

INTERVIEW OF AYATULLAH KHUMAYNI  
WITH THE CORRESPONDENT OF  
LE MONDE, LUCIEN GEORGE

Since the beginning of the present (Christian) year, large-scale riots have taken place regularly in Iran, from Qum to Tabriz, and have engulfed numerous cities in flame. This week, too, classes have been suspended at several universities situated in Tehran . . .

The demonstrations constantly repeat the name of the leader of the Shi'i Muslims, Ayatullah Khumayni, who has been living in exile in Iraq since 1965. The death of his son on October 29 under suspicious circumstances, and the publication of an insulting article against the Ayatullah in the government press, formed the origin of the rebellion and uprising that the religious forces have since launched against the Shah.

Ayatullah Khumayni, a bitter foe of the monarchy, has regularly issued proclamations and declarations addressed to the Iranian people, calling on them to rise in revolt. This is the first time, however, that he has granted an interview to the foreign press. He received the special correspondent of *Le Monde* at his place of exile in the sacred city of Najaf.

With a thin face elongated by a white beard, Ayatullah Khumayni spoke to us for two hours, in a forceful style and a calm, deep tone. Even when he repeated his assertion that Iran must get rid of the Shah, and even when mentioning the death of his son, no trace of agitation was apparent in his voice, and his features remained totally composed. His conduct, discipline, power and self-control were the fruit of an ancient wisdom.

In order to convey his opinions and convictions, the Ayatullah did not lay particular stress on his words. Rather he conveyed his meaning with his constantly penetrating gaze. When our discussion touched on a sensitive and

important point, his gaze became particularly sharp and almost unbearable. The Ayatullah has firm and complete determination and is in no mood to accept a compromise. He is determined to carry his struggle against the Shah to its conclusion. It is in the name of this seventy-six year old pious ascetic that numerous riots are now taking place in Iran . . .

These disturbances, that bear religious titles and themes, threaten the regime of the Shah far more than does the leftist opposition.

We are now in the presence of Ayatullah Khumayni, in a room four meters square in a house in the most remote part of Najaf, a city which geographically speaking is one of the worst desert-regions of Iraq.

On the road between Baghdad and Najaf a violent wind arose, stirring up the sand. Such was the force of the wind that it tossed our car around like a piece of straw and finally brought us to a halt in a pile of sand. The driver saw in this a sign of God's anger and wrath, and began reciting verses from the Quran . . .

Here in the holy land of the Shi'a Muslims, God The Just and the Lover of Justice is omnipresent. The tomb of Ali upon whom be peace, the first Imam and the son-in-law of the Prophet, is in Najaf. In Karbala there is the tomb of Imam Husayn, the third Imam and the grandson of the Prophet. These tombs of these Imams lie beneath gilded domes that constantly sparkle and gleam; the interior of the structures also are decorated with thousands of shining mirrors. The Imam Husayn and all of his descendants, down to the eleventh Imam, were killed by the Umayyad and Abbasid usurpers.

This arresting wealth, against the background of the infinite poverty of the environment, is not in fact surprising, for it forms a kind of compensation for the Islam of the poor, i.e., Shi'ism. Shi'i Islam, the followers of which constitute one sixth of the world Muslim population, has been waiting

for the appearance of the Twelfth Imam for ten centuries. This Imam will establish a just government and establish justice throughout the world.

Although the holy places of the Shi'a are situated in Iraq (half of the population of which is Shi'a), the Shi'a's live particularly in Iran, and in fact 93% of the 33 million Iranians are Shi'as.

Whoever controls this mass of Shi'as and brings them into motion practically governs Iran. Does this aged and pious man, Ayatullah Khumayni, have this power?

The Shah exiled this pious man from Iran in 1963, and since 1965, after a period spent in Turkey, he has been living in Najaf. The death (or murder?) of his son has become the occasion for successive riots that have been shaking Iran every forty days.

