

## Associate Paper

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### **The Political Legacy of the Iranian Revolution: Theocratic Tyranny and Religious Terrorism**

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#### **Key Points**

- A major objective of Khomeini's revolution was to create a pan-Islamic state for all Muslims.
- That objective was to be exported to all Muslim countries, by revolution if necessary.
- That objective was partly responsible for the rise in Islamist violence and religious terrorism.
- Ordinary Iranians who suffer under economic sanctions levied on their country because of the actions of the hard-line clerics, however, reject that initiative.
- That has led to the major decision that the theocracy in Iran faces: does it continue to export the revolution or does it focus on sustaining the regime?

#### **Summary**

In early February of this year, the regime in Teheran celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the 1979 revolution that overthrew the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and brought to power a theocratic regime led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The sad reality is that most Iranians have very little to rejoice about today, struggling under a ruthless government and an ailing economy, which is, in turn, the result of corruption, mismanagement and biting international sanctions that have been levied on Iran in response to its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Noting the anniversary, experts engaged in a debate about the legacy of that revolution, including its impact on Islamic political thought. FDI Senior Visiting Fellow, Dr. Emile

Nakhleh, [explained](#) how the Iranian revolution ‘advanced the notion of Islamic activism as a potential force in governance by showing that participating in elections and governing (within limits), did not violate God’s rule’.

### Analysis

The 1979 revolution manifested Khomeini’s radical rewriting of Shi’ite theology into a model for political governance, which has indeed inspired many religious forces across the Middle East and beyond to jump into the mainstream political pool.

At the same time, the legacy of that revolution is much broader, and is not limited to Islamic activism within current regimes of governance or participation in existing political systems. Instead, Khomeini’s theory-turned-practice in Teheran is more about the goals than the methods of Islamic political activism - with participation in elections alongside other political forces being frequently seen as a small, sometimes even insignificant, step on the road to a universal Islamic theocratic state ruled by *Sharia* (Islamic law). Khomeini’s version of this vision is the *Welayat-el Faqih*, the "Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist" (or clerical authority), whereby religious experts are the final arbitrators on all of the state’s activities.

Khomeini did not invent pan-Islamism, a political ideology advocating the unity of Muslims under one Islamic state. He followed in the footsteps of thinkers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Abul Ala Maududi and the Egyptian ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb. The Islamic state they advocated was not a futuristic dream, but rather a religious duty that should actively be pursued every day by every Muslim. It is also to be a global political entity, which disregards both national borders and ethnic and geographic boundaries.

As early as 1970, Khomeini strongly asserted that it is the duty of all Muslims ‘to establish an Islamic government’, and that the only legitimate rulers are Muslim clergy, who would establish a universally just government.

The centrality of pan-Islamism in Khomeinism left a huge legacy in political thought in two arenas – internal and external. Internally, it advocates cruel suppression of dissidents, since any opinion not in line with “the revolution” may delay or endanger the establishment of a fully Islamic state within Iran. This idea of clamping down on dissidents to protect clerical rule strays far from the pluralism of thought that has been a major feature of Islam.

Externally, Khomeinism has aspired to “export the revolution” by all means available: peacefully and forcefully, using soft power (money, social and cultural ventures, etc.) and hard power (terror and war). This zealous ideology has created what [Mosa Zahed](#) labelled “religious terrorism” and its sour fruits were suicide bombers and contempt for the sanctity of human life.

It is no accident that suicide bombing, now a widespread tactic among militant Islamist groups, originated in the modern Middle East with Shi’ite Hezbollah, a Lebanese militant

proxy of Iran, armed, trained and commanded by Iranians, and zealously devoted to Khomeini's theocratic vision.

### **Internal Legacy - Theocratic Tyranny**

From his early days as a clergyman contemplating Islamic jurisprudence, Khomeini's vision of Islamic political activism was tainted with blood. In his 1943 book, *Kashf al-Asrar (Unveiling of the Secrets)*, Khomeini rejected Western values of democracy and human rights as blasphemy, in direct violation of true Islamic norms. By staying away from God, the offenders, Khomeini determined, would lead to a weakened Islamic nation submissive to external foreign domination. Hence, a real Islamic government must "execute" advocates of liberalism in order to protect itself and society.

Contrary to the popular misconception in the West, Khomeini, along with other clergymen, actually applauded the overthrow of nationalist Prime Minister Mossadegh, with the connivance of the British and the Americans, in 1953, because of the latter's attempts at reforms. In the late 1940s and 1950s, Khomeini actively supported the terrorist organisation *Fada'iyān-e Islam* (Devotees of Islam) which was inspired by his writing. The group was responsible for the murders of several leading intellectuals and politicians in Iran between 1946 and 1956. When it was disbanded, Khomeini created his own party, later called Hezbollah (Party of God). This organisation would be the precursor and model for a long list of terrorist organisations and institutions, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah in Lebanon, etc. After seizing power in 1979, many members of Fada'iyān-e Islam became senior officials in Khomeini's government.

Forty years later, Khomeini's concept of the governance by Islamic jurists is still the beating heart of the Islamic Republic. It is reflected in the [Constitution](#) (Articles 5 and 110) and is embedded in the power vested in the hands of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader and Khomeini's chosen successor, and the 12 hardliner members of the Guardianship Council. Both these institutions are final arbitrators with ultimate and undisputed authority to overrule any decision, policy or idea stemming from the government, or the nation. Political opposition against this centralist theocratic tyranny is violently and mercilessly crushed, under the pretext that objecting to the regime is equivalent to heresy.

