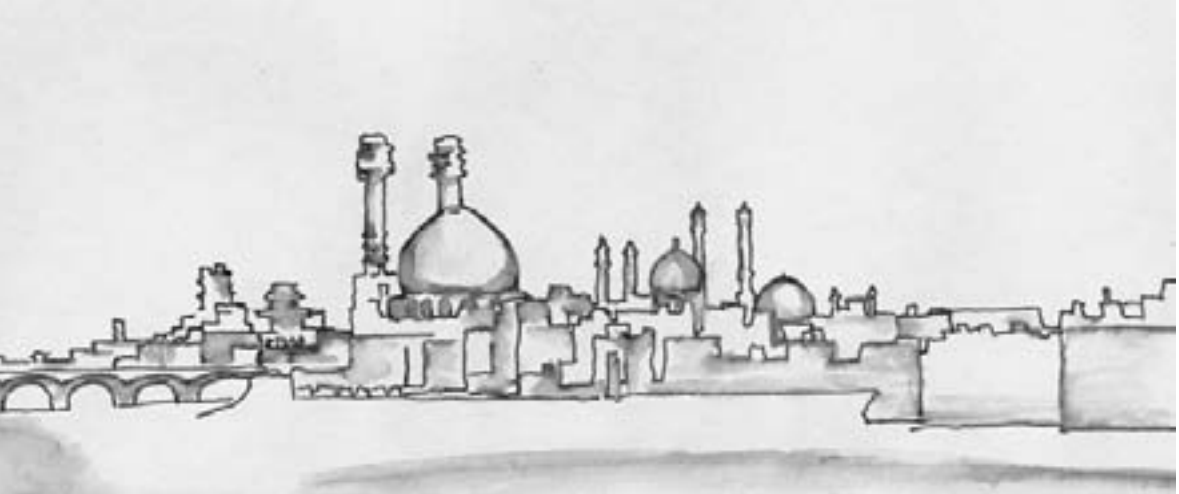


The Ayatollah Khomeini's Calls for Non-Violence

During the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran

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Qom; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

BACKGROUND

On January 16, 1979 the shah of Iran officially abdicated his throne and left his country. Thus ended the rule of a royal family going back to 1925 and a monarchy going back two-and-a-half millennia.

In any sense of the word, the shah's departure was forced. He had been in power since 1941, put there during World War II by the armies of Great Britain and the Soviet Union. In 1953, when Iran's prime minister, Mussadegh, challenged the shah's authority and drove the shah out of Iran, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency restored the shah to power. The reinstated shah formed a foreign consortium to manage the Iranian Oil Company, putting Iran's oil resources to work but depriving Iran of half its oil's value. Under the shah's direction Iran established closer ties with the West and joined the Baghdad Pact. In 1964, after the Shi'ite cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, began criticizing the shah's policies of "westernization" and "seculariza-

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tion", the shah exiled the Ayatollah from Iran. The Ayatollah found shelter in Shi'ite regions in neighboring Iraq. In 1975 the shah created SAVAK, his secret police, by means of which he repressed further internal opposition. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the United States gave the shah massive amounts of military and economic aid with which he consolidated his power.

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Anti-shah sentiment simmered in Iran. The country's poor resented the king's lavish two-thousand five-hundredth anniversary of Persia's empire of Biblical times (complete with foreign royalty, film stars, air-conditioned tents, and champagne). The harsh measures imposed by Iran's police, SAVAK, and eventually Iran's military generated increasing waves of citizen resentment. During these and earlier decades citizen resentments against hereditary rulers and the rich and powerful were common in much of Asia and Africa. These resentments led to struggles against royalty in Egypt, against colonialism in Algeria and Indonesia, and against dictatorships in Cuba and Nicaragua. Unique to resentment in Iran was its Muslim articulation. Although – or perhaps because – the Ayatollah Khomeini had been driven from Iran, he became the voice of the protesters. From neighboring Iraq he was unrelenting in his criticisms of the shah, the royal family, and Iran's upper classes for their "materialism" and non-

Islamic lifestyles. The Ayatollah blamed the West – specifically the United States – for corrupting them. Iranians could readily observe their upwardly-mobile fellow citizens imitating the lavish lifestyles of the hundreds of American program directors, advisers, and consultants who, with their families, moved into Tehran's expensive northern suburbs.

