

Imam Khomeini's Biography

Ayatollah Seyed Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (May 17, 1900 – June 3, 1989) was a Muslim cleric and *Marja*, and the political leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran which overthrew Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran. Following the Revolution, Imam Khomeini became Grand Leader of Iran — the paramount figure in the political system of the new Islamic Republic — until his demise.

Imam Khomeini was considered a *Marja-e taqlid* to many Muslims, and in Iran was officially addressed as Imam rather than Grand Ayatollah; his supporters adhere to this convention. Imam Khomeini was also a highly-influential and innovative Islamic political theorist, most noted for his development of the theory of *velayat-e faqih*, the "guardianship of the jurisconsult."

Family and Early Years

Ruhollah Mousavi was born to Ayatollah Seyyed Mostafa Musavi and Hajieh Agha Khanum, also called Hajar, in the town of Khomein, about 300 kilometers south of the capital Tehran, Iran, possibly on May 17, 1900 or September 24, 1902. He was a Seyyed from a religious family that are descendants of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), through the seventh Imam, (Imam Mousa Kazem). His paternal grandfather was Seyyed Ahmad Musavi, whose third wife, Sakineh, gave birth to Mostafa in 1856. Imam Khomeini's maternal grandfather was Mirza Ahmad Mojtahed-e Khonsari, a high-ranking cleric in central Iran whose Fatwa for banning usage of Tobacco in opposition to a monopoly granted by Shah to a British company, led to cancellation of the concession.

Imam Khomeini's father was murdered when he was five months old, and he was raised by his mother and one of his aunts. Later, when he was 15, his mother and aunt died in the same year. At the age of six he began to study the Quran, Islam's holy book. He received his early education at home and at the local school, under the supervision of Mullah Abdul-Qassem and Sheikh Jaffar, and was under the guardianship of his elder brother, Ayatollah Pasandideh, until he was 18 years old. Arrangements were made for him to study at the Islamic seminary in Esfahan, but he was attracted, instead, to the seminary in Arak, which was renowned for its scholastic brilliance under the leadership of Ayatollah Sheikh Abdol-Karim Haeri-Yazdi (himself a pupil of some of the greatest scholars of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq).

In 1921, Imam Khomeini commenced his studies in Arak. The following year, Ayatollah Haeri-Yazdi transferred the Islamic seminary to the holy city of Qom, and invited his students to follow. Imam Khomeini accepted the invitation, moved, and took up residence at the Dar al-Shafa school in Qom before being exiled to the holy city of Najaf in Iraq. After graduation, he taught Islamic jurisprudence (Sharia), Islamic philosophy and mysticism (Irfan) for many years and wrote numerous books on these subjects.

Although during this scholarly phase of his life Imam Khomeini was not politically active, the nature of his studies, teachings, and writings revealed that he firmly believed from the beginning in political activism by clerics. Three factors support this suggestion. First, his interest in Islamic studies surpassed the bounds of traditional subjects of Islamic law (Sharia), jurisprudence (Fiqh), and principles (Usul) and the like. He was keenly interested in philosophy and ethics. Second, his teaching focused often on the overriding relevance of religion to practical social and political issues of the day. Third, he was the first Iranian cleric to try to refute the outspoken advocacy of secularism in the 1940s. His now well-known book, *Kashf-e Asrar* (Discovery of Secrets) was a point by point refutation of *Asrar-e Hezar Saleh* (Secrets of a Thousand Years), a tract written by a disciple of Iran's leading anti-clerical historian, Ahmad Kasravi. Also he went from Qom to Tehran to listen to Ayatollah Hassan Modarres —the leader of the opposition majority in Iran's parliament during 1920s.

Imam Khomeini became a *Marja* in 1963, following the death of Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi.

Life in exile

Imam Khomeini spent over 14 years in exile, mostly in the holy city of Najaf in Iraq. Initially, he was sent to Turkey on 4 November 1964, where he stayed in the city of Bursa for less than a year. He was hosted by a Turkish Colonel named Ali Cetiner in his own residence, who couldn't find another accommodation alternative for his stay at the time. Later in October 1965 he was allowed to move to Najaf, Iraq, where he stayed until being forced to leave in 1978, after then-Vice President Saddam Hossein forced him out (the two countries would fight a bitter eight year war 1980-1988 only a year after the beginning of Imam Khomeini's leadership in Iran and the start of Saddam Hussein's term in Iraq) after which he went to Neauphle le Château in France.

Logically, in the 1970s, as contrasted with the 1940s, he no longer accepted the idea of a limited monarchy under the Iranian Constitution of 1906-1907, an idea that was clearly evidenced by his book *Kashf-e Asrar*. In his *Islamic Government* (*Hokumat-e Islami*) —

which is a collection of his lectures in Najaf published in 1970 — he rejected both the Iranian Constitution as an alien import from Belgium and monarchy in general. He believed that the government was an un-Islamic and illegitimate institution usurping the legitimate authority of the supreme religious leader (Faqih), who should rule as both the spiritual and temporal guardian of the Muslim community (Umma).

