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THE NATURE AND FUTURE OF SHI'ITE FUNDAMENTALISM

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) The purpose of this paper is to study the major dissenting sect of Islam called Shi'ism, which comprises about one tenth of all Moslems. The Shi'ite community is of substantial interest to the West because of its apparent propensity for radical militant fundamentalism, which reached its zenith in 1979 with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran. The paper examines the crucial differences in belief between Shias and most other Moslems, and traces how the sect has followed a unique and sometimes violent path towards the unattained utopian goal of a supra-national		

Islamic state.

The paper concludes with a forecast for the future, which suggests that although the appeal of Shi'ism has been recently degraded by war and privation, the root causes of militant radicalism remain. After a pause to shore up the faith's economic, military and political position, further extreme manifestations of Shi'ite fundamentalist activism are likely to occur.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
CHAPTER I. THE BIRTH OF ISLAM.....	1
Background on Islam.....	2
Pillars of Islam.....	3
Hadith.....	4
Sharia.....	5
Descendants of the Prophet.....	6
Schism.....	6
II. THE SEPARATE PATH.....	10
Shi'ism.....	11
Golden age.....	12
Hidden Imam.....	13
Shadow of God.....	14
Power without responsibility.....	15
III. THE CHALLENGE OF THE WEST.....	19
Moslem weakness.....	20
Factionalism.....	21
Appeal of Islam.....	23
Nature of fundamentalism.....	23
IV. THE NEW HASHISHIN.....	28
New Jihad.....	29
Moslem Brotherhood.....	31
Shi'ism in Persia.....	34
V. THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC.....	38
Ayatollah Khomeini.....	39
Rule of the Jurisprudent.....	40
Export of Islamisation.....	42
Iraq invades Iran.....	43
VI. WHITHER SHI'ITE FUNDAMENTALISM?.....	47
New regime in Iran.....	48
Gods or butter?.....	49
The pressure of the past.....	50
Resurrection of Khomeini.....	51
The one true faith.....	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	55

THE NATURE AND FUTURE OF SHI'ITE FUNDAMENTALISM

CHAPTER 1

THE BIRTH OF ISLAM

"Allah is great; there is no God but Allah; Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah; and 'Ali is His chosen friend."

Until twenty years ago, relatively little was known in the West about Islam. It existed somewhere in the Middle East, and was associated with Mohammed, and pilgrimage to Mecca, and curious prayers at odd times of the day - but until the Arab oil embargo in 1973 it is probably true to say that Moslems impinged very little upon Western consciousness. Once Arabs began to flex political and financial muscle, however, there was a quickening of academic interest in the 'new' phenomenon. But it was only when the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic took shape in Iran that the outside world began to appreciate that there are many forms of Islam, some of which possess a surprising power and potential. In the last ten years there has been a burst of new scholarship about the Moslem world's apparent propensity for 'mindless violence', but much writing has been sensational, and the nature of Islam is still not widely understood.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the major dissenting sect of Islam, known as Shi'ism, from its conception in the civil war which followed the death of the Prophet

Mohammed, up until the present day. Shi'ites presently appear to Western observers to possess a particular affinity for terrorism and insurrection, and the term 'fundamentalism' is often associated with such actions. This paper aims to explain what motivates fundamentalists, and what part Islam plays in inspiring its followers towards achieving their ends through activist violence. The paper will describe the historical pressures which have shaped Shi'ism, and conclude with a forecast for its future development.

Background on Islam

Islam is the youngest and most virile of the major world religions; beneath its banners march six hundred million souls. Of these, nine tenths are Sunni; believers in a faith which sets out a 'correct' way of life, in a manner which is not very different to the teachings of Christianity. But the followers of 'Ali, known as Shi'ites, form the major dissenting sect of Islam, both in politics and religion. It is these people who mostly represent the vanguard of Islamic militant radicalism today, and it is the study of their beliefs, methods, aspirations and intentions which forms the content of this paper.

Born nearly six hundred years after the death of Christ, the prophet Mohammed lived his early life in Mecca, a town already familiar to several pagan tribes as a place of pilgrimage. His parents having died when he was a small child, he was raised by his uncle, Abu Talib, and became a camel trader,

employed by a wealthy widow named Khadija, whom he subsequently married. When he was about forty years of age, the angel Gabriel first appeared to him, and thereafter revealed to him at various times and places what Moslems revere as literally the word of God. During such revelations Mohammed lay in a trance, his utterances being transcribed by his companions and later recorded as the Surahs, or chapters, of the Holy Quran. These sayings were all recorded in writing during the lifetime of the Prophet, and after his death collected by one of his close companions and compiled in the present form of the holy book. They are thus accepted as authoritative, and the Quran forms the most important part of the "Sunna", the path which all Moslems must follow.

Pillars of Islam

The Quran lays down the fundamental tenets of Islam, known as the 'Five Pillars', which are accepted unequivocally by all Moslems. These are -

The 'Shahadah'; the affirmation that there is no God but Allah, and that Mohammed is his Prophet.

The 'Salah'; the five daily ritual prayers.

The 'Zakah'; the giving of alms to the poor.

'Sawm'; fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

The 'Hajj', the pilgrimage to Mecca, to be performed once in a lifetime by those physically and financially able to do so.

Of these pillars, the first is quite essential and the second is nearly as important. Some Moslems profess a sixth

pillar, 'Jihad'; the obligation to take part in holy war, but this is not universally accepted [1].

Hadith

Another part of the 'Sunna' is called the 'Hadith'; the record of the Prophet's own deeds and words, as opposed to those words which were revealed to him by the angel. This is not as authoritative as the Quran, as it initially consisted of an exhaustive compilation of the memories of those who had known Mohammed, or knew others who had known him, sometimes several times removed from the original source. Consequently opinions differed about the accuracy of records which were to a great extent based on ancestral memories, orally transmitted. The work of writing down the Hadith did not begin until some fifty years after the death of the Prophet, and two hundred years later they had grown in haphazard fashion to comprise more than half a million anecdotes. In about the year 900 they were the subject of much revision and re-interpretation by religious scholars, until six much-pruned versions were finally compiled by contemporary Islamic jurists like al-Bukhari, Muslim and Ibn al-Hajjaj [2]. Their anthologies of the 'Hadith' became accepted by different schools of Islam according to geographic area; they vary in interpretation between the Hanafite school in Turkey, which is the least rigid, and the ultra-orthodox Hanbalis of Saudi Arabia [3].

In some schools the Hadith about Mohammed have been joined by similar anecdotes pertaining to the Imams who followed him, but Islamic scholars also disagree about the authenticity of these subsequent religious leaders. During the first few years following the Prophet's death the original purity and clarity of his message had thus become distorted, and inter-factional strife was and is nourished on the different perceptions of the 'Sunna'.

The doctrine of Islam stems from several different sources, which include the Quran, the Hadiths, and the canonical law known as 'Sharia'. The first is much the most important, for it reveals the word of Allah himself; but, like the holy books of other major religions, it may seem ambiguous and its verses may be mutually contradictory, especially when read out of context. The Hadiths can be similarly criticised - but, taken together, the Quran and the Hadiths form a code of religious belief which sets out the correct path - the Sunna - for the Moslem community.

