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Tehran's Open Horizon

Lebanese views on the Iranian Revolution of 1979

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Ayatollah Khomeini in 1980

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In its fortieth year, the Iranian Revolution has become a victim of teleology. In order to explain the sectarian malaise of the present-day Middle East, observers point to the global shock caused by the Shah's entirely unexpected downfall.^[1] "Radical" Shi'ism, it seems, was set loose in the spring of 1979. This frightening movement did not hide its expansionist goals, fuelled by the flames of revolutionary change.^[2] With Shi'is "awakening in Iran, the years of sectarian tolerance were over".^[3] As a consequence, the Islamic world in general and the Middle East in particular descended into a deadly Shi'i-Sunni game of domination. The toppling of Iraq's long-time ruler Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the aftermath of the "Arab Spring" have exacerbated this perception of a "sectarian tsunami" being unleashed. Iran and its main regional nemesis Saudi Arabia are locked into a fervent geopolitical battle.^[4]

Arguably, however, the emphasis on such a path-dependency comes with its own serious pitfalls. Labelling 1979 as the moment of an exclusivist sectarian explosion and the ground zero of politicized confessional tension in Islam is not only anachronistic but also precludes us from appreciating the utopian horizon of that year. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi has recently emphasized that "[f]orty years ago,

Iranians embodied the [...] philosopher Walter Benjamin's definition of revolution and took a leap into the open sky of possibilities, a costly leap into a world of uncertainty."^[5]

This article highlights two unexpected Lebanese reactions to the Iranian events unfolding on a world stage brimming with expectation. Leaving aside the Shi'i case, as that aspect has been dealt with at length elsewhere,^[6] particular attention must instead be paid to Lebanese Sunni Islamist and leftist thinkers. Taken together, their writings demonstrate that the revolutionary period, and the early 1980s in general, were a laboratory of both ecumenical Islam and serious attempts at forging a leftist-Islamist alliance. Islamist actors perceived Khomeini's rise not only as an opportunity to finally do away with internal dissensions in Islam. It also brought home to them the urgency of reaching out to workers and the urban poor instead of only debating within their own echo chambers. On the Left, excitement also prevailed for much longer than we commonly assume. Iran's own Communist Party, the Tudeh, was not finally crushed before the summer of 1983.^[7] Until then, it remained a staunch supporter of the Islamic Republic and Khomeini. It should thus not come as too big of a surprise that leftist intellectuals in Lebanon, many of whom were born into Shi'i families themselves, were full of admiration for Iran's transformation after the Revolution as well as the country's newly gained "anti-imperialist" credentials.^[8]

Lebanese Sunni Islamists and the Discovery of the Social Question

Articles in the Sunni Islamist Lebanese periodical *al-Aman* in spring 1979 hailed the Iranian Revolution as a watershed moment. Ibrahim al-Masri, the editor of the monthly and later General Secretary of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, put it this way:^[9]

The future in Iran will belong to Islam, even if the road will take long and if it means thousands of victims. The events have taught us that it is impossible that blood flows in vain... The Islamic movement in Iran has proven its appropriateness and its strength of character (*jadaratahu wa-asalatahu*) in a way that leaves no room for doubt that Islam is the hope of the masses and the dream of their future.^[10]

Khomeini, according to al-Masri, had been successful in fostering the perception of Islam as a message of liberation and progress (*risalat tahrir wa-taqaddum*) among university students and intellectuals once again.^[11] Personal observations and visits to revolutionary Iran later deepened this perception on behalf of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya. The Sunni Muslim scholar Faysal al-Mawlawi himself had visited Khomeini during his French exile.^[12] In al-Mawlawi's view, the separation between Iran and the Arab states, which had largely been caused by the Shah's support for Israel and his secular policies, was now removed. Iran had once again re-joined the Islamic community.^[13] Despite the fact that foreign and Arab media outlets kept insisting on the Revolution's supposedly Shi'i character, al-Mawlawi reiterated Iran's insistence on its ecumenical Islamic credentials. He highlighted the shared goal of electing a believing Muslim as ruler (*al-hakim al-muslim*) who would impose *shari'a* on the Muslim community.^[14]