In early 1970 Imam Khomeini gave a lecture series in Najaf on Islamic Government which later was published as a book titled variously Islamic Government or Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists (*velayat-e faqih*). This was his most famous and influential work and laid out his ideas on governance (at that time):

- That the laws of society should be made up only of the laws of God (Sharia), which cover "all human affairs" and "provide instruction and establish norms" for every "topic" in "human life."
- Since Sharia, or Islamic law, is the proper law, those holding government posts should have knowledge of Sharia (Islamic jurists are such people), and that the country's ruler should be a faqih who "surpasses all others in knowledge" of Islamic law and justice, as well as having intelligence and administrative ability. Rule by monarchs and/or assemblies of "those claiming to be representatives of the majority of the people" (i.e. elected parliaments and legislatures) have been proclaimed "wrong" by Islam unless approved by the faqih.
- This system of clerical rule is necessary to prevent injustice: corruption, oppression by the powerful over the poor and weak, innovation and deviation of Islam and Sharia law; and also to destroy anti-Islamic influence and conspiracies by non-Muslim foreign powers.

A modified form of this *Velayat-e Faqih* system was adopted after Imam Khomeini and his followers took power, and he became the Islamic Republic's first "Guardian" or Grand Leader.

In the meantime, however, Imam Khomeini was careful not to publicize his ideas for clerical rule outside of his Islamic network of opposition to the Shah which he worked to build and strengthen over the next decade. Cassette copies of his lectures fiercely denouncing the Shah as, for example, "the Jewish agent, the American snake whose head must be smashed with a stone," became common items on the markets of Iran, helped to demythologize the power and dignity of the Shah and his reign.

As protest grew, so did Imam Khomeini's profile and importance. During the last few months of his exile, Imam Khomeini received a constant stream of reporters, supporters, and notables, eager to hear the spiritual leader of the revolution.

Grand Leader of Islamic Republic of Iran

Return to Iran

Only two weeks after the Shah fled Iran on January 16, 1979, Imam Khomeini returned to Iran triumphantly, on Thursday, February 1, 1979, invited by the anti-Shah revolution which was already in progress.

Conservative estimates put the welcoming crowd of Iranians at least three million. When Imam Khomeini was on plane on his way to Iran after many years in exile, a reporter, Peter Jennings asked him: "What do you feel?" and surprisingly Imam Khomeini answered "Nothing!"

In a speech given to a huge crowd on the first day of returning to Iran, Imam Khomeini attacked the government of Shapoor Bakhtiar promising "I shall punch their teeth in." He also made a variety of promises to Iranians for his coming Islamic regime: A popularly elected government that would represent the people of Iran.

Iran-Iraq War

Saddam Hussein, Iraq's secular Arab nationalist Ba'athist leader, was eager to take advantage of Iran's weakened military and (what he assumed was) revolutionary chaos, and in particular to occupy Iran's adjacent oil-rich province of Khuzestan and undermine attempts by Iranian Islamic revolutionaries to incite the Shia majority of his country.

With what many believe was the encouragement of the United States, Saudi Arabia and other countries, Iraq soon launched a full scale invasion of Iran, starting what would become the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War (September 1980 - August 1988). A combination of fierce patriot resistance by Iranians and military incompetence by Iraqi forces soon stalled the Iraqi advance and by early 1982 Iran regained almost all the territory lost to the invasion. The invasion rallied Iranians behind the new regime, enhancing Imam Khomeini's stature and allowed him to consolidate and stabilize his leadership.

Although outside powers supplied arms to both sides during the war, the West (America in particular) became alarmed by the possibility of the Islamic Revolution spreading throughout the oil-exporting Persian Gulf oil and began to supply Iraq with whatever help it needed. The war continued for another six years, with 450,000 to 950,000 casualties on the Iranian side and the use of chemical weaponry by the Iraqi military.

As the costs of the eight-year war mounted, Imam Khomeini, in his words, "drank the cup of poison" and accepted a truce mediated by the United Nations. As the war ended, the struggles among the clergy resumed and Imam Khomeini's health began to decline.

Death and Funeral

After eleven days in a hospital for an operation to stop internal bleeding, Imam Khomeini died of cancer on Saturday, June 3, 1989, at the age of 89. Many Iranians mourned Imam Khomeini's death and poured out into the cities and streets. More than 10 million people from across the country attended Imam Khomeini's funeral to form one of the largest ever funerals in the world.

Following Imam Khomeini's demise, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei came to be selected on June 4, 1989 by the Assembly of Experts to be his successor, in accordance with the Constitution.

Works:

- Velayat-e Faqih
- Forty Hadiths (Forty Traditions)
- Adab-e Salat (The Disciplines of Prayers)
- Jihad-e Akbar (The Greater Struggle)
- Tahrir al-Wasilah
- Interpretation of Surah Fatihah
- Serr al-Salat (Secrets of Prayers)
- Interpretation of Dawn Pray
- Interpretation of Forces of Reason and Negligence Tradition
- Hajj