Sharia

The Sharia, however, has been devised by ordinary mortals, and is an attempt to translate the Sunna into a rule of law; but this too has suffered from human frailty [4]. The application of Sharia law exclusively as set out in the Quran and Hadiths is not possible today without a compromising addition of modern ideas and precepts, and only in a few countries is it now the dominant legal system. There are groups of religious authorities, the 'Ulema', who are men versed in theology, tradition and other

religious sciences; [5] they are mostly laymen, who teach and guide the faithful in the way of the Sunna. The 'Ulema' regulate and interpret the Sharia law according to the four orthodox schools on behalf of the Islamic community, but they themselves disagree, and Moslems of one school will not necessarily accept the authority of another. Both the law and the Hadith remain divisive between different sects of Moslems in content and in application, which has major ramifications for the political development of the Islamic world; the roots of this division spring from the very loins of the Prophet.

Descendants of the Prophet

Mohammed's first wife, Khadija, was some years older than the Prophet, but she bore him six children, four of whom survived. Their daughter Fatima is the most famous, for she married 'Ali, the son of his uncle Abu Talib, who had been the young Mohammed's guardian. 'Ali was thus not only the Prophet's son-in-law, but also his first cousin, who had known him intimately all his life. Both he and his sons Hasan and Huseyn could therefore claim patrilineal descent from the Prophet.

Schism

When Mohammed died in the year 632 he was followed by several politico-religious rulers or caliphs. They were chosen by the people of the Sunna and drew authority from their

association with the Prophet, but different factions disputed their power over the early Moslem community. When the third caliph was murdered in 656 'Ali was nominated as his successor but he never received the allegiance of all Moslems, and was forced to wage increasingly unsuccessful civil wars; his followers being known as the "Shi'at 'Ali", or party of 'Ali. From a political faction this steadily developed into the religious movement of Shi'ism, which further splintered in later years to form a number of important sects to which the general term Shi'ite is applied. These various groups will be discussed in a later chapter.

'Ali was assassinated in 661 while at prayer, and is believed to have been buried near the town of Kufa in Iraq; now a major place of pilgrimage for Shi'ites. The people of the Sunna thereafter elected his chief opponent as their next caliph, but the Shi'at 'Ali supported the rival claim of Ali's sons, and chose Hasan as their imam. The schism between Sunnis and Shi'ites was thus established, and grew bitter; Hasan was poisoned in 671 by the rival caliph. The title of Shi'a Imam passed to Huseyn, who was forced to fight for his birthright against the usurping Sunnis. He was not successful, and in 680 his outnumbered force was slaughtered in battle near Kerbala in Iraq. Huseyn's head was cut off and taken to his opponent [who allegedly belaboured it with a stick in an effort to stop it from reciting the Quran.] His body was buried at Kerbala and his tomb is now one of the most important Shi'ite shrines.[6]

That these two grandsons of Mohammed were thus killed by other followers of the Prophet remains the primary cause of the religious divide. Shias perform the pilgrimage to Mecca as prescribed in the Quran, but their most fervent demonstrations of religious belief occur at the tombs of 'Ali and his sons, who are venerated as martyrs. The anniversary of the death of Imam Huseyn on the tenth day of the month of Moharram is commemorated in an emotionally highly-charged manner on 'Ashura', when groups of Shi'ites mourn the death of Huseyn and share his pain in various ritual ways. By chanting religious tracts they eventually achieve a state of self-hypnosis, during which they may beat their own chests, slash their heads with swords, and flog themselves with hooked chains; meanwhile condemning the 'guilty' Sunnis. For their part, the Sunnis regard such foreign practices as almost pagan, as worship should be given only to Allah, and not to the tombs of mere men, however holy. Islam accordingly split into its two major sects; the majority Sunnis and the minority Shias, and the trauma of this schism had an effect which has shaped Shi'ite mores to this day [7].

Notes

1. C.Glasse; The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1988.
2. G.H.Jansen; Militant Islam, Harper Colophon Books, New York 1979.
3. Ibid.
4. T.W.Lippman; Understanding Islam, New American Library, New York 1982.
5. Philip.K.Hitti; Islam and the West, Van Nostrand Company, Toronto 1962.
6. H.Munson; Islam and Revolution in the Middle East, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
7. Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

THE SEPARATE PATH

Islam has a common root in the Quran and the life of the Prophet, but as the faith grew, its branches spread and subdivided. The death of Mohammed brought about a religious and political crisis, which was inadequately resolved by the civil wars fought between his successors. In very general terms, the Sunnis emerged as the winners. Their Caliphs were victorious in the struggle with the followers of 'Ali, and for the next thirteen hundred years, theirs was the pre-eminent branch of the faith which has continued to attract new adherents from many parts of the world. Although much mythology surrounds the spectacular early spread of Islam, which Christians depict as a warrior creed enforced by the 'jihad', or holy war, the Sunni faith is in fact a tolerant, attractive and practical code of living which owes its continued success to its central theme of redemption for the righteous; a message not very different from Christianity. Indeed it is important to remember that Moslems agree with Christian and Jewish concepts of the creation of the heavens and the earth, as revealed by God to his emissaries, who include Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Moslems regard the sacred books of Judaism and Christianity as incomplete versions of God's

revelations, whereas the Quran is revered as the literal and perfect transcript of God's message, dictated to the latest and greatest Prophet, Mohammed ¹. The spread of Islam owed more to its appeal as a civilised system of government [with tax reliefs for true believers] than to the popular concept of an irresistible army of banner-waving fanatics ². In addition to the 'Five Pillars' of the Moslem faith, the Quran and the Hadith lay down strictures concerning commerce, the family and society which together give rise to the common observation;

"Islam is more than a religion, it is a way of life."³

Because of this, although it has suffered from reverses and excesses it has worn well with the years; it offers a practical source of direction and comfort that appeals to ordinary folk. In this it is not dissimilar to Christianity in promising the hope of a bright hereafter, particularly to those whose life on this earth is one of unremitting trouble and toil.

Shi'ism

But this passive, almost Western approach to religion is not such a significant aspect of the Shi'ite movement. Schooled excessively and repetitively in suffering, martyrdom, defeat and persecution, the followers of 'Ali include Islam's hungry underdogs, whose turbulent past dictates a militant radical

stance as the only way toward a glorious future. While in very general terms Sunnis may cherish popular fatalism, Shi'ites are more likely to embrace radical activism; they stress the need to create a single Islamic state to govern the whole world. From a fundamentalist perspective;

"They are the slaves of God engaged in a holy war against the slaves of Satan, the latter including all those Muslims who do not interpret Islam as they do."⁴

In order to appreciate how this militant fundamentalism appeals to some Shi'ites it is again necessary to delve into the early sacred history of Islam after the murder of 'Ali and his sons.