In the early days of the Islamic Republic former Fada'iyān-e Islam member, Sadegh Khalkhali, was notorious as "the butcher of the revolution". As the head of the revolutionary courts, he sent thousands of Iranians to the gallows with no fair trial, no due process and without upholding basic legal rights. Four decades have passed and nothing has changed. Under "moderate" current President Hassan Rouhani, the number of [executions](#) in Iran remains among the highest in the world. According to [Amnesty](#), the human rights situation in Iran continues to "severely" deteriorate, with widespread torture, unfair trials and cruel crackdowns on religious minorities and political dissidents.

And there is little hope for a change. In early March, hard-line cleric [Ebrahim Raeesi](#) officially became Iran's Judiciary Chief, and shortly after was nominated to the powerful role of [deputy chief of the Assembly of Experts](#). Raeesi was personally selected for that position by Supreme Leader Khamenei. He was one of the judges who sentenced thousands of political

prisoners to death in Iran in 1988, and may now be being singled out as the heir to Khamenei.

### **External Legacy – Religious Terrorism**

Khomeini saw all nationalism as a foreign “imperialistic conspiracy” to weaken Islam. Seizing power in Teheran was, in his view, a first step towards “a complete Islamic revolution” that should be exported from Iran, “Um al-Qura” (the mother of all cities – also a name for Mecca), to create a unified and powerful Islamic entity. Yet, in practice, the real aim of this campaign is to extend Shi’ite influence to counter Sunni hegemony within the Islamic arena.

Under Khomeini, Iran enacted political pan-Islamism into the pillars of the state. Directly rejecting the idea of territorial sovereignty of other Muslim countries, Article 11 of the [Constitution](#) stipulates that:

all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran have the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world.

Spearheading the campaign to export the revolution is the IRGC – an ideologically infused armed force which amounts to “a state within a state”. This force is directly under the supreme leader’s command and, in return, he makes sure the IRGC is in control of major and critical parts of Iran’s economy. The IRGC’s paramilitary volunteer unit, the Basiji, violently represses dissidents at home, while the Al-Quds force is in the forefront of spreading “the revolution” outside Iran, using terror and subversion.

To advance its goals of enforcing terror internally and exporting the revolution externally, Khomeinism constructed a martyrdom culture based on a dangerous interpretation of Shi’ite beliefs. The symbolism of *Ashura* (the day of remembrance), where Shi’ites mourn the martyrdom of Hussein Ibn Ali in 680 AD at the battle of Karbala, was re-packaged to advance the horrific idea that death is to be aspired to because martyrdom for Allah would absolve all earthly sins, granting a key to heaven. The first result of promoting this doctrine in the media, in speeches, in mosques and even in schools, saw children as young as 12 years old recruited to the Basiji, who were then sent to die clearing mine fields during the war with Iraq in the 1980s. Since then, suicide bombing and self-sacrifice as a *modus operandi* became commonplace among terrorist organisations inspired, trained or funded by Iran. The first case outside Iran was the December 1981 attack on Iraq’s embassy in Beirut, and from that point onward it was (and still is) practiced by Iran’s Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, Al-Qaida and ISIS, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the like.

### **Exporting the Revolution vs. Sustaining the Regime**

Pan-Islamism poses a crucial problem to the Iranian regime, however. Religious utopia aside, even Khomeini was clear-cut about what is more important, ruling in 1988 that Iranian national interests transcend revolutionary ideology. This question has since been a core debate in Teheran, between what people mistakenly called “moderates” and “hardliners”.

Iranian politics expert, [David Menashri](#), explains that while the opposition is made up of all groups who want to topple the theocratic regime, there are three conservative camps inside the regime: traditionalists, who follow Khamenei and whose main goal is regime preservation; pragmatists, who prefer reforms which would enable Iran to re-engage with the world while entrenching the regime for the long term; and the radicals, separatists who reject the existing world order and are determined to destabilise it forcefully, led by the IRGC and their supporters.

The pragmatist President Hassan Rouhani was able to form a coalition with the traditional clergy in 2015 and sign the nuclear deal with the West (the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action or JCPOA). Iran's aggressive and subversive activities outside its borders – in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen – are conducted and managed by the radicals' IRGC, and supported by the radical camp because they serve the goal of exporting the revolution. Opposition protesters in Iran shout '[Death to Palestine](#)' and '[Not Gaza, Not Lebanon, I Give My Life for Iran](#)', demanding the interests and welfare of the Iranian people be the first priority, before efforts to export the revolution.

By withdrawing last year from the JCPOA, US President Donald Trump stopped the lifeline of free money to the regime which was part of that deal. Instead, new and tougher sanctions now imposed on Teheran stifle vital financial sources needed to sustain the regime. As a result, the key dilemma which has dogged the Iranian revolution since 1979 is highlighted yet again - what is more important, exporting the revolution or sustaining the regime?

Protesting for many months now, the people of Iran have already answered this question: they want neither. Rather, they seek a new Iran, one that is not based on the destructive legacy of Khomeini's revolution on Islamic political thought.

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