

# KHOMEINI'S IRAN

*Khomeini's Iran is very different from the Shah's, but pretensions to being a local great power and the desire to influence the politics of the entire Middle East are characteristics they both share.*

BY FRANCINE LECOURS

**W**HEN THE AYATOLLAH Khomeini took power from Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi in Iran in 1979, he transformed the country from a secular state to a Moslem fundamentalist one. Iran is a country of forty-five million people, eighty-five per cent of whom are Shi'ite Moslems. While Khomeini's Iran is vastly different from the Shah's, they share one characteristic, namely, an ambitious political design for Iran in regional politics.

During the 1960s the Shah's policy was dictated by strategic considerations and laid its emphasis on regional stability, especially in the Persian Gulf. With this strategy and the goal of territorial expansion, Iran conferred on itself the role of policeman of the Gulf, particularly after Britain gave up the job.

In addition to occupying three islands in strategic locations in the Persian Gulf, Iran, with its aspirations to regional superpower status, intervened frequently in the internal affairs of other countries of the region, particularly when their central governments were threatened by rebel groups. This was often accomplished through economic and technical assistance, but occasionally involved direct military intervention. The dispatch of Iranian troops to the Dhofar, in order to assist the Sultan of Oman in his struggle against Popular Front guerrillas, is one example.

The Shah backed his ambitions with a sophisticated military arsenal which made the Iranian army one of the most powerful in the world. Iran's security policy also relied on diplomacy. Political or military alliances resulted in

reconciliations with Ankara, Islamabad, Riyadh and Cairo. And even while establishing close working relationships with most of the Arab countries, it continued to maintain good relations with Israel in the economic and military fields.

The 1979 crisis led to the creation of a Shi'ite Moslem government and, as a consequence, changed the rules of the game in the Middle East. Iranian foreign policy now reflects the revolution and as such, contains some new elements. The advancement of Islam is the cornerstone of this policy and the restoration of Islam as the basis for political legitimacy is the ultimate objective. The preamble to the Constitution of the new republic advocates the founding of an Islamic world order, and the reunification of the community of believers, the *oumma*, has become a priority. According to the fundamentalists, this entails the liberation of Moslem countries ruled by godless governments (read secular governments), and involves a reconciliation of the ethnic, regional and other differences between all Moslem nations.

GIVEN THAT THE KHOMEINI REGIME will be unable to achieve this ambitious plan in the near future, it has chosen to base its hopes on the creation of a regional Islamic order, more or less controlled by Teheran, in which Islam will determine both the political nature of the various countries and their foreign policies.

Teheran furthers its goals by indirect methods such as the

spreading of "revolutionary" propaganda in several Middle Eastern countries (especially Iraq and Lebanon), through the proselytizing of Moslem religious leaders in other countries, activism by Khomeini supporters during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and the provision of financial and logistic assistance to foreign Islamic organizations (particularly for the training of militants in Iranian camps). The best organized among these are the *Hezbollah*, a group of pro-Iranian Lebanese Shi'ites.

Iranian activities often take on a more violent character. Responsibility for both the attempt to overthrow the government of Bahrain in 1981 and the assault on the American Embassy in Kuwait in 1983, has been laid at the door of pro-Iranian elements. Moreover, since the occupation of Lebanon by Israeli troops in 1982, Teheran has supported a contingent of revolutionary guards in that country. The Lebanese government estimates that there are currently several thousand *Pasdarans* in Syria. They make periodic forays into the Bekáa Valley (populated largely by Shi'ite Moslems) in order to spread propaganda and provide military training to activists.

The seven-year-old war between Iran and Iraq can be attributed only indirectly to this "revolutionary" Islamic policy since it was Iraq that launched the hostilities. Moreover, the refusal of Iran to accept a negotiated settlement to the conflict can be explained by the secular tensions which exist between the two capitals, as well as the open animosity between Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Khomeini. An additional fac-

tor is the Khomeini regime's effort to maintain social cohesion by rallying the population to confront a common enemy.

This effort by Iranian leaders since 1979 to export ideology and revolution is a significant component in Iran's regional activism. The rise of a Moslem fundamentalist regime continues to cause major repercussions in the Arab and Islamic world. In the years following the revolution, riots broke out in Moslem countries, from Bangladesh to Morocco. Portraits of Khomeini and slogans inspired by his ideas were always evident on those occasions. The example of Iran appears to have influenced Shi'ite communities in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in their demands for increased rights. Since the late 1970s events in Iran have constituted the most important manifestation of the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East.

Governments in the region have adopted various strategies to protect themselves from this fundamentalist wave which threatens them as much from within as without. In 1981, the conservative monarchies of the Persian Gulf formed the Council for Co-operation in the Gulf (CCG) not only to guard against a possible expansion of the Iran-Iraq war (which had begun to swing in Iran's favour) but also out of fear of fundamentalist groups emerging among their own populations. Following the Iranian revolution, countries such as Egypt and Pakistan placed more emphasis on the significance of Islamic values in setting government policy. By contrast, other