Golden age

Despite their defeat and the killing of their champions, Shi'ites did not accept the Sunni caliphs as their religious leaders. For Sunnis, the golden age of Islam was the period of the Prophet's life, plus that of the four Caliphs who succeeded him. Thereafter Sunnis have continued to choose religious leaders irrespective of their patrilineal descent from the Prophet, as they accord them no quasi-divine right. Sunnis adhere to principles rather than personalities, and are fortified in this

philosophy by the fact that Mohammed left no son; they uphold the right of the Moslem community to select their own holy men.

For Shi'ites, only the fourth Caliph, 'Ali, was a fitting successor to Mohammed. He was the Prophet's son-in-law and father of his famous grandsons, and Shi'ites also quote the eighth Surah of the Quran as authority for their claim that Ali was designated by Mohammed himself. (The Prophet is alleged to have said; "He for whom I was the master should hence have 'Ali as his master," and verse 8:75 records that among "those who are akin, some must be prior to others.")⁵ All other Caliphs were regarded as Sunni-appointed usurpers, some of whom were damned as idolatrous.

Hidden Imam

Shi'ites believe that the leaders of Islam must be as pure and sinless as either Mohammed or his family, and none other is capable of leading the community or of interpreting the Quran and the Hadiths. They therefore continued to choose Imams, or spiritual leaders, who were in some way related to the Prophet; but the line of 'Ali probably died out with the eleventh generation in about the year 870. Since Shi'ites consider it inconceivable that Allah would allow his line of chosen Imams to simply disappear, they cling to the belief that one of the last pure Imams vanished into a cave and has remained hidden for the last thousand years, and will one day return to claim his inheritance.

Most Shi'ites hold that it was the Twelfth Imam who vanished, and are therefore correctly known as 'Twelver Shi'ites'. Some believe that it was the Fifth Imam, and a few believe that it was the Seventh Imam, who was the last to be related by blood to the Prophet, and so these sects are respectively known as 'Fivers' or 'Seveners'. The actual coming of this concealed messianic Imam will mark the end of the present age and the beginning of an era of justice, equity and happiness. Meanwhile, God's will on earth must be interpreted for his followers by the foremost religious scholars of their day ⁶.

Shadow of God

This simple belief confers enormous power on senior Shi'ite clerics, for it is most logical that it will be from their ranks that the hidden Imam will appear. In Iran, such a top religious leader is known as an Ayatollah, or Shadow of God, and perhaps a handful of them will eventually attain the rank of Ayatollah Ozma, or Grand Ayatollah. Many Shi'ites believe that these most charismatic and notable religious leaders may in some way serve as the deputies of the messianic Imam. They are known as "Mujtahid", or source of imitation, and since they are regarded as the closest living model of Allah's will on earth, they are blessed with an aura of divinity ⁷. Although the Ayatollah Ozma Ruhollah Khomeini never claimed to be the concealed Imam, (and would have regarded as blasphemous any such belief,) yet many of

his less well-educated followers appeared to regard him as the possible messianic Twelfth Imam.

There is thus a striking difference between the power and prestige of Sunni and Shi'ite clerics. Sunni doctrine stresses that all men are equal before Allah; the 'Ulema' are therefore simply elders of the mosque, whose age, wisdom and religious learning are respected by the community. The business of government is left to others and the Sunni hierarchy seldom becomes actively or dynamically involved in politics. This is not the case in Shi'ite societies, where the 'Ulema' enjoy far greater authority as a result of their connection with a system which may one day produce a messianic Imam.

Power without responsibility

Shi'ite Imams have never been subservient to political authorities, but rather have taken an aloof or critical position with regard to national leaders and the government of the day. The nature of the Shia hierarchy itself ensures that the 'Ulema' maintain close links with the people through the congregation of each mosque; it is thus relatively easy for a senior cleric to mobilize popular support for any cause he may espouse. Such senior religious leaders enjoy power, respect, and excellent access to the masses, without being tied down by any real responsibilities of government⁸. They also possess considerable wealth in land and property through the mosque, which with the collection of tithes or taxes from the

congregation endows them with ample means to be used very much as they see fit.

A further buttress to the power of the top Shi'ite leaders lies in their freedom of movement. Since they do not answer to temporal powers they need not stay in a country which challenges them; the Ayatollah Khomeini, for example, moved when persecuted from Iran to Iraq, and thence to France, without in any way losing his position of authority. Endowed with that quasi-divine aura which Shi'ites accord to their Grand Ayatollahs, he retained an unassailable position among the 'Ulema', who were able to pass on his wishes to the masses. Cassettes of his sermons were clandestinely brought into Iran, and disseminated among the mosques before the revolution.

It is possible to draw a very rough and simplistic parallel between the two branches of Islam and the Catholic and Protestant divide in Christianity, particularly if the simile were to be situated a few hundred years ago. Catholicism's strength among ill educated people was in part due to the discipline and industry of its clergy, who were spread widely among many communities but all answered to one supreme Papal authority. The Protestant faith tended more to pragmatism, accommodation with the monarchy, and a less demanding credo. The parallel is but a poor one, however, and does not explain the Shi'ite belief in the inherent virtue of belonging to an embattled or besieged minority, which contributes to their propensity for militant radicalism so marked today.

The long and often bloody history of the Shi'ite faith has forged a religious system well suited to the toiling underdogs of Islam. Among them and respected by them, aloof from governmental concerns and aspirations, the Shi'ite clerics study piety, poverty, ecclesiastical learning, renunciation and, ultimately, leadership of their followers. They represent an alternative power base in Shi'ite states, and the appeal and prowess of their faith reached a plateau in Iran with the rise to power of the Ayatollah Khomeini ⁹. The political factors which shaped that movement will be examined in a later chapter.

Notes

1. H.Munson; Islam and Revolution in the Middle East, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1988.
2. P.K.Hitti; Islam and the West, Van Nostrand, Toronto 1962.
3. T.W.Lippman; Understanding Islam, New York American Library, New York 1982.
4. H.Munson; Islam and Revolution in the Middle East, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1988.
5. Hamid Enayat; Modern Islamic Political Thought, Texas Press, Austin.
6. Ibid.
7. N.R.Schahgaldian; The Clerical Establishment in Iran, Rand National Defense Research Institute 1989.
8. A.S.Cudsi & A.E.Hillal Dessouki; Islam and Power, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London 1981.
9. Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHALLENGE OF THE WEST

The spectacular advance of Moslem arms during the early centuries of Islam may in part be due to the doctrine of holy war, or 'jihad', which stated that he who fell on the battlefield would gain immediate entry into Paradise. The 'Ulema' have seen merit in supporting this view, which they interpret in religious terms as meaning that conquest simply opened the path for Allah. In fact, the motivation was primarily economic, as the surplus population of a desert peninsula had to seek 'lebensraum' in adjacent lands. It was not Islam, but Arabism, which triumphed; the Arab people fell upon their unsuspecting neighbours as a national movement seeking access to greater material wealth¹. While it was indubitably Islam that bonded the Arabs into one force, and inspired the commanders and troops, the military campaigns were wars of Arab conquest, not of Moslem conversion; and the conquered peoples were not compelled to accept Islam. Moslems generally tolerated diversity, winning converts more from example or for economic reasons than by force².