The shah was annoyed. He pressured Iraq to exile Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1978 Iraq responded. The Ayatollah was forced to leave. He moved to France, from where he continued publishing his criticisms of the shah. The shah's censors tried to prevent the Ayatollah's words from reaching Iran's public, but the Ayatollah discovered an ingenious way to elude the shah's censors. He

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tape-recorded his sermons and had them smuggled into Iran where they were played in mosques throughout the country at Friday-noon worship services. In his sermons the Ayatollah contrasted the shah's Iran with Mecca and Medina under the Prophet and the rightly-guided khalifs. Kings and royal families had no place in Muslim countries. The Qur'an provided instructions for leadership. These instructions were to be interpreted by morally-qualified scholars and the *Ulama* (learned guardians of the religious community).

Occasionally, after listening to these Friday sermons, Iranian crowds would flow from the mosques into the streets

shouting slogans. Police, plainclothes security officers, and occasionally the military would disperse the crowds with batons, tear gas, and sometimes deadly force. When deaths occurred, processions

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of mourners accompanied the bodies to the local cemeteries chanting slogans. These processions would sometimes be attacked – often with further resulting injuries and deaths. By the end of 1978 government-sponsored violence against Iranian citizens reached appalling levels. The exiled Ayatollah emerged as the citizens' moral leader. Like Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. he called for disciplined nonviolence by protesters and widespread refusal to cooperate with agencies of the oppressive state. The goal, he declared, should be the nonviolent replacement of the shah by a government elected by Iranian citizens and guided by God's laws.

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Below are statements made by the still-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini during the final weeks of the shah's rule in late 1978 through the shah's resignation and departure from Iran in early 1979. ¹



Gods Law; photo, Cetta Kenney

November 22, 1978

Excerpts from the Ayatollah Khomeini's message to the Iranian nation

The military government is repressive and illegal, and unlawful, and everybody should oppose it and not cooperate with it. You should refrain from paying any taxes and doing anything that might help this oppressive government. Also the employees and workers of the Iranian Oil Company must prevent the exportation of this vital national resource. Do these employees and workers know that the weapons that shatter the chests of our beloved youth and shed the blood of our women, men, and children, are paid for from the money of that vital resource that is extracted by their tremendous toil? . . .

December 11, 1978

Interview with a US television reporter

Question: In yesterday's demonstrations there was neither violence nor rebellion. Some say, therefore, that the shah has passed through the storm and will survive. Do you agree?

Answer: The most powerful storm included yesterday's peaceful demonstrations. Yesterday the Iranian people showed to the world that these demonstrations were calculated, and that the Iranian people could control everything. At the same time the demonstrations showed that the Iranian people do not want the shah. They want him to go. All must know that the shah has no choice. He must go.

January 6, 1979

Excerpts from the Ayatollah Khomeini's message to the Iranian nation

O vigilant people of Iran! Continue your brave struggle ... I call on you to do the following:

- 1) *Employees of the ministries, do not obey the unlawful and corrupt ministries; if possible, do not let them enter their ministerial buildings.*
- 2) *Fellow citizens, refuse to pay taxes absolutely; refuse to pay the water, electricity, and telephone bills; do nothing that may help the government.*
- 3) *Respected Ulama, speakers, religious students, lawyers and judges, university professors, other university employees, shopkeepers, guild-members,*

workers, farmers, politicians, and all other social strata of the nation, proclaim the illegitimacy and unlawfulness of the shah, of both houses of parliament, and of the entire government. Proclaim this with all seriousness; otherwise it is possible that the plots against our country will be successful, in which case all of us will be held accountable.

- 4) *Shopkeepers, avoid overcharging your customers.*
- 5) *Fellow citizens, let us not forget to help those workers and strikers who may be having problems making ends meet. You can help support them through paying religious dues and charities as well.*

February 10, 1979

(After the shah's departure)

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. O brave Iranian nation! O respectful people of Tehran! As you know, my aim is to solve the problem of Iran, and bring about the downfall of the shah's regime nonviolently. However, the cruel and oppressive system, that sees itself legally condemned, has resorted to criminal actions. In the cities of Gorgan and Gonbad-Cawous the regime has attacked and killed courageous Muslim people. In Tehran, too, the Guard Battalion suddenly attacked the Air Force that has joined the people ... I condemn this inhuman attack of the Guards. By committing these killings among brothers, our enemies hope to

open our country to the return of foreigners and plunderers to their former places.