The development of a great coalition between Shi'i clerics and the left, which had made the upheaval in Iran possible, shaped the perspective for Lebanese Islamist observers to watch out for similar potential at home.^[15] Yet Ibrahim al-Masri held that, among Arab Islamists, a lack of awareness for their surroundings made such an alliance outright dangerous. In Masri's view, Islamists in Lebanon and elsewhere continued to be obsessed with the purity of creed (*'aqida*) and Islamic law. They did not, however, address the social question (*al-mas'ala al-ijtima'iyya*), although this was *the* burning issue for the people. Against the background of a civil war, the Lebanese struggled with horrendous inflation, hoarding of commodities, deprivation in many areas of the country, unsafe working conditions, and insufficient wages. Despite these obvious problems in society, the Islamists continued to direct their attention toward cleansing the people's soul from false conceptions of Islam and engaging in complicated discussions only discernible to a highly educated elite. This was by no means sufficient to meet the leftist challenge. Islamists had to step out of their comfort zone and be present on the factory floors, in the narrow lanes, the damp huts, and squalid buildings.^[16] Further

articles echoed this view, lamenting the feebleness of Islamist outreach efforts and lack of contacts to fishermen, tobacco producers, and refugees from the south. In the spring of 1979, the Islamists were thus not able to cash in on the Iranian Revolution despite its Islamic ring. Its legacy in the country was instead claimed by the leftist, pan-Arabist Lebanese National Front (*al-haraka al-wataniyya*), which portrayed the fall of the Shah as a revolution of the toiling masses.^[17] In short: the Islamic movement, according to authors belonging to al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, had so far distinguished itself primarily through ignorance and inactivity. "We do not build hospitals, do not set up cooperatives, do not establish clinics. And we do not even know how many workshops or factories there are in Lebanon." The Islamists simply did not possess the level of commitment to "social justice" (*al-'adala al-ijtima'iyya*) which was required of them. This painful realization was an important lesson they drew from the Iranian Revolution.

Religion and the Struggle against Imperialism

Lebanese leftist thinkers similarly paid close attention to the domestic scene in Iran, as demonstrated by the coverage in^[18] This periodical, published from Beirut at the time, is officially the organ of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) but had gained a much broader socialist appeal since the 1960s.^[19] was not silent on Iran's pressing domestic problems. It dealt extensively with brutal suppression of the Kurdish uprising or attacks on the press and criticized moves by the ruling clerics to bar certain lay candidates from taking their seats in the constitutional convention during the summer of 1979.^[20] Yet contributors to *al-Hurriya* were adamant that they blamed neither Shi'i clerics nor Islam per se for these troubling developments. Instead, the magazine saw Khomeini and allied leaders as part of the "progressive revolutionary forces."^[21] There could be no doubt that Iran had embarked on crucial democratic projects and formed a bulwark against all those "reactionary systems working for imperialism", such as Bahrain or Saudi Arabia.^[22] Echoing Tudeh polemics, articles in *al-Hurriya* frequently labelled Iran's first provisional government under the leadership of Mehdi Bazargan (d. 1995) as the true enemy.^[23] These "liberal" politicians worked, according to the periodical, hand-in-glove with rightist forces among the clergy and the military in trying to turn back the clock in Iran.^[24] Such views are vividly expressed in an article written by Fawwaz Traboulsi in 1979, offering his readers a choice between two forms of Islam.^[25] On the one hand, there was Khomeini's Islam, which was the Islam of Tehran's poor. It had deep social and historical roots while also being attuned to the needs of the time, open to knowledge, and independent legal reasoning (*ijtihad*). It put an axe to the roots of exploitation in order to tear these out in resolute fashion. This Islam stood for national liberation, national unity, and brotherhood among the peoples (*al-taharrur al-watani wa-l-wahda al-qaumiyya wa-l-ta'akhi bayn al-shu'ub*). The alternative was the Islam of the rulers (*umara'*), the sheikhs, and the kings, of the traders of the bazars and the graduates of American universities. Indeed, the choice was a stark and ultimately binary one

between an Islam of tyrants or [an Islam of] the oppressed (*mustada'fin*) of the earth. The latter is capable of finding common ground with the thought of the secular oppressed (*al-mustada'fin al-'almani*) and their revolutionary movements. This is their slogan: "Oh oppressed of the earth, both workers and downtrodden people, unite!"^[26]