In the early 1980s it was fashionable to view the advance of Islam as a wave which began with the Prophet's death in the seventh century and that has rolled on ever since. Certainly by

the year 730 Arab armies were masters of a huge area which stretched from the south of France to the river Indus, and their empire included North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, Persia and much of Central Asia ³. But in 732 the Arab advance into Western Europe was halted at the battle of Tours, and ever since then Islam has had to struggle for its survival against the seemingly implacable hostility of the West. The most specific medieval examples of this were the Crusades, first urged by Pope Urban II in 1095, which continued until the thirteenth century, by which time an anti-Moslem tradition was firmly established in Europe.

Moslem weakness

There was no coordinated response to the Crusades by Islam, although if ever there was an occasion when a call to "Jihad" should have been answered by all Moslems, it was when infidel forces arrived on Moslem soil bent on wresting the sacred sites of the Holy Land from Islamic control. No such call to "Jihad" was made, as by then the Caliphate was weak and fragmented, and its jurisprudence was spread over a wide area. Europe declared war against Islam, but the guardianship of the Faith was insufficiently cohesive to resist such a military attack. The Caliphs had abandoned their role of religious exemplars, surrendered themselves to a life of luxury and decadence, and delegated their power to bureaucrats and tax collectors. Islam slipped into a long period of political chaos while, in the name

of Allah, rival empires sprang up in Turkey, North Africa, Oman, Syria and Persia.

This situation remains true today, as, although the faith of the masses outlasts all coups and dynasties, there is no unified Islamic nation and the centre of Moslem civilisation has shifted several times in the last thousand years. Even now, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Libya are waging a contest for supremacy in various fields among the Arabs and perhaps among all Moslems. Iraq claims to be the Arab champion in the age-old struggle against Persian dominance; Syrians wage war against infidels in Lebanon; Egypt's ancient civilization prompts its intention to be the the cultural centre of the Arab world. The Saudis are not only the wealthiest Arabs but also desire theological primacy since they are the de facto guardians of Medina, Mecca and the holy of holies, the Ka'bah Stone itself. Libya's aspirations stem directly from its mercurial and unpredictable ruler, Colonel Qadhafi, who perhaps yearns to lead a repeat of the spectacular advance of Islamic arms in the seventh century.

Factionalism

This inherent situation of domestic and external Arab rivalry tends to favour the growth of small, energetic politico-religious movements, whose compactness makes them more amenable to central control and direction. In relatively recent years the discipline and cohesiveness of Shi'ism has spawned several such

fervent factions, like, for example, the Iranian 'Pasdaran' Revolutionary Guards, or Lebanon's Hezbollah or Amal fighters. These groups of mainly young, poor, and resentful people currently represent the vanguard of the ancient struggle by Islam against what such people perceive as the traditional hegemony of the West. The stark realities of this conflict are described:

"There are only three possible responses that the non-Westerner can make to the challenge of the West; he can join the West by imitating it; he can turn his back on the West, rejecting it and all its works; or he can, most difficult, try to work out a liveable compromise between his own cultural background and set of values, and those of the West." 4

It is not difficult to find unhappy examples of all three responses in Islamic states today. Earlier this century, when Western nations withdrew from their colonies or protectorates, they naturally preferred to pass on power to the indigenous intelligentsia, who then followed the precepts of their mentors. Alternative channels of power like the 'Ulema' were disregarded as anachronistic. In a series of uprisings in some Islamic countries like Egypt, Libya, Lebanon and Iran these post-colonial authorities were overthrown in favour of revolutionary systems of government which appeared to offer more benefits for the common people. In a few other countries, like Oman or North Yemen, traditional rulers attempted to stop the spread of modern ideas

by closing their borders to them, not always with success. Most Islamic countries have tried to feel their way towards some form of harmonious relationship with powerful foreign civilisations, but no one such country has yet devised a truly effective method of accommodation.

Appeal of Islam

It is the pressure engendered by this desperate need to achieve Western-style success without sacrificing national pride or identity which drives young people to turn to Islam for leadership. More than any alternative, the faith gives its followers a source of identity, a feeling of psychological authenticity, and a new corporate bonding, energy, and self-esteem. Furthermore it tends to blend religious belief and strict nationalism into a form of Islamic patriotism, which has as its goal the sort of supra-national pan-Islamic utopian order envisioned in the Quran. This deeply-felt sense that Islam should offer a way forward in the world is not new, and through the centuries there have been many isolated instances of small, fundamentalist religious revolts. but they were generally inchoate, and their success at bringing about a better political order was limited.

Nature of fundamentalism

It is modern communications, and the wealth and power of oil, which have brought about a quantum leap in the appeal and potency of religious fundamentalism. Essentially, fundamentalism means no more than a desire to return to the basic, puritanical foundations of the faith; which has regularly occurred in the Moslem world during times of crisis. There are both passive and active fundamentalists; the former involve themselves deeply in Quranic studies, the mosque, and all aspects of the faith, but take little part in politics. The latter group comprises those who seek actively to spread their beliefs through recruitment, enhanced group consciousness, and political, military or terrorist action.

A rough profile of a modern fundamentalist activist will include at least several of the following attributes. He will probably be young, as youth are particularly susceptible to the total conversion brought about by a new faith. He will also possess the intolerance and idealism of his age group, reinforced by belonging to a conspiracy which is critical of what are perceived as 'illegitimate' established regimes. He will be alienated in some way from society, and perhaps jealous of the material success enjoyed by others - which results typically in suppressed feelings of inferiority. Such feelings are emphasised by a burning resentment of Arab military failure against Israel, and economic failure viz-a-viz the West. All this makes him aggressive, and he may adopt the spartan and self-disciplined lifestyle of his desert forebears, perhaps with a distinctive appearance; beards and traditional dress are favoured. His naive

but utopian aim is to dispossess worldly rulers of their authority and re-establish the dominion of Allah over all mankind.

Rejection of Western values

In the early 1970s the renaissance of Arab self-confidence and cohesion contributed to the steady pressure of militant Islam to take control of the elements of power in Moslem countries, and after so many years of inferiority there is a powerful feeling that Moslems should once again control their own destiny. Their new fervour was inflamed by the bitter rhetoric of such outspoken revisionists as Dr Qureshi, vice chancellor of Karachi University, who accused Westernised elite groups of imposing foreign

"systems of education, economy, social institutions and moves to perpetuate the stranglehold that they have established over the entire area of national life..... in the name of progress, which is identified with Westernisation. The Moslem peoples cannot come into their own until they dethrone these elite groups which are the creators of all their misery and have led their nations into a deep psychosis of an inferiority complex that paralyses their thought and actions alike."

The only hope, he said, was to revive the sense of national identity and the uniqueness of Islam ⁵.

After hundreds of years of poverty, corruption, decline and decay the Arab nations, freed of foreign domination and newly possessed of vast wealth and modern communications, became once more aware of their common cultural heritage. The ideological confrontation with the West, the long history of military hostility and the politics of the post-colonial era combined to strengthen Islam among the faithful masses, not to erode it. The post-war legacy of de-colonialisation was underdevelopment, illiteracy, administrative inefficiency and cultural confusion, but among this chaos the beacon of Islam seemed to shed a steady light on a way to reduce continuing foreign political or economic domination. In despair at what they perceived as the weakness or corruption of their governments, and their rulers' preoccupation with Western materialism or Marxist Godlessness, the young people, especially, rejected the values and mores of foreign civilisations and discovered a renewed identity in Islam for cultural self-defence in an arrogantly competitive world. The time was ripe for new leaders, new struggles, new heroes, and new martyrs.

