

# **Ayatollah Khomeini: A Rare Encounter With a True Revolutionary**

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Exactly 35 years ago, I had the experience of a lengthy meeting with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in his tent where he received visitors in the Paris suburb of Neuville-le-Chateau. It was on the day preceding his triumphal return to Iran after almost 14 years of exile, mostly spent in Najaf, Iraq. I was returning to the United States after spending two weeks in Iran during the turbulent final stage of the revolution that was on the verge of victory. My presence in Iran was in response to an invitation from Mehdi Bazargan, soon to become interim president of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

I was accompanied by Ramsey Clark the former US Attorney General, and still a prominent political figure in the country, and Philip Luce, a highly respected leader of a religious NGO who had distinguished himself by much publicised nonviolent civil initiatives of opposition to the Vietnam War. At the time, I was chair of a small American committee opposed to American intervention in Iran, and it was the activities of this group that, I assume, led to the invitation to get a first-hand look at the revolution.

We met with a wide spectrum of Iranian religious and secular personalities, including the Shah's last prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar, and the notorious counter-insurgency diplomat, William Sullivan, who was appropriately the final American ambassador to Iran.

While we were in Iran, the Shah left the country signaling the end of his monarchy, which occasioned at the time the largest mass display of joy that I have ever witnessed, with millions peacefully marching on the streets of Tehran in a festive mood.

## **The future Khomeini envisioned**

Leaving such a scene, and having the opportunity to meet with Ayatollah

Khomeini climaxed this experience of touching the live tissue of revolution. In Iran, with crowds chanting his name and carrying posters bearing his image, it was clear he was the iconic inspiration of the revolution that had somehow managed to overthrow one of the strongest and most oppressive regimes in the world.

We had little sense, however, of the sort of future Khomeini envisioned for himself or what his hopes were for the revolution. What was obvious from the moment we were seated cross-legged on the ground within his tent was the strength of his arresting presence, especially his shining eyes that seemed almost black.

What struck us immediately was his active mind and sharp intelligence. He wanted to know what we thought were American intentions now that the Shah was gone, and whether the United States was ready to respect the outcome of Iran's revolution. In turn, we asked about his hopes for the "Iranian Revolution". His response fascinates me to this day.

First of all, he immediately corrected us forcefully pointing out that what had just been completed was "an Islamic Revolution", that is, asserting as primary an identity associated with religious and cultural affinities rather than emphasising the nationalist agenda of regime change that was the common way of interpreting what had happened in Iran.

Khomeini went on to say that the importance of the unfolding of events in Iran related to the entire region. Prefiguring the future tensions in the region, Khomeini spoke disparagingly about the Saudi Arabian dynasty, calling it "decadent" and out of touch with its people.

Khomeini, then, explained his own role in Iran, saying that he entered the political domain because the Shah had "created a river of blood between himself and the people". He added that he was looking forward to "resuming the religious life" upon his return to Iran, and would leave the governing process to others outside of the religious community, but drawn exclusively from the ranks of the religiously oriented supporters of the revolution.

At first, as we know, Khomeini resumed his residence in Qom, a religious city filled with madrasas (or seminaries), but as the new leadership seemed to falter, his political role became more and more pronounced.

By the time of the hostage crisis in late 1979, the radicalisation and

theocratic nature of the new political order became manifest, and Khomeini himself emerged as "the supreme guide", with the elected political leadership discharging the functions of government, but subject to his veto and vision.

There were other important pronouncements made during the meeting. We asked about the fate of minorities, specifically, Jews and Baha'i's, who were seen as aligned with the Shah, and in jeopardy. Khomeini's response was thoughtful, and suggestive of what would follow. He said, "For us, the Jews are an authentic religion of the book, and if they are not too entangled with Israel, they are most welcome in Iran, and it would be a tragedy for us if they left." In contrast, "the Baha'i's are not a genuine religion, and have no place in Iran."

Such attitudes did foreshadow both the hostile confrontation with Israel that intensified over the years, and the discriminatory approach taken toward the Baha'i's that at one stage approached a genocidal threshold. Both minorities felt uncomfortable living in an Islamic theocracy, and if they possessed the resources, mainly emigrated to friendlier national habitats.

### **Nuremberg trials as model**

Khomeini spoke at some length about the crimes of the Shah's government, and the responsibility of its political entourage, suggesting the importance of individual accountability. He mentioned the Nuremberg trials of surviving Nazi political figures and military commanders after World War II as a useful precedent that would underpin the approach taken by the new Iranian leadership toward those who had carried out the repressive policies of the Shah, which included widespread torture and massacres of unarmed demonstrators.

As we know, this Nuremberg path was never taken by the new Iranian rulers. The most prominent members of the inner circle of the Peacock Throne who had not fled the country were summarily executed without either indictments or trials. This was aptly treated by the outside world as an indication that the new governing process in Iran would turn out to be repressive and contemptuous of the rule of law. After the fact, it seemed rather obvious why the regime resorted to rough justice. Many of those who had shaped the revolutionary process had studied in Europe or America, and were recipients of economic assistance from Western governments and

maybe performed political roles.

Remember that during the Cold War era, Islamically oriented groups and individuals were looked upon as valuable allies in the West. This was due in Iran to their deep dislike of Marxism and the Soviet Union. Sullivan informed us during our visit to the American Embassy that Washington had prepared 26 scenarios of potential political dangers for the Shah, and not one of them had posited Islamic opposition as a threat.

Reflecting on this meeting more than three decades ago, several strong impressions remain. First, the almost archetypal reality of Khomeini as the embodiment of an Islamic religious leader, who despite a physical frailness, exhibited great strength of mind and will combined with a demeanor of austere severity.

Secondly, his vision of an Islamic political future that was rooted in religious affinities rather than based on national borders.

Thirdly, the discrepancy between his assertions that upon returning to Iran he would resume the pursuit of his religious vocation and his emergence as the dominating political figure who moved from Qom to Tehran to preside over the drafting of a new theocratic constitution and the formation of the government.

I have thought often, especially about this last observation, and discussed its core mystery with friends. This remains my question: Did Khomeini change the conception of his role upon returning to Iran, or did he hide from us either consciously or unconsciously his real game plan?

As far as I know, no one has provided a credible explanation. It may be that Khomeini during his long exile underestimated his popularity in Iran, which he reassessed after receiving such a tumultuous welcome when he returned or that he found that the liberal Islamists (such as Bani Sadr, Bazargan, Ghotbzadeh) he was relying upon to manage the government were not committed to the kind of revolutionary future that he believed to be mandated by the Iranian people.

Or, upon his return he was pushed by other imams "to save the revolution" from this first wave of post-Shah politicians who had mainly lived in the West and were not trusted in Iran. However such issues are resolved, it is clear that the Islamic Republic that emerged in Iran resembled the kind of

ideal design of Islamic government that Khomeini had depicted in a series of lectures on "Islamic Government", which was published in 1970.

There is one further reflection that bears on the present course of events in the Middle East in this period, three years after the Arab Spring. Khomeini by insisting on all or nothing in the struggle against the Shah did create a transformative moment in which an Iranian transition to a truly new political order took place.

In contrast the 2011 militants in Tahrir Square were content with the removal of the despotic leader and some soft promises of democratic reforms, and ended up succumbing to a counter-revolutionary tsunami that has reconstituted the repressive Mubarak past in a more extreme form. This does not imply that what has unfolded in Iran was beneficial, only that it was a decisive break with the past, and in this crucial sense, "revolutionary".

In this respect, Ayatollah Khomeini was a true revolutionary even if his goal was to turn the clock back when it came to modernity, including secular values.