Conclusion: Late Reckoning and a Look across the Border

These last sentiments were expressed in direct reaction to the Iranian takeover of the US embassy in November 1979. Reflecting on what was later in store for leftist groups in Iran, Fred Halliday has called this blind excitement an "anti-imperialism of fools".^[27] Yet even in hindsight, more research is required to confidently delineate how and when Islamists and leftist groups in Lebanon and beyond finally turned their back on Iran. Even this eventual break and parting of ways was far from as straightforward as it might appear at first glance. Many relations persisted, as demonstrated by existing travelogues or participation in Iran-sponsored conferences. Additionally, as of yet we have no clear understanding as to how revolutionary ideas and efforts of a leftist-Islamist amalgamation, tried and tested in Iran, developed a life of their own and were consequently adapted and reworked by

Sunni groups, for example. When we look across the border, the eventual disenchantment kicked in much sooner and is definitely easier to pin down than in Lebanon. In Syria, the local Muslim Brotherhood branch was desperately counting on Tehran for support in its revolt against Hafez al-Assad and the Baath regime.^[28] Yet Tehran in the early 1980s decided that world revolution and the support of the Syrian "liberation movement" was in the end a less pressing concern than courting reliable allies in the region. The implications of this decision are apparent to this day, with Tehran along with Moscow forming one of the closest allies who helped Bashar al-Assad stem the tides of the Syrian civil war.

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[1] Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[2] R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Export of the Revolution: Politics, Ends, and Means," in *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, ed. John L. Esposito (Gainesville, FL: Florida International University Press, 1990).

[3] Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Updated edition (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

[4] Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Sectarianization of Geopolitics in the Middle East," in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (London: Hurst, 2017); Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017). For attempts at theorizing the situation in the Middle East, compare Morten Valbjørn and Raymond Hinnebusch, "Exploring the Nexus Between Sectarianism and Regime Formation in a New Middle East: Theoretical Points of Departure," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (2019), pp. 2-22.

[5] Behrooz Ghamari Tabrizi, "The Iranian Revolution Turns Forty: Dare to Know, Have the Courage to Act!," <https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/02/12/the-iranian-revolution-turns-forty-dare-to-know-have-the-courage-to-act/>, accessed on 16 August 2019.

[6] Norton, Augustus R. (1987): *Amal and the Shi'a. Struggle for the soul of Lebanon*. Austin: University of Texas Press; , *Amal and the Shi'a. Struggle for the soul of Lebanon*; H. E. Chehabi, "Iran and Lebanon in the Revolutionary Decade," in *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, ed. H. E. Chehabi and Rula J. Abisaab (Oxford: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr, *Shi'ite Lebanon. Transnational Religion and the Making of National Identities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Joseph Elie Alagha, *Hizbullah's Identity Construction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011)

[7] Marxist-Leninist activists, who had been freshly released from prison as part of a general amnesty, founded the Tudeh party in Iran in 1941. Enjoying close links with the Soviet Union, the party flourished during the 1940s but was banned after an unsuccessful attempt on the Shah's life in 1949,

and again after the overthrow of the nationalist government of prime minister Mohammed Mosaddegh in 1955. The Tudeh leadership spent the 1960s and 1970s mostly in exile and was struggling to make headway among Iran's students abroad, who were drawn to rival leftist factions instead. Shortly before the downfall of the Shah, the Tudeh leadership declared its full support for the Revolution and Khomeini at a congress in Leipzig, East Germany. In spring 1979 the senior leadership returned to Iran and Communist prisoners were set free. The party resumed its overt activities and quickly managed to attract many of its former supporters. See Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

[8] Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley, Cal: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 177-208. The Tudeh was by no means the only leftist force in Iran, of course. For an overview, see Val Moghadam, "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran," *New Left Review*, no. 166 (1987), pp. 5-28. On revolutionary leftist thought in Lebanon since the 1960s, see also Fadi Bardawil, "Theorising Revolution, Apprehending Civil War: Leftist Political Practice and Analysis in Lebanon (1969–79)," *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, no. 16 (2016).

[9] On al-Masri, see www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php. On al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, see Fatima 'Itani, Rana Sa'ada, Amal I'tani, and Muhsin Muhammad Salih, *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya fi Lubnan* (Beirut: Markaz az-Zaytuna li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Istisharat, 2017), pp. 77-88.

[10] Ibrahim al-Masri, "Harakat al-Imam al-Khumayni judhuriha al-islamiyya wa-afaqiha al-siyasiyya", *al-Aman* 1 (2 February 1979), p. 17.