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CHAPTER 4

THE NEW HASHISHIN

The word 'assassin' is generally applied to a person who murders by treacherous violence; it derives, however, from the arabic term 'hashishin', literally translated as one who smokes hashish. This was originally a name given to the branch of the Ismai'li sect of Shi'ite Moslems founded in 1090 by Hasan ibn al Sabbah, alias the 'Old Man of the Mountain', who had seized the castle of Alamut in a hitherto impregnable valley in Persia. By the end of the 11th century he commanded a network of strongholds all over Persia and Iraq, manned by a growing corps of devoted terrorists who allegedly took hashish to induce ecstatic visions of paradise before setting out to face martyrdom. The Hashishin claimed many victims among the statesmen and generals of the Caliphate, including even some of the Caliphs themselves, and it was not until the Mongols allied themselves with the Mamelukes in 1273 that the castles of the Hashishin, or Assassins, were finally subjugated. Thereafter the sect declined dramatically in importance, but its followers are still to be found in Syria, Iran, and parts of central Asia ¹.

The Old Man of the Mountain was an early Shi'ite practitioner of the successful use of terrorist violence for

political purposes, but it would be wrong to think that such acts were ever the exclusive preserve of Shi'ites, other Moslems, or indeed the Arabs. In fact, the majority of the world's assassins in recent centuries were probably Europeans of Christian confession, and Islamic sects were not especially noted for such proclivities until the twentieth century.

New Jihad

The revival of the appeal of Islamic ideology in the last fifty years brought about a refurbishment of the concept of 'Jihad'. It was clear to Moslems that the old ideal of a Holy War against the infidel was impracticable in the light of Western economic and military supremacy, so modern revolutionary methods had to be employed. The new fundamentalists were no longer dry scholars poring over the Quran by candlelight; they were angry young modernists determined to erase what they perceived as corrupt, repressive, unjust and unrepresentative governments in their own countries.

The new 'Jihad' turned its focus inwards, with the aim of recreating government by Islam in areas where alternative ideologies had failed. Several significant revivalist movements sprang up, notably in Egypt, Iran and Lebanon; and the existing order in many Islamic nations now faces a present threat from terrorism born out of revolutionary fundamentalism.

To date, such dramatic measures to attempt social change have succeeded only in Shi'ite Iran, and in no other Islamic

community. This reflects historical inclination, as Sunnis remain haunted by the trauma of the civil war that split Islam in the mid seventh century, and thereafter they have tended to eschew violence as a legitimate means of achieving political change. Sunnis, as a rule, do not allow religion to intrude itself upon practical considerations, and even their antipathy to Communism has been tempered by pragmatism. Their 'Ulema' traditionally accepted any governing authority provided that it did not directly contravene the tenets of their religious beliefs; their expression of protest is largely intellectual and seldom violent. Moslems hold that it is the duty of every thinking believer to subject his social environment to continuous, searching criticism for the common good, and they draw on many Quranic injunctions to combat evil and stand up for right and justice;

"The highest kind of 'jihad' is to speak up for truth in the face of a government [sultan] that deviates from the right path."

(Hadith of the Prophet, according to Abu Said al Khudri.)

Sunnis do not believe, however, that the peoples' obligation to watch over and criticise the activities of their governments confers upon individuals or small groups the right to rebellion. In the last resort an unsatisfactory regime may be removed only by a clear verdict of the majority, and even then by peaceful means if at all possible ².

Moslem Brotherhood

The Moslem Brotherhood, a classic fundamentalist group founded in 1928 in Sunni Egypt, was an exception; it was built on a foundation of extreme puritanism, xenophobia, and opposition to Western cultural influence. In the words of Hassan al-Banna, the Brotherhood's founder, it stood for;

"Belief in the unity and perfection of the Moslem system, the identification of the state with religion, the execution of the Moslem law, the return to the Quran and the Hadith and no other sources, the refrain from scholastic theology, the opposition to mystic innovations, and the imitation of the early righteous ancestors."

The Brotherhood initially performed many acts of charity and social welfare, but these beneficial deeds were later subordinated to a nationalist terrorist campaign to rid Egypt of secularisation, corruption and foreign influence. By 1940 the brethren numbered some half a million active members, and saw themselves as the vanguard of a revolution which would bring in a new pan-Islamic order. Inevitably they clashed with the Egyptian government, and when they attempted to assassinate Nasser in 1954 he retaliated with such devastating accuracy, hanging or imprisoning Moslem Brotherhood leaders, that the movement never

regained its early impetus, although it has lingered on as a dangerous extremist organisation and has made several comebacks through the years. It achieved a brief respite in the early 1970s, when Anwar Sadat allowed several thousand of its supporters out of prison or back from exile; but it was efficiently proscribed again in 1981, when it attempted to resist Egypt's new foreign policy with Israel.

The initial success of the Brotherhood's campaign stemmed from nationalism cloaked in religion; but when the monarchy and its foreign advisers had been replaced by a nationalist Egyptian government under Nasser, their message was robbed of much of its seductive and incendiary appeal. Nasser himself possessed enough personal charisma to challenge the Brotherhood, which drew much of its strength from businessmen, professionals and university students, but lacked mass support. It suffered from recurring and ultimately fatal conflict with powerful groups like Nasserites and senior military officers.

Other activist groups

The same criticism applied to several later activist groups in Egypt, which included The Islamic Liberation Organisation, The Society of Moslems, and 'Al Jihad' (an offshoot of the brethren, which assassinated Anwar Sadat in 1981) ³. Significantly, the 'Ulema' nearly always supported the established government against the Moslem Brotherhood or other militants, who never quite succeeded in rallying the tolerant Sunni people of Egypt to

their cause ⁴. The militants' enduring legacy is the well-publicised zeal with which most Sunni rulers now adopt the trappings of devotion to Allah; an essential defence against fundamentalist criticism that their regimes might be un-Islamic, and therefore illegitimate.

By contrast, the Shias have tended to nourish grievances against the authorities, and their position as a persecuted minority has made them suspicious of, and hostile to, outsiders. The particularly Sunni virtues of breadth of vision, tolerance and self assurance tend to be replaced in Shi'ite societies by an element of shrill and discordant hysteria, exemplified by the Ayatollah Khomeini's condemnation of Iraq's Saddam Hussein as "a devil" and the USA as "The Great Satan." Historically, the Shia see established civil governments as 'de facto' usurpers of the right to rule which should belong only to the Hidden Imam or his deputies; and the Quran itself may be quoted to justify military action against an opponent:

".....In war, deal with them so as to strike fear in those who are behind them, that haply they may remember." (8th Surah, Verse 57)

"Slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them captive, and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush." (9th Surah, Verse 5)

The Shi'ite ethos is of an opposition which gains popular

support as a result of persecution or tyranny by its oppressors. Subject to an independent, critical and wealthy 'Ulema', encouraged by selective study of the Quran, and led by quasi-divine, charismatic alternative rulers, the followers of 'Ali have recently proved to be more promising revolutionary material than their pragmatic and fatalist cousins. In the past it was their numerical, financial and social inferiority that inhibited them from embracing revolution more fervently than has yet been seen; but in Iran and now Lebanon they comprise the majority, and the Islamic Republic is a talisman of their new-found power.

