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The Impact of Mysticism on the Islamic Revolution of Iran through the Legacy of Imam Khomeini

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT	
Article History: Received: 19 August 2023 Revised: 11 October 2023 Accepted: 08 November 2023		SUBJECT & OBJECTIVES: The objective of the article is to provide evidence on the impact of mysticism on the Islamic Republic of Iran through the figure, thought, and legacy of Imam Khomeini. To achieve this, the article discusses the relationship between the political thought of Imam Khomeini and his mystical and philosophical views on society and life.	
Key Words: Mysticism Spiritual Journey Religion and Politics Islamic Revolution Imam Khomeini		METHOD & FINDING: The descriptive-analytical method is used to state the role and impact of mysticism on the Islamic Revolution by analyzing and comparing Imam Khomeini's texts and speeches on the topic. Imam Khomeini was a devoted scholar who brought Islamic mysticism to the public realm of discussion, both within the religious seminary system and in the public arena of institutional discussions around the formation of the Islamic Republic.	
DOI: 10.22034/imjpl.2024.17446.1130		CONCLUSION: Imam Khomeini revolutionized the clerical attitude towards politics and proved that religion was still relevant as an ideology capable of building a Modern society. His success in mobilizing his followers went beyond as he achieved this in a historical moment where the discourse of Westernization posed a threat to Iranians. Also, conveyed the revolutionary movement in a unique language featuring connotations of martyrdom, justice, freedom, and political and sociocultural independence. He emphasized the need to revitalize religion through the guidance of jurists and clerics while referencing the mystical traditions of Islam, which highlight its universality and transcendental importance.	
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Introduction

Imam Khomeini has been described as one the most famous religious figures of the 20th century. His impact on Western media, academic debates, and political instances has been the object of numerous research and writings. However, little is known about the mystical profile of the leader of the 1979 revolution that led to the consolidation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, overthrowing a millenary monarchy and radically changing the geopolitical panorama of West Asia.

Mysticism played a pivotal role in the political perspective embraced by Imam Khomeini throughout the pre-revolutionary, revolutionary, and post-revolutionary periods. It served as a guiding force, shaping his

conceptualization of the spiritual path toward attaining a direct connection with God. Imam Khomeini emphasized the significance of spiritual journeys and the transformative power in society and individuals.

These journeys, encompassing the ascent of the soul through stages of purification, illumination, union, and return, (*Amoli, 2010*) provided a framework for individuals to embark upon a profound spiritual awakening that Imam Khomeini visualized as the ultimate goal of the Islamic State.

Through this mystical lens, He envisioned a society that would undergo a collective return to God, illuminating the path toward a higher consciousness and moral awakening while combating the forces of evil, corruption,

imperialism, self-love, worldly passions, and moral slavery.

The fusion of mysticism and politics inspired a social awakening that sought to establish a divine order in the governance of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Imam Khomeini's life and legacy were devoted to fulfilling these individual and collective dimensions of spiritual journeys, and the Islamic Revolution was the pinnacle of such aim.

Based on this, this article will point to establishing the connections between the dimensions of politics and mysticism, arguing whether the Islamic Revolution can be analyzed through its spiritual undertone, and asking what impacts this element had on the institutions of the Islamic Republic.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

In the Islamic tradition, mysticism could be defined as interior knowledge and awakening experience. Some philosophers, especially from the Persian context, have used the term *Ahl-e Ma'rifa* to refer to the people of (mystical) knowledge as the seekers on this path. (*Amoli, 2010*)

This knowledge, which may appear concealed to most people, also refers to a knowledge of the Holy Essence and its Names, Attributes, and Manifestations. (*Ali & Mustafa, 2023: 109*)

On the other hand, during the 16th Century, Mulla Sadra, one of the most important Muslim philosophers of all times, wrote *The Transcendent Theosophy in the Four Journeys of the Intellect*, a dense treatise

exploring the meanings of spiritual journeys while discussing with other philosophers on ideas about time, change, and transformation.