February 12, 1979

Excerpts from the Ayatollah Khomeini's message to the Iranian nation

. . . The Iranian nation should know that this revolution is different from other revolutions that have occurred in other parts of the world. This revolution, since it was an Islamic and humane revolution, created little damage. In other revolutions around the world there has been massive devastation. We, thanks to God, achieved a great victory with little destruction. . .

. . . We must be aware that today, the day of revolution, there are treacherous and unclean hands at work, trying

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to create disunity among you. You have to avoid very carefully any destructive action. If anybody wants to engage in violence and kill people, to attack government or military centers, or to damage palaces and other places, you must prevent them ... you should avoid

turmoil and demonstrations. You should not resort to havoc. People must not think that now they are victorious they must create disorder. You must believe in an orderly way, according to Islamic and humanitarian principles, to show the world that you, citizens of a Muslim nation, are aware of

Islamic codes of conduct and are obedient to Islamic teachings . . .

COMMENTARY

In 1979 the shah of Iran was forced to abdicate his throne and leave his country. The force to which he yielded, however, was largely nonviolent. Furthermore, that force drew its inspiration from one of the world's major religions – Islam. The similarities between Gandhi's *satyagraha* ("truth force") campaign to free India, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s creative tension to achieve civil rights in the United States, and the Ayatollah Khomeini's call for a nonviolent revolution in Iran are striking. They underscore a point made by Elise Boulding² when she refers to cultures of nonviolence and peace and cultures of violence and war. Boulding suggests that all world religions contain elements of both cultures. They declare their cultures of peace in their versions of the Golden Rule: Do unto others what you would have them to do unto you. Love. Forgive. Show compassion. Seek wisdom. But virtually all world religions have also been used by the cultures they support to justify discriminating against, marginalizing, or even killing members of other religions for invading their

lands. India still memorializes achieving its national independence in 1947 by following Gandhi's strategies of non-violent satyagraha. Yet since 1947 India has annexed Goa and Sikkim through military takeovers. In 1983 the United States honored Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his nonviolent civil rights movement by establishing a national holiday in Dr. King's honor. Yet that same year

Nonviolence is a recurrent theme in interreligious dialogue.

the United States invaded the island nation of Grenada, and three years later invaded the Central American state of Panama. Ayatollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic of Islam with the help of millions of Iranians heeding his call to practice Islamic nonviolence. Subsequently, however, the Republic of Iran persecuted religious minorities such as the Baha'is and, in 2009, harshly repressed its own citizens who called for fair elections.

Nonviolence is a recurrent theme in interreligious dialogue. It circulated during the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions and was one of the four "irrevocable directives" to which people could sign their names in the post- 1993-Parliament document titled *Towards a Global Ethic (An Initial Declaration)*. Nonviolence has been discussed in various dimensions in the annual Conferences on Globalization for the Common Good. For the past decades commitments to nonviolence have recurred in interreligious con-

ferences sponsored by such groups as Japan's Buddhist-based Rissho Kosei-kai and in international conferences sponsored by such groups as Religions for Peace International.

One can readily find occasions when nonviolence is observed more in the breach than in the observance. One can easily criticize those who call for, but fail to implement, nonviolence. An alternative approach is to identify, analyze, and applaud those occasions when nonviolence has actually been implemented and to look for opportunities to expand upon and reward such occasions.

NOTES

¹ In 1991, with the help of the Soroush Press Research Group in Tehran, Sahifeh Noor published a collection of Ayatollah Khomeini's public statements. I am grateful to Moharnmad Hossein Panahi for selecting these passages and providing their English translations in 2007.

² See Elise Boulding, *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000.

³ *Towards a Global Ethic (An Initial Declaration)*," in Joel Beversluis (project editor), *A SourceBook for Earth 's Community of Religions*, Grand Rapids, MI: CoNexus Press - SourceBook Project, rev. ed. 1995, pp. 131-137.