Shi'ism in Persia

In the year 1502 Shah Ismail of Persia declared Shi'ite Islam to be the state religion, and Iran remains the only such country in the world ⁵. Lebanese Shi'ite fundamentalists certainly draw inspiration from Iran, but the degree of Iranian control or guidance is unclear, and the complex political situation does not permit an accurate assessment. Shi'ism now probably forms the largest single confessional grouping in Lebanon, but this is a country where Syria backs Shi'ite Amal against Shi'ite Hezbollah backed by Iran, and both also fight the independent Shi'ite Druze, the largely Sunni Palestinians, and the Christian Phalange militia sponsored by Iraq and Israel. Few lessons can yet be learned from such a chaotic situation, so Iran provides the sole modern example of a system of government based upon Shi'ite fundamentalism. To Western eyes, the metamorphosis

between orderly, progressive, pro-Western Iran under Shah Reza Pahlavi, and the present state of almost medieval turbulence inspired by pristine fanaticism, is startling, bizarre and retrogressive. The part played by Shi'ite ideology in the fall of the Shah, and in the subsequent bloodletting and turmoil needs to be examined.

The first successful mass protest in Iran occurred in 1891 over the grant to a British trader of a tobacco monopoly ⁶. Popular opposition to this example of widespread economic exploitation grew among both merchants and ordinary townspeople, and led to an uprising against government policy. This grievance was rapidly adopted by the 'Ulema', and ended only when the Shah cancelled the concession.

After this small harbinger of the marriage of peoples' power with indigenous religious leadership there was a period of relative peace until 1906, when the 'Ulema' again led a mass protest to demand judicial reform; which the Shah granted in 1906. There followed a lengthy struggle between the Majles (House of Representatives) which the 'Ulema' supported, and the Shah, who was backed by both Britain and Russia. This came to an abrupt end in 1911 when the Russians threatened to enter Teheran in support of the Shah, and the Majles was dissolved; the protest movement went underground. But it is not in the nature of Shi'ism to forgive or forget an oppressor, and the seeds of later rebellion were sown. Furthermore, the interference of foreigners increased the Iranian propensity for xenophobia, and led to greater rivalry between Shi'ite Islam and other sources of

authority. The all-pervading perception of persecution of the faithful masses was reinforced, and bazaaris and peasants alike took increasing heed of the alternative leadership on offer from the mosque. Through the years, the growing appeal of Islamic ideology would result in widespread support from the vast majority of the people for the Iranian Revolution ⁷.

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CHAPTER 5

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The aim of this chapter is to discuss how Shia Islam effected a successful revolution in Iran, where for the first time the majority religion took civil power and established the Islamic Republic, a form of government led by Shi'ite Ayatollahs and based upon religious ideology.

The United States Army's military manual on Low Intensity Conflict lists seven requirements for a successful insurgency;

Leadership.

Ideology.

Objectives.

Environment and geography.

External support.

Phasing and timing.

Organizational and operational patterns.

Doctrine goes on to state that the leaders of the insurgency must replace the government's legitimacy with that of their own, and to achieve this their active supporters must be willing to risk death in violent confrontation with the

established authorities in order to effect change ¹.

With hindsight it is clear that in 1978 these preconditions were met in Iran, and also the concept and sacrifices of revolutionary struggle were sanctioned by the Shi'ite faith and therefore agreeable to the thinking and lifestyle of the Iranian people. On the surface, Iran appeared a strong and stable country, well established as the West's policeman in the Gulf; but the ingredients of revolution were present. The Shah's apparent policy of dynastic self-aggrandisement was used by his foes to discredit him. By publicising the growing divide between rich and poor, they emphasised a grievance which the 'Ulema' aggravated for their own political purposes in traditional Shi'ite fashion. Dissent was fomented by public demonstrations and disturbances, which were handled ineptly by the Shah's security authorities; and their rough incompetence was duly portrayed as cruelty, to contribute to the alienation of the populace.

Ayatollah Khomeini

The Shah's most implacable enemy was given sanctuary first by Iraq and then by France, whence he directed the revolution until the Shah abdicated the Peacock Throne in January 1979. The next month the Ayatollah Ozma Ruholla Khomeini, one of five pre-eminent Shi'ite "Mojtaheds" (clerics of such exalted rank that they are regarded as the greatest sign of Allah) returned to Tehran from Paris. Not wholly in jest did some Iranians marvel

that the messianic Hidden Imam should have chosen to return from concealment aboard a jumbo jet of Air France; and press coverage of his return was adulatory.

Like other revolutionaries before them, the victorious clerics soon found that it had been easier to destroy a government than to build one, and Iran suffered from classic post-revolutionary turmoil while the new Islamic Republic established its power and eliminated its rivals. The bloodiness of this period should not be laid absolutely at the door of Shi'ite fundamentalists, although they orchestrated it; many revolutions elsewhere, like those in France, China or Russia, have only been achieved after similar birthpangs. But for the first time the Iranian 'Ulema' had to give up their traditional pose of aloof criticism, and play a leading part in defining and executing Iranian national policy.

Rule of the Jurisprudent

Khomeini himself established a totally new interpretation of Shi'ism called 'Velayat al Faqih', or rule of the jurisprudent. Traditionally the 'Faqih' independently interpreted religious truth without becoming involved in lay matters, and there was simply no historical precedent for Khomeini's unique mechanism for establishing clerical rule. His abrogation of such authority was not accepted by all other Ayatollahs, but he rapidly purged dissenters from senior posts within Iran and thereafter his reign was never seriously challenged. In later

years, and especially when his health was failing, he returned somewhat to Shi'ite tradition and distanced himself from the business of government, preferring to practice the time-honoured custom of religious dissimulation. But even then he articulated his views by means of forthright if perplexing utterances:

"America is worse than Britain; Britain is worse than America. The Soviet Union is worse than both of them."

Ayatollah Khomeini [2].

From such 'obiter dicta' his administrative authorities had to deduce the correct strategy. The results of this were, at a personal level, very successful, as Khomeini's reluctance to embroil himself directly in the cauldron of executive decision-making meant that his high office remained untarnished by failure and untouched by criticism³.

At a national level, however, Iran nearly foundered in the hands of a novice crew devoid of practical guidance or leadership, who were quite unable or unwilling to seek better counsel elsewhere. In 1978 Iran was a rich and powerful country with large modern forces and an impressive oil industry. After the revolution, senior clerics dominated the political, social and economic life of Iran as they held the overwhelming majority of the highest offices of state. The success or failure of Shi'ite fundamentalism can thus be linked to their novel prominence in government, and they have not proved themselves to be very competent. Although they did manage to prosecute a major

war against Iraq for eight years, and they have led the Islamic Republic for over ten, they have in the process ruined the once-flourishing Iranian economy, isolated their country from external help, and killed off thousands of their best supporters.

