

Le Monde Diplomatique on Iran's Muslim Brotherhood

The following are excerpts from the article by Ahmad Farouhy in the November 1980 issue of the French monthly Le Monde Diplomatique.

The first formulation of Islamism as a philosophy of action—at least for modern times—comes from a Shi'ite Iranian cleric, Seyyed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Toward the end of the 19th century, he elaborated the principles of Muslim fundamentalism: a return to the sources of the faith, purged from all impurities and doctrinal perversions that political power accumulated in the course of centuries.

The ideas of al-Afghani found many followers in Egypt, in particular Mohammed Abdu, grand mufti of Egypt, in 1900. Disciple and companion of al-Afghani, Abdu undertakes to enlarge the principles of Islamic fundamentalism in the socio-political domain. It belongs to Hassan al-Banna, however, founder and ideologue of the Ikhwan al-Muslimin—the Muslim Brothers—to radicalize the thought of al-Afghani to make out of it a tool of combat against the nationalist and secular movement that begins to surface in the Middle East.

Abdel Ghader Onah—member of the political bureau of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers—formulates the theocratic structure of government that must guide this unified nation: the executive power belongs to the imam—the spiritual guide—who must direct the affairs of the state; his responsibility is total, unlimited; he must command the army, proclaim war and peace; the imam must also supervise the dispersal of financial power. For that which is of the legislative power, it redounds uniquely on the *sharia* [Islamic law], while the judicial power must be held by the *ghadhis* [Muslim priests trained to make judgments]. The system of government elaborated by the Muslim Brothers of Egypt around 30 years ago is today that which—minus a few details—presides over the destinies of Iran.

Two events afterwards permitted the Muslim fundamentalists to pass to action against the secular political powers: the nomination of Mossadegh as chief of the Iranian government; the coup of the Free Officers in Egypt.

In May 1951 the Iranian parliament gives full powers to the Mossadegh government to nationalize the Iranian

petroleum industry that was under British control. The arrival to power of Mossadegh pushes the Fedayeen-e Islam—the Iranian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—to try to infiltrate the strong nationalist movement of Mossadegh, with the goal of turning it away from its secular content.

Little-known until then, the secret organization of the Fedayeen-e Islam had been constituted—it seems—in the beginning of the 1930s in Qom, the holy Iranian city. Basing their political ideology on that of the Muslim Brotherhood, recruiting their leaders among the Shi'ite clergy and their militants from the disinherited of the lower depths of Teheran, the Fedayeen were organized in secret cells and often had recourse to terrorism to eliminate the anticlerical personalities in plain sight, notably Ahmad Kasravi, the greatest Iranian historian of the epoch, assassinated in 1943, as well as Prime Minister Hajir, killed the year before.

At the end of 1951, the mullah Seyyed Navab Saffavi, “supreme guide” of the Fedayeen, begins negotiations by the intermediation of Ayatollah Kashani with Mossadegh with the aim of allying the fundamentalists in the battle that his government is leading against the British. However, the conditions posed by Saffavi—three ministerial portfolios; banning of mixed schools, of alcoholic consumption; obligation of women to wear veils—lead to a “no deal” on the part of Mossadegh. In prioritizing secularism and his opposition to the total Islamicization of Iranian political life, the old nationalist leader sends the mullahs back to the mosques. From this moment on, Ayatollah Kashani and his Fedayeen do all they can to battle the nationalist government—trying even to assassinate the Foreign Affairs Minister, Hossein Fatemi—and they collaborate closely with the partisans of the shah during the coup d'état of the CIA, which, in August 1953, overthrows Mossadegh.

The aid that the Fedayeen bring to the shah's regime—notably in its struggle against the Mossadeghists and the communists—permits them from 1953 onward to develop their organization with complete impunity, become thereby the main opposition force of the 1960s. Thus, Ayatollah Khomeini—now one of the leaders of the Fedayeen—judges the moment propitious to take the offensive. The program of reforms undertaken by the imperial government—in which agrarian reform is the most important—will be the pretext for it. This leads from then on to ferocious opposition by the fundamentalists, who accuse the shah of wanting to extend his political control, through the economic restructuring of the country, to all the sectors of the state. On June 6, 1963, Khomeini and the Fedayeen move on its offensive: After three days of riots that rage in the four states, the army of the shah retakes control of the situation. Balance: almost 5,000 dead. Ayatollah Khomeini is exiled, first to Turkey, then to Iraq.