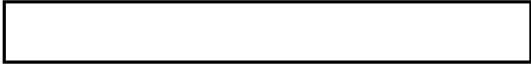


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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
National Foreign Assessment Center

20 November 1978

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

THE POLITICS OF AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH KHOMEINI

KEY POINTS

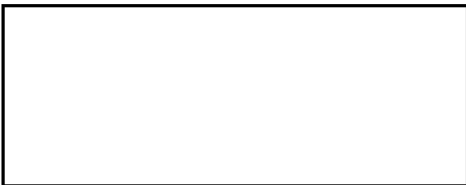
- Ayatollah Khomeini has long been the central figure in the conservative Shia clerical opposition to the Shah. His influence is now so strong that neither other clerics nor civilian opposition leaders will take actions he opposes.
- Khomeini is determined to overthrow the Shah and is unlikely to accept any compromise. He considers the Pahlavi regime to be corrupt, anti-Islamic and controlled by the US.
- Khomeini's power base is composed of the Shia clergy, bazaar merchants, the urban lower classes and students. Senior military officers generally oppose and feel threatened by Khomeini, but junior officers and enlisted men presumably are more responsive to his Shia message.
- Khomeini is anti-communist but his following may be susceptible to communist and radical penetration. He has cooperated in the past with an Islamic terrorist group in Iran.

This memorandum was coordinated within the Central Intelligence Agency. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the author, [redacted] Iran Analytical Center, Office of Regional and Political Analysis; (Phone: [redacted] with support from the Office of Central Reference.

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--An Iranian regime under Khomeini's influence would be xenophobic and probably prone to instability. It would probably not be aligned with either the US or USSR.

--Dependent on oil sales for the preponderant share of its revenues, a Khomeini-influenced regime would continue to sell oil to the US and its allies, perhaps with the exception of Israel. It might find it ideologically attractive, however, to slow the rate of industrialization and therefore institute more conservative petroleum extraction practices.

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Ruhollah Khomeini has emerged this year as the leading figure in the opposition to the Shah of Iran. Khomeini, who holds the title of Ayatollah, meaning a prominent leader of Iran's Shia Muslims, is determined to see the Shah and the Pahlavi monarchy abolished even at the cost of throwing Iran into chaos and anarchy. In place of the Shah, Khomeini advocates the creation of a vaguely defined "Islamic Republic" to be guided only by the principles of Shia Islam. This concept is not Khomeini's alone; it is a doctrine firmly embedded in Shiism.

The eloquent and charismatic Khomeini has amassed wide support among Iran's 35 million people, and has so intimidated the moderate opponents of the Shah that they have accepted his veto over their activities. He does not control the opposition to the Shah, however. Although he has become its foremost spokesman and symbol, the opposition remains an amorphous and disunited movement.

Khomeini seems supremely confident that he has unleashed the forces that will destroy the Shah. He recently boasted that the "latest riots herald the start of a gigantic explosion which will have incalculable effects."

Shia Islam--Khomeini's Base

Shiites constitute about 70 million of Islam's 500 million believers, and Iran is the center of Shia Islam, with 93 percent of its population belonging to the sect. Shiism is a heterodox sect--the orthodox are the Sunnis--which split from the rest of the community in a quarrel in the 7th century over who should succeed Muhammad as leader of the Muslim world. The Shia espoused the cause of Muhammad's son-in-law Ali.

In part because of its minority status in the Muslim world and in part because of its role as the "out" part in Islamic history, Shiism has a tradition of support for revolutionary dissidence against the established order. In Iran the conservative Shia religious leadership has played a major role in promoting dissent in all of the major historical turning points during this century, including the 1906 revolution and the 1953 crisis.

Islam in general does not grant formal religious authority to an institutionalized clergy. A clergy (known collectively

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as the ulema) exists, and the laity willingly grants them considerable authority, but since theological doctrine denies to any man religious preeminence over his brother, there is virtually no hierarchical structure. The ulema does interpret Islamic law, however, and the Shiite clergy in particular has traditionally had great influence in day-to-day secular matters.

What hierarchy does exist in the ulema is determined on an ad hoc basis. When a clerical leader achieves a certain status and eminence, based on the writings, reputation, and the quality of advice he gives, his followers may refer to him as "ayatollah," and if enough of the respected theologians and the community accept the title, it sticks. Shia Islam's foremost leader is called the "pishva-ye-moslemin" (leader of the Muslims) and is chosen by a consensus of the Shia community as expressed through the ulema. Such a consensus is hard to achieve. Since the death of the last pishva in 1971, the post has been vacant. Khomeini is widely regarded as the leading candidate, but the Iranian Government has maneuvered to block any attempt to give him the title. The "mojtahed"--almost invariably an ayatollah as well, is the legal specialist with the right of independent interpretation. At the other end of the hierarchy are the "mullahs" or lesser clergy, prayer leaders, and Koran chanters.