This record of mismanagement is not wholly surprising. For the greater part of their history Shi'ites have been a minority in the global Islamic community, or have lived under regimes hostile to them. Their survival has depended upon caution, secrecy and the need to avoid unnecessary exposure, and this strategy has served them well ⁴. It is hardly an adequate system of training for statecraft, however, and post-revolutionary Iranian policies accordingly tended to be crude, unsophisticated, and inherently self-defeating. Inevitably, Iranian excesses touched off a popular backlash among alarmed orthodox neighbours, which led to the grim stunting of the flower of revolution by the Iran-Iraq war.

Relations between Iraq and pre-revolutionary Iran had been stabilised by the Algiers Accord of 1975, and the Shah thereafter enjoyed fairly good relations with Saddam Hussein. In 1978 the Ayatollah Khomeini was expelled from Iraq at the Shah's request, not least because Saddam Hussein [who is a Sunni] was also concerned about the effect of Shi'ite fundamentalism upon his people [who are 55% Shi'ite.]

Export of Islamisation

When Khomeini came to power, his call for the Islamisation

of all the Gulf regimes brought about a growing wave of demonstrations by the Shi'ite minorities in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and especially Iraq, where guerrilla activity commenced. But very few of the senior Iraqi clerics accepted Khomeini's claim to 'Velayat al Faqih', and the Iraqi Ulema rejected the call to activism⁴. In 1980 Saddam Hussein warned that he would use his forces against anyone threatening the stability of the Gulf states; a message clearly intended for Iran. This resulted in attacks by Iranian Revolutionary Guards on the Iraqi Embassy in Teheran and consulates elsewhere.

Iraq invades Iran

In September 1980, Iraq, with the acquiescence of Jordan, the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, invaded Iran. Support was also later forthcoming from Egypt and Sudan. Saddam Hussein was quite successful in depicting the war as an ethnic conflict between Persians and Arabs, with Khomeini as some sort of Shah in a turban, intent on pursuing the traditional expansionist policies of his predecessor. Hussein hoped that dissatisfied groups within Iran would quickly depose the new regime and reach an understanding with Iraq, and that his invasion would act as a catalyst for rapid change. In this he miscalculated as, among all the Iranian ethnic groups, only the Kurds supported the Iraqi attack. There was no seizure of power by royalist or nationalist groups in the Iranian armed forces, which with the Revolutionary Guards proved to be surprisingly doughty fighters; their

typically Shi'ite willingness to become martyrs for the Imam made them staunch and determined defenders of Iran ⁶.

Khomeini accused Saddam Hussein of forsaking Islam and embracing the alien ideology of Arab socialism, while ruling his country by means of a secret police. Iran was also supported by Syria, Libya, and the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen, but this support stemmed more from secular revolutionary camaraderie than from Islamic fervour. Although Iraq would have stopped the conflict soon after the reversal of its initial success, the Ayatollah was intent on punishing Saddam Hussein and pursuing the war until the point of victory; his views were expressed by one of his aides:

"The Imam sees the war on the basis of a fixed strategy. This is continuing efforts to revive the great state of Islam, and the emergence of Islam as a third force to confront the East and the West" ⁷.

The result was a strengthening of the new Islamic Republic as all previously disparate Iranian elements rallied around the banner to defeat the external threat. Thereafter Iraqi fear of their much more powerful opponent, and Iranian determination, desire for revenge, and strategic incompetence led to the grim stalemate of a war of attrition until both protagonists were exhausted. In practical terms, this was closer to a victory for Iraq than for Iran, as Khomeini's hopes for exporting the Islamic Revolution had to be subordinated to the needs of the war, while

Iraq's relative success in diplomacy maintained a vital level of international support and succeeded in isolating its opponent.

In 1981 Iran alarmed its neighbours by supporting an ill-considered plot to establish an Islamic Republic in Bahrain. Despite the presence of a Shia majority and many Iranian sympathizers, the coup failed. The authorities reacted firmly but sensibly, and thereafter Shi'ite minorities around the Gulf were either unable or uninspired to try again elsewhere.

The effect of the war on Iran's internal affairs was crucial. For ten years, much of the energy which might have gone into exporting fundamentalist activism was consumed by the fight; and the Ayatollah grew old without a chance to realise his dream of a great state of Islam. In Iran the 'Ulema' did not quite lose the support of the masses, but the war became ever more unpopular as teenage martyrs were required in increasing waves. Ultimately, Khomeini was forced to accept the poisoned chalice of a truce with a 'Satanic' enemy, with the realisation that his once-magnificent drive for Islamic revolution had been swallowed up, among the bogs and marshes around the Shatt al-Arab waterway.

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CHAPTER 6

WHITHER SHI'ITE FUNDAMENTALISM ?

The purpose of this final chapter is to draw upon all that has been written about Shi'ite fundamentalist activism in order to make a forecast about its future. In attempting such an assessment, it is necessary to balance the present material exhaustion of many of Shi'ism's followers, against the historical but intangible forces which continue to drive the faith.

The Ayatollah Ozma Khomeini, supreme leader of the Shi'ite community and principal architect of the Iranian revolution, died on June 3 1989 aged 87. He was buried amid a chaotic frenzy of grief and widely mourned by Iranians, other Shias, and indeed by a sizeable following of sympathetic Moslems around the world -but although he was a great prophet, his very mortality proved that he was not the messianic Imam. At the time of his death his concept of the Islamic state had already begun to crumble. The long, costly, and ultimately pointless struggle with Iraq detracted hugely from his charisma and prestige, and left a legacy of bitterness which may rob his clerics of their former authority for some time to come.

The accession to power of the Ayatollah in 1979 appeared to inspire a great surge of militant fundamentalism throughout

Islam, which began among the Shia community and might have been expected to spread elsewhere. The turmoil in Lebanon, with its attendant beastliness of hostage-taking, terrorism, internecine murder and civil war, was in part instigated by Khomeinist policies; the oppressed Shias of Beirut were intent on claiming their inheritance, and the West should not have expected them to be civilised about it. The weapons of the weak have had to be chosen for their public deniability and politico-military effectiveness, with scant regard for the conventions of other societies.

These are the weapons employed by Hizbollah, and its pseudonyms; the Organisation of the Oppressed, the Revolutionary Justice Organization, and the Islamic Jihad, for example. Lebanon has a long history of such strife as, once begun, such horrors become self-propagating, and it is not only the Shia community which is responsible for them. But the rest of the world now associates Shi'ite fundamentalism with either Lebanon or with Iran, and there is no longer any widespread appeal in such blood-stained examples.