Ayatullah Khumayni's modest dwelling is situated, in the turning of one of the narrow alleyways of Najaf, where the houses are huddled together to give protection against the burning rays of the sun. His house resembles the dwelling of the poorest residents of Najaf. Not more than twelve of those close to him were present in the three rooms of the house. No sign is to be seen in this modest dwelling of the power of revolutionary leaders, or the leaders of oppositional fronts living in exile. If Ayatullah Khumayni has the power to stir Iran and arouse rebellion, his power derives of a certainty from his hold on the minds of the Iranian people. The influence of Ayatullah Khumayni, instead of decreasing after his exiling from Iran, has on the contrary increased tenfold.

The Ayatullah, a firm and taciturn man, has not previously addressed his remarks to the foreign press. His present interview with *Le Monde* is therefore, the first that he has ever given.

**Q. The Shah accuses you and the other religious leaders of being obscurantists and reactionaries. What do you say to this?**

A. "The Shah is the very essence of obscurantism and is oriented toward the past." For fifteen years, in all my declarations to the Iranian people, I have always insistently demanded the economic and social development of my country. But the "Shah, carrying out the policy of the imperialists, seeks to maintain Iran in a backward state." "His regime is dictatorial: individual freedom has been eliminated, and genuine elections, as well as the press and political parties, have been suppressed." In violation of the constitution, the deputies are imposed by the Shah, political and religious associations are forbidden, judiciary independence and cultural liberty no longer exist. The Shah has usurped all three branches of power. He has established a one-party system. Worse still, he has made membership in this party compulsory, under pain of reprisals.

Our agriculture, which 23 years ago exceeded our needs and enabled us to be exporters, has been destroyed. According to the figures cited by the Shah's own prime minister two years ago, Iran imports 93% of the food products it consumes. This is the result of the Shah's so-called land reform. Our universities are closed half of the time; our students are beaten and jailed several times a year.

"The Shah has destroyed our economy and squandered the oil income — our source of future wealth — on buying armaments gadgetry at exorbitant prices." This is incompatible with the independence of Iran.

I am against the Shah precisely because his policy of subjugation to foreign powers compromises the progress of my people. When the Shah claims to be leading Iran to "the frontier of a great civilization," he is lying, and makes use of this excuse in order to undermine the independence of the country and to shed the blood of the people. The workers, peasants, students and merchants, women and men alike, are all struggling against the reactionary regime of the Shah that is oriented toward the past.

It is because of these undeniable realities that the "Shah is attempting to distort the reasons for our opposition to him, and accuses us of being obscurantists and reactionaries." If

one day we succeed in overturning his rule, he will be brought to trial for all that he has done against the economic and cultural progress of our people; the entire world shall come to learn of his crimes.

**Q. Accused of obscurantism, you have done nothing more than throw the accusation back at the Shah. Your answer is not necessarily convincing. What is your position on certain problems such as land reform, industrialization and the status of women?**

A. The Shah's land reform was aimed above all at creating a market for foreign countries. The reform that we wish to undertake will enable the peasant to benefit from his labor and will penalize landowners who have acted contrary to Islamic law.

**Q. Will the lands that have been confiscated be returned to their former owners?**

A. Certainly not. The landowners accumulated money for years without making the distributions of wealth enjoined by Islam. They have thus held on to wealth belonging to the community, in defiance of Islamic law. If we come to power, we will confiscate their ill-gotten wealth and redistribute it equitably among the needy.

"As for the industrialization of the country, we are completely in agreement with this aim, but we desire an industry that should be fully national and independent, one integrated into the economy of the country and harmoniously balanced with agriculture in the service of the people." We do not want an industry that is dependent on foreigners and consists of assembly plants, like the industry now being established in Iran. "The industrial and agricultural policy of the Shah has turned us into a society of consumers, for the benefit of the imperialist powers."

"As for women, Islam has never opposed her liberty." On the contrary, it has always been against the concept of woman as object and has restored her dignity to her. Woman is the equal of man, and like him she is free to choose her

destiny and her activities. But the regime of the Shah is attempting to prevent women from exercising their liberty by plunging them into immorality. It is against this that Islam rises up in protest. This regime has destroyed the liberty not only of woman but also of man. Both women and men fill the prisons of Iran, and it is there that their liberty is menaced. We wish to liberate women from the corruption that is menacing them.