Several holy cities are of importance to the Shia. Qom, Mashad, and Esfahan in Iran are centers of Shia learning. Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, scenes of the deaths of early martyrs in the Shia tradition, are important pilgrimage sites.

Shia Islam has several important religious holidays. The most significant is the mourning month of Moharram, which commemorates the death in Kerbala of Ali's second son, Hussein. Moharram--and especially the day of Ashura, which this year falls on 11 December--is always a time of high tension in Iran.

Ayatollah Khomeini--Early Activities

Khomeini was born in 1901 in a clerical family in Golpayegan. His father, a mullah, was murdered by the local governor for his participation in the 1906 revolution. Khomeini studied at Qom and Esfahan and later at Najaf and Karbala. He taught Islamic law and theological doctrine in Qom until the early 1960s.

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Khomeini has always been closely identified with the conservative dissident views of the ulema in the holy cities. Much of the Iranian clergy has been alienated from the Pahlavi dynasty when the Shah's father Reza Shah began to impose a rapid modernization program on the country in the 1930s. The religious leadership's opposition to the Shah (led at the time by Ayatollah Kashani) at least initially supported those forces backing Prime Minister Mossadegh in the early 1950s.

Khomeini began to preach and issue leaflets critical of the regime in 1962. By January 1963, Khomeini's violent attacks on the Shah's land reform program and women's rights brought him nation-wide attention and he emerged as the symbol of Shia opposition to the Shah. In June 1963, during the mourning month of Moharram and following several inflammatory anti-Shah sermons, Khomeini was arrested. The arrest led to rioting in Tehran, Qom, and other cities. Martial law was imposed in some areas. Released from jail in April 1964, Khomeini almost immediately returned to the attack against the Shah with more inflammatory blasts.

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The Years in Exile

Khomeini continued his anti-Shah activities from his exile in Turkey, bitterly attacking the Shah as a pawn of the United States and Israel. In return, the Shah labeled Khomeini a tool of the radical Arabs led by Egyptian President Nasir.

In 1965 the Turkish Government requested the Iranian Government to remove him from Turkey. Khomeini rejected an Iranian Government offer to return home on condition that he not engage in any political activity. Instead he went to Iraq, where he was accepted by an Iraqi Government eager to support dissidence in Iran.

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Khomeini's Platform

Khomeini's views have not changed significantly since he first led the mobs against the Shah in 1963. As a fundamentalist Shia, he is opposed to the social reforms that the Shah has enacted in the last 15 years. Khomeini argues that the Shah is anti-Islamic and that the monarchy as an institution has become inherently opposed to Shia Islam. He often gives as an example the Shah's abortive effort to change the Iranian calendar from its Islamic base to one dating from the first Imperial dynasty in Persian history.

An examination of Khomeini's speeches and pamphlets between 1963 and the present reveals these persistent themes:

- Opposition to the Shah's efforts to give equal rights to women. This issue is symbolized by Khomeini's insistence that the Shah has forced Iranian women to give up the veil.
- Opposition to the Shah's land reform policy. Khomeini claims that it is the Shah's land reform efforts that are the cause of Iran's inability since the early 1970s to produce enough food to feed itself.*
- The Shah's regime is dictatorial and corrupt. It has wasted Iran's wealth on expensive weapons and grandiose economic projects to keep itself in power.
- General xenophobia, particularly anti-Americanism. Khomeini appeals to the deepseated Iranian belief that the Shah's government was imposed on the country by the US, that it does the bidding of the US, and that the Shah has "subjugated Iran to foreign powers."

* The Shah's land reform program was the centerpiece of the White Revolution launched in 1963. Land was taken from the landlords and distributed to the peasantry, who were then organized into rural co-ops. Much land was also taken from the control of the ulema. The government's bureaucracy has taken the place of the former landlords, and many farmers are no more enamored of their new rulers than they were of their previous masters.

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--Opposition to the Shah's cooperation with Israel. An anti-Zionist, Khomeini charges that the Israelis are helping to keep the Shah in power.

--A negative attitude toward religious minority groups. Besides the Jews who are associated with Israel, Khomeini has attacked the Bahai sect. This is a traditional rallying cry for Shia fanatics because the Bahai have long been over-represented at the highest levels of Iranian society.

To replace the Pahlavis, Khomeini suggests the establishment of an Islamic Republic. Khomeini has been vague as to what this would mean in practice. He rejects any comparison with Saudi Arabia or Libya and claims that "the only reference point (would be) the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the Imam Ali."

Khomeini's ambiguity reflects a lack of interest in a specific political program. For him Shia Islam is a total social/political/economic system that needs no further explanation. In addition, he would risk losing support from some elements of the opposition if he tried to spell out a detailed program of action. The widely based and badly divided opposition movement probably would not support any platform that went beyond simple opposition to the Shah remaining in power.

