

Assessment Two

The Significance of a Muslim Movement in a Muslim Majority Context: Iran

Muslim Politics

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Introduction:

The 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran undoubtedly has significant relevance to the contemporary aspect of Islamic and global politics. Often the leading image of the antithesis of western society and its values, Iran's relationship with western powers is as strained in the contemporary political landscape as it was in its eventual inception in 1979 after the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy.

Yet, Iran's Islamic Revolution is unique to various other political movements in wider Muslim societies. Being the lone Shiite theocratic voice in the overwhelming Sunni majority of Islamic interpretation, especially before the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, is significant in itself, leading to debates of intra-Islamic religious authority, often leading to the question of which sect is the proper interpretation of that authority. However, when analyzing Iran's Islamic movement and its significance, it is different from that of other movements in the Middle East region. When compared to various other (although not all) movements in the Middle East, Iran's movement is unabashedly Islamic, instead of ethnic, even incorporating a strangely sympathetic view of Sunni-Shiite Islamist unity to counter western influence. Contributing significantly to the success of the Islamic Revolution of Iran was its successful implementation of Islamic, particularly Shiite rituals and symbolism to its political advantage.

This essay is going to examine the significance of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and how it differs from various other movements. Part I will examine how the Iranian Revolution transcended ethnic and even Islamic boundaries, portraying itself to be an organic Islamic movement, rather than just a Shiite or Iranian one. Part II will examine the ritualistic and symbolic aspects employed in Iran's Islamic Revolution and how that led to its eventual success and prevailing relevance in the wider Islamic political framework.

Part I.

When assessing the post-World War ideologies of Arab and Muslim countries of the Middle East, there was an increased emphasis on Arab nationalism and economic interests. Although there are various Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in which Islam (primarily Sunni Islam) is at the forefront as the ideological component, there is a visible emphasis on Arab identity, as compared to just a Muslim one. When assessing various successful

movements after the two World Wars, there is an increased projection of Arab unity, autonomy, and interests, taking a definitive position after the Young Turk movement “failed to give the Arab provinces autonomy within the Ottoman Empire.”¹ This is further illustrated by the later Baathist movements in various Arab countries, such as Iraq, in which the concepts of Arab national and economic interests were prominent.²

Yet, the significance of the Islamic Revolution of Iran is that it successfully led a movement with Islam (in this case, Shiite Islam) as the forefront means of identity, ahead of ethnic, nationalistic identity. The successful culmination of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the propagation of Islamic identity proposed by the Shiite clergy, was a departure from the nationalistic principles of Iran’s preceding monarchy, the Pahlavi regime. The Pahlavis employed the concept of Iranian nationalism as the defining principle of Iranian identity, in addition to the strong cultural influence of the modern West.³ This concept of a nationalistic identity was later replaced with Islam as the primary aspect of Iranian identity under the Islamic movement led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

What made the Islamic movement of Iran under Khomeini more successful than the concept of Iranian heritage and nationalism under the Pahlavi regime? One key factor to this question can be the overwhelming diversity of Iranian ethnic identity of previous years. The involvement of various national and ethnic identities has been a significant factor in daily Iranian life, such as the common use of various ethnic languages such as Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, and Azeri, allowing for an “awareness of multiple perspectives of ethics, politics, and interpretations of the past.”⁴

Additionally, the Islamic Revolution appeared to have much wider appeal, to not just the dominant Shiite population of Iran, but also to the wider Muslim audience, providing a unique aspect of pan-Islamic interests under an open Shiite theocratic movement. This was primarily achieved by extending an open invitation to various Sunni Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood amongst Egypt’s Muslim population, with the core of the pan-Islamic

¹ M.A. Aziz. 2009. “The Origins of Arab Nationalism,” *Pakistan Horizon*, 62.1: p. 60
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24711051>

² Roy E. Thoman. 1972. “Iraq under Baathist Rule,” *Current History*, 62.365: p. 31
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/45312599>

³ Kamran Scot Aghaie. 2004. *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi’I Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press), p. 47

⁴ Dale F. Eickelman, James Piscatori. 2004. *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 29

ideology being a unifying factor. This is further illustrated by the unique following of Sayyid Qutb in Iran, with his works being translated into Farsi and widely spread throughout, although Qutb's brand of Sunni Islamic interpretation was different from the overwhelming Shiite sympathies in Iran.⁵

Even after the successful takeover of the Shiite clergy in Iran toppling the Pahlavi regime, the concept of pan-Islamism didn't waver, even prompting internal ritualistic change within Iran. For example, various forms of self-flagellation are a common feature (including in contemporary Shiite communities) during the month of *Moharram*, in which the Shiites mourn the death of the 3rd Shiite Imam, Husayn ibn Ali. Keeping in mind the international image of Iran, including that of non-Shiite Muslims outside Iran, Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamenei banned the practice in 1994 declaring it "wrong and unIslamic."⁶ Another evidence of this sentiment of a pan-Islamic portrayal includes Iran's unwavering support to predominately Sunni Palestine, including providing financial assistance to the Palestinian militant organization, Hamas, ranging from \$20 million to \$50 million between 1990 to 2000.⁷

Part II.