**Q. What do you think of the term "Islamic Marxist" constantly used by the regime to describe the rioters? Do you have any organic relationships with the extreme left?**

A. It is the Shah who has used this expression, followed by his bootlickers. It is a false and contradictory concept invented in order to discredit and eliminate the struggle of our Islamic people against the regime. The Islamic concept, based on the unity of God, is the antithesis of Marxism. The expression "Islamic Marxist" is an absurdity.

Another phrase used by the Shah and his propaganda machine — "the alliance between black reaction and red subversion" — has the same objective: to frighten the Muslim population and sow confusion among it, in order to destroy its opposition to the regime, an opposition that is total and irreversible.

"There has never been any alliance between the Muslim masses struggling against the Shah and communist elements, whether extremist or otherwise. I have always stressed in my proclamations that the Muslim people must remain homogeneous in their struggle and shun any organic collaboration with communist elements. This is the manner in which we are struggling against the Shah and shall continue to struggle, and it is precisely for this reason that the Shah wishes to distort the very bases of our struggle.

**Q. Instead of an organic relationship, can you envisage a tactical alliance with the Marxists in order to overthrow the Shah? If you are successful, what will be your conduct and behavior toward them?**

A. "No, we will not collaborate with the Marxists, even in order to overthrow the Shah. I have given specific instructions to my followers not to do this. We are opposed to their ideology, and we know that they always stab us in the back. If they came to power, they would establish a dictatorial regime contrary to the spirit of Islam.

Nonetheless, at the same time, in the society that we wish to establish, the Marxists will be free to express themselves, because we are convinced that Islam has the answers for the needs of the people. Our faith is capable of countering their ideology. From the very beginning of Islamic thought, the question was posed of those who deny the existence of God. We have never deprived them of their freedom or infringed upon it. Everyone is free to express his opinions, but not to conspire.

**Q. In your opinion, what is the cause for the flare-up of riots in Iran? Why has it come at this moment in particular?**

A. The repression exercised by the Shah, like his father before him; the misery that afflicts our people, deprived of its liberty, independence, progress and well-being, and fed on lying promises, especially during the last fifteen years — this is the cause for the demonstrations. The deterioration of economic, social and cultural conditions, and the extent of repression have reached an intolerable degree. The recent riots are the prelude to a gigantic explosion with incalculable consequences.

The counter-demonstrations organized by the police with the participation of people hired for the purpose, the slaughters enacted in every village and town, are aimed at preventing the overthrow of the Shah.

**Q. Do you think that your son was assassinated? If not, why was his death the signal for the explosion?**

A. I cannot say for sure what happened. I know only that on that day before his death he was in good health and that certain suspicious people visited him that evening,

according to reports I have received. The next day he was dead. How? I cannot say.

The discontent of the people expressed itself on this occasion. Naturally, our people loves its servants and considers me as its servant, as it did my son. From that time on, every massacre organized by the regime has provoked new outbursts forty days later. But the essential factor is not my son; it is the revolt of a people against its oppressors.

**Q. What is your political program? Do you wish to overthrow the regime? By what type of regime do you wish to replace it?**

A. Our ideal is the creation of an Islamic state. Nonetheless, our first concern is the destruction of this autocratic regime. As a first step, it will be necessary to create a regime answering the essential needs of the people.

**Q. What do you mean by Islamic state? On hearing this phrase, one thinks of the Ottoman Empire or Saudi Arabia?**

A. Our only basis of reference is the time of the Prophet and of Imam Ali.

**Q. Would the return to the constitution of 1906 be a valid solution for you?**

A. The constitutional laws of 1906, on condition that they be amended, could be a foundation for the state we envisage. They serve the cause of Islam.

**Q. The constitution preserves the monarchical regime. Do you envisage a monarchy or a republic?**

A. "The regime we establish will definitely not be a monarchy. It is out of the question.

**Q. Would the accession to the throne of the son of the present Shah be acceptable to you?**

A. We were against the father of the Shah; we are against the present Shah and all of his dynasty. The people want nothing of them.