Khomeini claims that he is not an opponent of modernizing Iran, but that Islam provides a sufficient guide. He argues that the Shah has concentrated on grandiose projects that do not benefit the masses of Iranians, and has failed to move the country ahead because he has allowed "foreigners" to steal Iran's wealth. Khomeini promises social equality and political democracy in his new Iran. Khomeini has labeled President Carter's human rights policy a propaganda move and in at least one clandestine pamphlet attacked the President by name.

Khomeini's Constituency

The ulema have always been able to rally wide support for their position in Iran. A traditional bedrock of this support has been the small shopkeepers and merchants of the bazaars in the cities. They provide much of the "khums"--a religious

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tithe the pious give to the ulema. This close alliance between the bazaars and the clergy continues today, and much of the recent unrest in the major cities has originated in the bazaars.

Khomeini also can count on the support of many of his fellow clergymen. The mullahs support his appeals to Islamic law and tradition, and most seem to back him for the post of pishva. There are moderate religious leaders in Iran who have disagreed with Khomeini in the past, but increasingly they have lost the will and the ability to stand up to him.

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The ulema is not a monolithic bloc in Iran. There are rivalries, and differences. But these seem to work against the Shah, as each faction tries to outdo the other in appealing to the mobs.

Khomeini draws his greatest popular support from the lower classes in the urban centers. In the last several years, and especially since the oil boom began in 1973, Tehran and other Iranian cities have grown enormously.* In this milieu of rapid change and social upheaval, many illiterate and often unemployed workers have turned to the traditional values of their religion. A miserable existence, with difficulty in securing justice from the state, has festered in this group. In Khomeini they see the symbol of Shia purity and orthodoxy.

* The population of Tehran has risen from 200,000 in 1900, to 540,000 in 1945, to 2,720,000 in 1966, and to 4,400,000 in 1976.

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Khomeini also seems to be developing more and more support among the university students. Traditionally a source of dissidence against the Shah, the student population is divided between leftists and supporters of the religious right.

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Khomeini appears to have little support among senior officers of the Iranian military. Most of the leading commanders of the military regard Khomeini as a threat to their privileged status in the country and are worried that if Khomeini should establish his Islamic republic in Iran they would lose power.

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Khomeini may have more support among junior officers and rank and file soldiers.

Khomeini has publicly called upon "the soldiers and younger officers" to "join the people's struggle."

Attitude Toward Communism

Publicly Khomeini is opposed to any collaboration with Iran's communists, the Tudeh Party. Last October he explicitly criticized the Tudeh for anti-Islamic beliefs and materialistic tendencies. Khomeini also blasted the Soviet Union for meddling in Iran's internal affairs in the past. In May he told Le Monde that "we will not collaborate with the Marxists even to overthrow the Shah."

There is little reason to doubt that Khomeini is philosophically opposed to communism as an atheistic force. Although the Tudeh has endorsed Khomeini's opposition to the Shah, there is little clear evidence to indicate the scope of the role the Tudeh Party has played in the disturbances that have beset Iran this year.

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Khomeini in Power--Implications

Khomeini claims to have no interest in holding power himself. Nonetheless, a new regime in Tehran led by the civilian opposition would obviously be greatly influenced by his beliefs.* Any regime that replaces the Shah will have to deal with Khomeini and will come under great pressure to allow him to return to Iran and have a voice in policymaking.

If Khomeini is successful in unseating the Shah and comes to play an important role in a future regime in Iran there would be serious policy implications for the United States. We would expect a regime under his influence to be xenophobic. Khomeini might:

--Move Iran away from its alignment with the US. While it is unlikely that Khomeini would put Iran in the Soviet orbit, he probably would like to see the country adopt a non-aligned posture.

--Cut off Iran's ties with Israel. Iran sells Israel most of its oil

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--Curtail Iran's support for pro-Western regimes in the Persian Gulf like Oman. A radical Shia state might in time even try to support dissidence in the conservative Sunni dominated states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar which have Shia minorities.

--Renege on business deals with the US. Khomeini has stated that all of Iran's agreements with foreign states--including arms purchases from the US--will have to be renegotiated in Iran's favor if the Shah is removed. Khomeini might not feel restrained by Iran's dependence on foreign technology in the pursuit of a xenophobic foreign policy.

--Dependent on oil sales for the preponderant share of its revenues, a Khomeini-influenced regime would continue to sell oil to the US and its allies, perhaps with the exception of Israel. It might find it ideologically attractive, however, to slow the rate of industrialization and therefore institute more conservative petroleum extraction practices.

* A devout Shiite is expected to choose a living Mojtabah to whom he will turn and whose advice he will follow in all matters. If strictly followed, this would place a clergyman at the elbow of every government official.

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The most significant implication for the US of a regime under the influence of Khomeini, however, is likely to be instability in Iran itself. In fact he is unlikely to be able to contain the revolutionary impetus he has helped to spark and might be preempted by a leftist regime or a military dictatorship.

Khomeini as an influential decisionmaker would probably find it difficult to reconcile his Shiite principles with the needs of a modern state--there is no precedent in Iran's modern history for what Khomeini proposes.

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