propagated by Khomeini and the Islamic activist movement, there were distinct non-religious desires that were oftentimes incongruent with Khomeini’s vision of the state’s future. However, these desires ultimately became submerged within the “Shia memory” that Khomeini had rigorously fought to revive. In essence, the “Iranian” identity that emerged through the Revolution was an amalgamation of different interests, but it was premised on a particular kind of understanding of the role of secular interests within an Islamic state. Furthermore, the “ideological confusion” brought forth by the convergence of Shia Islamic activism with Marxism gave Khomeini’s revolutionary movement the external form and internal solidarity that it needed to trample the despotic, despised rule of the Shah.

---

<sup>21</sup> Humphreys, *Memory and Desire*, 188.

<sup>22</sup> Humphreys, *Memory and Desire*, 188.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006).
- Ansari, Ali M. *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- Ansari, Ali M. *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2007).
- Dabashi, Hamid. *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- Greason, David. "Embracing Death: The Western Left and the Iranian Revolution, 1978-83." *Economy and Society*, v. 34, no. 1 (February 2004): 105-140.
- Humphreys, R. Stephen. *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*, updated ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).
- "Iran: Syria part of our 'Axis of Resistance,'" CNN (August 7, 2012). Accessed online at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/07/world/meast/syria-unrest/>
- Kurzman, Charles. *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- Mirsepassi, Ali. *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- Rostami-Povey, Elahé. *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in its Region*. (London and New York: Zed, 2010).