New regime in Iran

After Khomeini's death, power in Iran passed on to a relatively young caretaker president, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, whose position in the religious hierarchy was not of the first order. Despite this, when he relinquished presidential power in August 1989 he was confirmed as the spiritual leader of the

Islamic Republic; a telling indicator of erosion of clerical importance in Iran. The new president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, is a consummate politician whose clerical rank of Hojatolislam, or 'Proof of Islam', is below that of the most junior Ayatollah. In religious terms, he, too, lacks worthwhile qualifications. Although he has been astute enough to publicly follow the Imam's line, he is a clever realist who may be expected to try to rebuild Iran, and he has managed to greatly reduce the power of the radical fundamentalists. Several once-prominent Ayatollahs have been retired to the seminary in the holy city of Qom.

Iran is such an impoverished and disorganised country that it may even have to rethink its relations with 'the Great Satan', America. While a public rapprochement is not yet thinkable with a country long castigated as a prime source for all Iranian ills, American wealth and resources are none the less seen as one possible way forward, and Rafsanjani is pragmatic enough to realise this. Until he is firmly entrenched in office no such dramatic steps can be expected, but a possible future volte-face in Iranian foreign policy cannot be ruled out.

Gods or butter?

These internal and foreign policy imperatives for Iran throw up tremendous challenges to Khomeini's legacy. The rebuilding of the shattered economy, the fulfillment of long-promised socio-economic and political reforms, and the emergence of a new regional environment all pose such pressing problems

that it is tempting to construe that fundamentalism, like true communism, will now be seen as an unattainable ideal. Khomeini is buried; the war is over; there is much to be done, and only capitalism offers a workable system. Fundamentalist activism brought about sweeping changes in the way that Iran was governed, but it has not in the end made life better for the toiling masses; perhaps it is now time for a switch to materialism.

The pressure of the past

In the short term, this rosy view of Iranian affairs may have some merit, but it ignores a thousand years of history. Exhaustion may well force Iran to compromise on long-cherished aspirations for a few years, but the driving force behind Shi'ite fundamentalism remains not merely unimpaired, but is likely to be weighted with new potency. Shias traditionally feel themselves to be an oppressed society - often with good reason - and they have always drawn strength and cohesion from their perception of their sect as an embattled minority. It will not be lost on them that most Arab nations, and the majority of the rest of the world, favoured Iraq during their epic struggle. Shi'ite doctrine, stemming from the heroic but tragic legends of 'Ali and his sons, is quite consistent with a doomed battle against such challenging odds. Furthermore, too many people have been killed to allow the war to be forgotten or forgiven; the seeds of revenge are best watered by the tears of bitterness.

Resurrection of Khomeini

The Ayatollah is dead, but his message will live on. With the passing of the years he is likely to become still more important; parallels will be drawn between his ultimately unsuccessful fight with Iraq, and the slaughter of Husayn and his followers a thousand years ago at Kerbala. In some way Khomeini too may be portrayed as having been 'martyred' to the cause of Shi'ism, and his grave will likely become another place of veneration and pilgrimage for the faithful. Another parallel, with Imam 'Ali, is that he too was not accepted by all Moslems during his lifetime, but achieved lasting veneration after his death. Future generations may well revere Khomeini as the supreme 'Mojtahed' who re-established the importance of the Shi'ite faith and brought about the miracle of the Islamic Republic.

Khomeini's concept of 'Velayat al Faqih' was doctrinally flawed and a practical failure. There is no Islamic precedent for placing absolute power in the hands of the 'jurisprudent', and it obliged him to rule through councils of exalted clerics who were quite untrained and unsuited to the task. But it is a mistake to attempt to apply capitalist value-judgements of success or failure to something so intangible, so ethereal and so inspiring as the search for the way of God. Western societies, which have long ago relegated religion to second place in their determined pursuit of riches and rewards on this earth, are unable to fully grasp the stirring emotional appeal of Islamic fundamentalism.

Paramount among the several forces which led to the Iranian revolution was the authority of the Shi'ite 'Ulema' in general, and the charismatic leadership of the Ayatollah Khomeini in particular. In the short term that power and prestige may have suffered some decline, but it still offers the mass of the people the best way forward in the modern world. The economic, military, political, social and technological challenges of the West continue unabated; but a response to these things based on aping them has been tried, and found unpalatable.

The one true faith

Shias have also learned, again, to place little reliance on other Islamic governments, which seem divided, uncertain, and immersed in their own problems; but the one true faith still sheds a guiding light. For centuries, the tremendous authority of the deputies of the hidden Imam has been of crucial importance, and to oppose the will of such 'signs of Allah' is unthinkable. Without this belief, millions of relatively apolitical Iranians would not have been induced to overthrow the Shah, and no contemporary Sunni or secular leader has managed to inspire such a following.

In the short term, the need to rebuild Iran will dominate the lives of its citizens, but even while that requirement is being met the post-war bitterness of the crippled and the bereaved will need to seek some form of solace. Shia mythology, with its heavy emphasis on suffering, persecution and martyrdom

will continue to have a powerful appeal, and in time the 'Ulema' will regain their long-established position as the conduit for the people's various discontents. Iran's leaders will be obliged at the very least to pay lip-service to the achievements of the Imam, and the early days of his Islamic Republic may well be remembered with increasing nostalgia; the dream of all those centuries very nearly came true on earth.

The concerns and grievances of politically conscious Moslems still exist throughout the Middle East, and will continue to do so. The economic and social problems of the developing nations of the region would pose very difficult questions for even the most stable, democratically-elected governments, and it will never be possible to please everyone. A belief which teaches that all men are equal before Allah will always instill some resentment of temporal authority, and there are unavoidable violations of traditional values inherent in modern forms of government.

The rule of Islam remains on offer as a highly desirable alternative, and the way to achieve that goal may be to return to the pure fundamentals set out in the Quran. Historically, Sunni fundamentalism has mostly been the preserve of the educated middle classes, but Shi'ism offers an inspiring leader the chance to mobilize huge apolitical masses of his people with a power currently unmatched by any other faith. Sooner or later another charismatic leader will emerge 'from concealment' to continue the work of the Ayatollah Khomeini.

In Iran a new centre of clerical opposition to Rafsanjani may yet emerge among the embittered Ayatollahs presently exiled to the seminary in Qom. Elsewhere, the spread of fundamentalism is a major transnational phenomenon, as evinced in the repeated clashes between Moslems and others in several of Russia's southern republics. Lebanon remains in turmoil. Other partially Shia states, like Bahrain, have recoiled from the extreme Iranian example but Shi'ites are now aware of their strength, and demography is working to their advantage. There are opportunities for a new Imam to emerge in such areas, and in Afghanistan, as well as in Iran.

The long-term foreign policy goals of the Islamic Republic have been postponed, but it is far from clear that they have changed. The present pragmatism in Iran is designed to shore up the regime's economic, military and political position while those to the north and east disintegrate. Iran is too big and too wealthy a country to lie quiescent for long; it remains potentially the dominant regional power.

Few revolutionary goals have ever been achieved with one masterstroke, and most have needed years of toil and bloodshed. The Islamic Republic is now a proven fact, but the wider spread of renaissance Islam remains to be accomplished. Shi'ite fundamentalist activism has achieved much, but there is work still to be done. The historic drive to establish the greater State of Islam is not over, and until it ends, the 'Jihad' will continue.

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