**Q. Do you intend to head the government yourself?**

A. In my own person? No. Neither my age, nor my position, nor my own inclinations fit me for such a task. If suitable circumstances arise, we will choose qualified persons from among those who are well acquainted with Islamic ideas and concepts of government.

**Q. You have always maintained silence in the face of requests for interviews from the foreign press. Why?**

A. The international press is concerned chiefly with pomp, pretension, show and official ceremony: things like Persepolis, the Shah's coronation, and so on. At the most, it will show some interest in the price of oil, but never in the misfortunes of the Iranian people or the repression they are suffering. The Shah is said to spend \$100 million a year on propaganda abroad.

It is for this reason that throughout the past fifteen years I have addressed my words to the Iranian people, and I shall continue to do so. However, I have been told that your newspaper is independent and concerns itself with the real problems of Iran: torture, massacre and injustice. I hope that this interview will contribute to making known the goals of my people.

**Q. Does the policy of the Shah favoring Israel constitute one of the reasons for your opposition to the regime?**

A. Yes, because Israel has usurped the land of a Muslim people and committed innumerable crimes. By maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel and extending economic aid to that country, the Shah is acting against the interest of Islam and Muslims.

**Q. Would you like Iran to join the Arab countries in their struggle against Israel?**

A. I have always insistently demanded that Muslims of the whole world should join together to fight their enemies, including Israel. Unfortunately, my appeals have gone

unheeded by the different regimes that have come to power one after the other in the Muslim countries. I hope that my appeals will finally be heeded, and I will persist in the same path.

**Q. What is your position toward the United States?**

A. In my proclamations, I have several times defined my position toward the United States and the other great powers that exploit the wealth of the poor countries, imposing their agents on those countries and supporting the repression exercised against the peoples of the Third World. The United States was behind the coup d'état of 1953; it enabled the Shah to return and ever since has kept him in power. It has not changed its policy. As long as this remains the case, my position too will remain unchanged.

**Q. Do you share the belief of certain people that the United States wishes to establish a liberal regime in Iran?**

A. The declaration concerning respect for human rights? Nothing but words; I have no faith in it. It is enough to note that President Carter, during his visit to Iran, renewed his support of the Shah, and the course of events since then has fully demonstrated this continuing support. In any event, we will never accept a regime liberal in appearance but dictatorial in content.

**Q. The most recent series of Israeli operations has led to the occupation of another Arab land, South Lebanon, the people of which are Shi'i. What are your thoughts on this matter?**

A. The people of South Lebanon must return to their home by whatever means possible, and it is their duty to struggle for the restoration of their land before the Israelis can settle their own people there. I myself have requested the people of Iran and the Shi'is of the world to hasten to the help of this brothers in South Lebanon. My call has had its effects. But it is only governments that have at their disposal the necessary means of fulfilling the needs of the people, and it is

only governments that are able to put pressure on Israel and compel it to withdraw from this territory.

**Q. A detachment of Iranian soldiers is now serving with the United Nations force in South Lebanon. Do you think this represents a positive contribution?**

A. We have had experience of the Iranian regime. There is no reason for believing that this regime, that has constantly helped Israel to the detriment of the Arabs, will this time act in the service of a sacred purpose. In my opinion, this act of Iran has as its chief purpose preventing the enemies of Israel from expressing their opinions.

**Q. What is your position and attitude with respect to the Soviet Union, Iran's great neighbor?**

A. The same as my attitude to America. Both powers have exploited our people, and I see no difference between them, or even between them and England. Only when Iran becomes genuinely independent can it establish healthy relations with all the countries in the world.

**Q. Do you think the regime of the Shah is capable of liberalizing itself?**

A. Never. The very principles of democracy and liberty are in fundamental contradiction with the regime and even the person of the Shah. No compromise with him is possible for us; his crimes are without number. The first task of a free government will be to institute proceedings against the Shah for the vast riches he has amassed in foreign banks. He will have to answer for all of the crimes he has committed. Genuine liberalization is impossible as long as the Shah is on his throne.