A significant aspect of the success of the Islamic movement in Iran includes the employment of Islamic, specifically Shiite, rituals and symbols against the Pahlavi regime and the West (in this case the United States, the United Kingdom) and Israel. This also prompted the political leadership of neighboring Iraq to employ religious symbolism for its own political purpose. When analyzing Iraq, under the secular leadership of dictator Saddam Hussein, there are various instances of religious symbolism used to garner a sympathetic Islamic sentiment. When facing opposition from Shiite factions of Iraq (with the Shiites also being an overwhelming majority) and undoubtedly factoring in the recent events of Iran's revolution, there was the dissemination of portraits of Hussein riding a white stallion. This symbolic portrait

⁵ Shadi Hamid, Sharan Grewal. 2019. "What Iran's 1979 Revolution Meant for the Muslim Brotherhood," *Brookings Institution* <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/24/what-irans-1979-revolution-meant-for-the-muslim-brotherhood/>

⁶ Aghaie, p. 53

⁷ Daniel Levin. 2018. "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad," *United States Institute of Peace* <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2018/jul/09/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>

of a white stallion is often associated with the symbolic image of the Shiite Imam, Husayn ibn Ali, believed to have had a white stallion during his martyrdom.⁸ Although a committed nationalist, secular Baathist, Hussein nevertheless attempted to employ Shiite symbolism for political sympathy, possibly to appease potential Shiite dissenters, although the attempt was futile.

When analyzing the Iranian Shiite resistance to the Pahlavi regime, direct use of rituals and symbols was used to portray a specific narrative. In 1963 during the *Moharram* rituals in Iran, Khomeini instructed the clergy to “change their sermons to antigovernment themes” during the peak times of the *Moharram* speeches.⁹ Although non-political themes, such as communal solidarity and ethics were often relayed, there were also direct political admonishments directed at the Pahlavi regime, often equating the regime to the tyranny of the 2nd Umayyad Caliph, Yazid I, vilified by the Shiites for his killing of Imam Husayn.¹⁰ The thematic religious nature of the *Moharram* rituals by the Iranian clergy proved to be of key importance to gaining widespread sympathy leading to the toppling of the Pahlavi regime.

Interestingly, Mohammed Reza Shah also attempted to employ religious themes to counter the narrative against his declining regime. Shah made publicized visits to sites of religious importance, including the holy cities of Mecca, Medina, and the more Shiite-centric cities of Qom and Karbala, portraying himself to being a believing and devout Muslim.¹¹ However, this was a futile attempt by the Shah. Along with his enforcement of limiting religious practices in public, the overall image of the regime including that of his father, Reza Shah, was hostile to the public portrayal of Islamic identity. The enforcements of the Pahlavi regime included the ban of Islamic attires like the *hijab*, along with the banning of the *Moharram* processions in the 1930s, which were often implemented with violence.¹² The attempt of employing Islamic themes and symbols by Mohammed Reza Shah as a practicing Muslim did not gain much traction and if anything gave an image of political hypocrisy.

It is also important to signify the limitations of Iranian nationalism proposed by the leaders of the Pahlavi regime. In many instances, the Pahlavi regime limited, and strictly

⁸ Eickelman, p. 64

⁹ Aghaie, p. 79

¹⁰ Aghaie, p. 73

¹¹ Aghaie, p. 53

¹² Aghaie, p. 52

enforced public declarations of religion, which often had roots in Iranian culture, proposing Iranian nationalism as the primary form of identity. Yet, their brand of Iranian nationalism seemed contrary to its implementation, primarily in the strong western modernization aspects of the regime. This brand of Iranian nationalism seemed perverted by western domination, and not inherently indigenous to Iran paving the way for an alternate movement.¹³

Significantly, a key factor in the success of the Iranian clergy's use of religious symbolism and rituals included its grassroots impact on Iranian society. Where the Pahlavi regime limited the *Moharram* gatherings, the Shiite clergy used these rituals for their political gain, reaching multiple segments of Iranian society. Along with the successful use of religious rituals and symbols, religious organizations were also held in a positive light by various segments of Iranian society. These organizations provided services to common Iranians, such as community centers and charitable organizations.¹⁴ Therefore, the wider theocratic element of Iran was providing a sense of communal solidarity and social services for diverse factions, often neglected by the ruling establishment of the Pahlavi regime.

Conclusion:

It is difficult to ignore the various elements successfully employed by the Shiite theocracy in Iran to topple the secular, nationalist, and Western-oriented Pahlavi regime. Utilizing Islamic, primarily Shiite, ritualistic, and symbolic elements heavily favored the theocratic Iranian Revolution. This was quite distinct from the varieties of nationalistic movements and sentiments occurring in the wider regional political environment, such as the Baathist movements in the Middle East. The pan-Islamic message of the Iranian Revolution held significance during its inception and continues to be a critical factor in global politics, as illustrated by Iran's open support for the Palestinian Sunni-Islamist group, Hamas.

The success of the Iranian Revolution continues to have immense significance throughout various Muslim societies, including but not limited to the framework of contemporary Islamic politics and authority. Later events, such as the invasion of Iraq and the eventual overthrow of

¹³ Nikki R. Keddie. 1983. "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective," *The American Historical Review*, 88.3: p. 594 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1864588>

¹⁴ Aghaie, p. 82

the dictator, Saddam Hussein, left the overwhelming Shiite majority of Iraq available for Iranian religious and political influence. These factors are significant in understanding the contemporary tensions between Iran and western powers, primarily the United States and the United Kingdom in the understanding of global affairs, as well as the issues associated with the precarious nature of Islamic authority.

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