[11] Ibid., p. 16. Compare Hasan Husayn, "al-Judhur al-tarikhiyya li-l-thawra al-iraniyya," *al-Aman* 6 (9 March 1979), pp. 42-43.

[12] On al-Mawlawi, see also <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/icons/2014/11/6/%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%D9%8A>.

[13] Faysal al-Mawlawi, "al-Qadaya al-islamiyya fi marhala ma ba'd al-Khumayni," *al-Aman* 4 (23 February 1979), p. 7.

[14] Ibid., p. 8. Compare also Nabih 'Abd Rabbihi, "al-Muntalaqat al-asasiyya li-l-thawra al-iraniyya," *al-Amān* 5 (1 March 1979), pp. 12-14.

[15] Already in 1974, the prominent Shi'i leader Musa al-Sadr, who disappeared in 1978, had founded the Movement for the Dispossessed (*Harakat al-Mahrumin*). His declared goal with this organization was to struggle "relentlessly until the security needs and the social grievances of the deprived—in practice the Shi'a—were satisfactorily addressed by the government." By adopting such leftist issues, al-Sadr was trying to counter the appeal of communism among Lebanese Shi'is. The onset of the Lebanese civil war, however, meant that the military wing of the movement, which had adopted the name Amal, became much more prominent (and functional) in the long run. See Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a*, pp. 47-48.

[16] Ibrahim al-Masri, "al-Islamiyyun wa-l-mas'ala al-ijtima'iyya," *al-Aman* 4 (23 February 1979), pp. 24-26.

[17] Abd al-Hadi Muhammad, "Adwa' 'ala al-islamiyyun wa-l-mas'ala al-ijtima'iyya," *al-Aman* 6 (9 March 1979), p. 36.

[18] For two excellent overviews of how Palestinian Maoists were drawn to the Iranian Revolution, see also Manfred Sing, "Brothers in Arms: How Palestinian Maoists Turned Jihadists," *Die Welt des Islams* 51 (2011); Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, "De Pékin À Téhéran, En Regardant Vers Jérusalem La Singulière Conversion À L'islamisme Des « Maos Du Fatah »,," *Cahiers de l'Institut Religioscope*, no. 2 (2008).

[19] Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[20] See, for example, Sa'id Jawad, "'Ala hamish al-intikhabat al-iraniyya: al-taqaddum, wa-l-marawiha wa-l-akhtar", *al-Hurriya* 927 (12 August 1979), pp. 26-27. For more background on this crucial time period in Iran, see Abbas Amanat, *Iran. A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 773-819.

[21] "Al-Taleghani mithal al-Imam al-thawri al-taqaddumi", *al-Hurriya* 932 (17 September 1979), p. 29.

[22] Sa'id Jawad, "al-Hulul al-dimuqratiyya li-l-mushkilat al-dakhiliyya tuwallid siyasat kharijiyya thawriyya", *al-Hurriya*, 943 (1 October 1979), pp. 42-43.

[23] Mohsen M. Milani, "Harvest of Shame: Tudeh and the Bazargan Government," *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 2 (1993), pp. 307-320.

[24] Wa'il Zaydan, "Ma'rakat Iran hiya ma'rakat al-'arab aydan", *al-Hurriya* 942 (03 December 1979), pp. 6-7 and Sa'id Jawad, "Al-Thawra al-Iraniyya wa-l-'arab... wa-idarat al-sira' didd al-imbiriyaliyya, *al-Hurriya* 943 (10 December 1979), pp. 35-36.

[25] Fawwaz Traboulsi (b. 1941) co-founded the Organization for Communist Action in Lebanon in 1970. During the civil war, he fought at the front and worked as the editor of *al-Hurriya* before receiving his PhD from the University of Paris VIII and becoming a professor of history and political science at the American Lebanese University. See Baradawil, "Theorising Revolution", p. 9.

[26] Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Iran wa-l-Sa'udiyya wa-l-namudhaj al-sa'udi", *al-Hurriya* 942 (3 December 1979), pp. 4-5.

[27] Farid Nouri, "Interview with Fred Halliday: The Iranian Revolution and Its Implications," *New Left Review*, no. 166 (1987).

[28] Yvette Talhamy, "The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 4 (2009), pp. 569-572; Umar F. Abd-Allah and Hamid Algar, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983).