What is Khomeinism?
Mark Silinsky and Leah Silinsky

In 1944, George Orwell ventured, “Of all the unanswered questions of our time, perhaps the most important is: ‘What is Fascism?’” Thirty-five years later people would ask “What is Khomeinism?” There was no quick answer. This question bedeviled successive generations of Iranians and Iran watchers because Khomeinism changed the world. It is not clear what it is, but it contains elements of Islamism, communism, fascism, and Shia revivalism. This paper will drill-down on each of these four sets and explore how they relate to Khomeinism.

One set of ideas was anchored on Islamism, or political Islam, which began in Egypt and quickly found an audience among Iranian intellectuals and nationalists. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after the World War I signaled the nadir of Muslim prestige and power in the world. In response, some Muslims rallied to revitalize and politicize Islam. Most of the more-important leaders were Sunnis, who included the Indian-Pakistani Abdula Maududi, and the Egyptians Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. Their ideology and strategies gained traction in the early-mid-20th century. It was the Iranian Dr. Ali Shariati who is often called the ideologue of the Iranian Revolution. He promoted Islam as a complete lifestyle and advocated purging Iran of all non-religious elements. This appealed to the religious, poor, and alienated of Iran. Shariati took avant-garde leftist designs of social justice and wedded them to Shia Islam. Shariati lived in Paris in the late 1950s and earned a doctorate in religious studies from the Sorbonne.

The second set of ideas are attached to communism. While some Iranians hoped to recast elements of the Brotherhood in a Shia mold, secular intellectuals looked to the Soviet Union for inspiration. The Communist Party of Iran, the Tudeh, was founded in 1920, and a rival, a harder-left group, the Jangali party, was established at about the same time. The Jangali movement was split by internal bickering and atomized into small hard-left factions. It ended in 1921, but the Tudeh Party continued.
There were left-oriented opinion makers who were independent of communist organizations. Novelist and essayist Jalal Al-e Ahmad was not a communist, but his ideas and literature resounded with progressives, as well as nationalists. His influential 1962 pamphlet “Westoxication” and his short stories argued that Iranians must control all elements of wealth, power, and culture. This was layered on the works of Marx, Lenin, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Frantz Fanon and debated on university campuses and coffee houses. Khomeini wrote favorably about Al-e Ahmad, who analyzed Iranian society through a Marxist lens. Khomeini saluted the mobilizing capacity and revolutionary zeal of Marxists, including Castroists and Maoists, though he did not share their view of religion. In 2007, Al Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden tried to lay the foundations for an alliance between radical Islamism and Western leftism.

The third set of ideas is based on fascism. Fascist elements that attracted some Iranian intellectuals were the glorification of violence, fetishized masculinity, and mass mobilization. They were also taken by the theatricality and fixation on enemies. Iranians applauded German fascism because it was hostile to British colonialism. The Shah admired Hitler, National Socialism, and elements of the Aryan race concept. The elder Shah admired Germany’s agenda. When Persia changed its name to Iran, Hitler reciprocated by making Iranians honorary Aryans.

Some of Iranian intellectuals liked what they saw in Hitler’s collectivist and socialist philosophy. Some sympathy for Nazism continues still today. Khomeini advocated for a dictator to lead an Islamic government. But the philosophy that held the greatest and most enduring pull for most influential Iranians was a resurgent and compelling Shia revivalism, which is the fourth idea set.

The fourth set of ideas is based on Shia revivalism. For over 500 years, Shia Islam has been Iran’s dominant religion. By the mid-20th century, strains of nationalism were fused with Shia fundamentalism. The Shia “Twelvers,” the majority branch of Shia Islam in Iran, believe
that the 12th successor to Mohammed never died. Rather, he is still hiding in “occultation,” and will return to bring universal triumph to Shia Muslims throughout the world. In the spirit of Shariati’s sermons, revivalists believe they can set the stage for the return of the 12th Imam by committing acts of violence. A young revolutionary guard who later became president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said, "The most important task of our revolution is to prepare the way for the return of the Twelfth Imam." 

The paper will explore how these four idea sets converge on seven points. They are anti-democratic conviction, a sense of victimization; sharp focus on implacable enemies; a contempt for non-conformism and the conviction that the individual’s value was subordinated to the collective; the belief in utopia; a mandate for change; and anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism.

There are three points of divergence. They are the role of religion, the distribution of wealth and property, the nature of utopia. The Islamic revolution struck lightening. It needed a security and intelligence service and built one in the Guards. All this is the subject on our paper.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Principles</th>
<th>Islamism</th>
<th>Communism</th>
<th>Fascism</th>
<th>Iran’s Shia Revivalism</th>
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<td><strong>Political Islam</strong>; all agencies of the government enforce Sharia or Islamic law. Non-Muslims are second-class citizens. The goal is a world dominated by Islam. Chief function of women is to produce and raise sons. Utopia defined as an approximation of life in the first generation of Muslims.</td>
<td>Ownership of capital enterprises is placed in the hands of the means of production. There is a dictatorship of the proletariat followed by a lessening of power. Utopia defined as a classless society in which there is no private property, no want, no crime, no profit, and no imperialism.</td>
<td>The individual means nothing and the collective means everything. War and militarism are glorified, and men are valued regarding their masculinity. The chief function of women is to produce and raise sons. Compassion is seen as a weakness. Some fascism is racially based, and some are not.</td>
<td>Bring all elements of Iranian society under Shia Islam as defined by the supreme leader and his clerical associates. Export the revolution abroad. Chief function of women is to produce and raise sons.</td>
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| Leaders | Al Banna, Qutb, Safavi and Mawdudi | Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, modified elements of Shariati’s work | Hitler, Mussolini, and Gentile | Shariati and Khomeini |

| Enemies | Any person or agency that tries to impede the growth of Sharia around the world. Non-conformists. Chief enemies are the United States and Israel. | Capitalists or privately owned capital enterprises; Any person or country that combats or prevents the spread of communism. Non-conformists | Anyone or agency that impedes the consolidation of state power. Those challenging the authority of the state. Free spirits. Racial, political, and religious groups that do not conform to state norms. | Western states, particularly the United States and Israel. Sunni states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Those considered degenerates, particularly gays and avant-garde artists. |

| Strategies | Promote and penetrate civil society; work from within; once in power, eliminate opposition to Islamic law. After Islamic law is established in Muslim-majority countries, bring Islam to the entire world. | Subversion – undermine the authority of state. Erode existing culture. Revolution – using armed force to overthrow existing government. | Strategies are similar to those of communists. There is tactical flexibility. Fascists, like communists, will use elections, infiltrated political parties, advocate subversion, and terrorism. Once they have power, they do not relinquish it. | When out of power, subvert the existing system and partner with opponents of the current regime. |
## Table One – Selected Totalitarian Ideologies of the 20th Century

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<th>Status</th>
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<td>Very pervasive in parts of the Islamic Brotherhood;</td>
<td>Discredited after the fall of the Soviet Union; cultural Marxism exists in some academic disciplines in the West, particularly in the humanities and social sciences</td>
<td>Thrived for years in the 1930s and mid-1940s and was, largely destroyed in World War II.</td>
<td>Very pervasive in religious cohorts in Iran and in many areas of Iranian control. Near-total control of Iranian society through the Guards; suppressed or killed intelligentsia</td>
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