Mulla Sadra's first journey involves moving from the created world towards a deep awareness of the divine reality. The second journey occurs within the divine reality itself, where the seeker perceives the perfections and experiences a series of transformations. The third journey leads the wayfarer back from the divine reality to the created world, allowing them to perceive the mysteries of divine actions in the phenomenal realm, and the fourth journey completes the circle, as the awakened individual, accompanied by God and deeper self-knowledge leads the path towards human perfection and

back to God. (*Corbin, 1998b: 137-138*)

Another issue is dealing with the Islamic revolution. The lexical definition of revolution comes from the Latin revolution, to turn around something, or to change from the original position.

A social revolution, then, means the transformation of the social, political, moral, and/or economic foundations of society, which can be viewed as an event but also as the conjunction of multiple interrelated and simultaneous events that take place in society. (*Siddiqui, 1996: 57*)

The Islamic Revolution of Iran could be defined as the process of Islamization of society that before it had Islamic roots affected by a process of Westernization and the imposition of external

moral values by a ruling class's governing system. Although there are several theories of why the Islamic Revolution happened, it would be more precise to analyze it through a holistic lens with multiple causes, as *Haghighat (2000)* suggests.

But in terms of research background, the East-West divide has long been marked by a distortion of perspectives; Particularly when it comes to understanding complex events and ideologies.

One such instance is the analytic scenario of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, where the mystical aspects have often been overlooked or underrepresented in Western academia; While extensive literature exists on the political, social, and historical dimensions of the revolution, there is a noticeable scarcity

of writings that delve into the profound spiritual and mystical underpinnings that shaped it.

It would be imprecise to say there is no academic exploration of the relationship between mysticism and the Islamic Revolution by Western scholars; Therefore, we can mention a few examples, such as *Ridgeon (2014)* in "*Hidden Khomeini*" in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*.

Also, *Martin (2004)* in "*Creating an Islamic State*" explores in detail the mentioned relationship.

Finally, *Alger (2000)* in "*The Fusion of the Gnostic and Politics in Life of Imam Khomeini*" describes the impact mysticism had on the intellectual and political formation of Imam Khomeini.

This article seeks to solve the problem of the lack of

critical analysis by establishing clear connections between mysticism and politics in Imam's texts that have been translated into English.

The Revolutionary Movement and Change of Perspectives

Around the 1960s, amid the Pahlavi regime's White Revolution, Imam Khomeini began connecting the political unrest with some of the elements of political Islam that he learned about in the seminary.

In this sense, it was important the revival of the sacred biographies of Ahl al-Bayt, something that was still underdeveloped in public discussions about the oppression and arbitrary political decisions of the Pahlavi regime. Although the clergy and most educated urban classes were familiar

with the issues relative to Pahlavi's modernization programs, there was still no clue on how religion and the example of sacred figures could bring a solution.

In "*Islamic Government*", the Imam asserts that the authority of the jurists can be traced back to the Prophet, the Imams, and the leader. (*Imam Khomeini, 2005*)

The Shi'a tradition has extensively studied the verses of the Holy Qur'an which establish that God is the ultimate authority; While the Prophet and "Those who believe," that is, true Muslim believers like Imam Ali, possess a delegated authority:

"Your protector (wali) is only God, and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down". (Qur'an, 5: 55)

“O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you differ among yourselves concerning any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you believe in God and the Last Day”. (Qur’an, 4: 59)

1. Internal Revolution of the Hearts

Other important contributions of Imam Khomeini were the conceptualization of the Islamic prayer and the heart as epicenters of the spiritual awakening of the believer in the process of wayfaring. A well-known tradition, which Imam Khomeini refers to, affirms that prayer is the ascension of the pious. *(Imam Khomeini, 2009: 7)*

As Ibn Arabi explains, prayer is a journey that

transcends physical movement, encompassing the stages of both exoteric and esoteric interpretation and descent of the soul. *(Mora, 2011)*

According to Imam Khomeini, prayer, this ascension to the mysticism and journey of the lovers, is the way to reach this destination. *(Imam Khomeini, 2009: 14-15)*

This does not imply that the outward act of prayer itself is excessively challenging; rather, he highlights that the inner disposition of the mystic, characterized by attentiveness, concentration, and sincerity, is arduous to attain. Therefore, prayer, as well as all human actions, require a state of preparedness and disposition in the heart, which is God’s dwell.

In addition to this, it is crucial to note that

remembrance of God is an essential and constant state that accompanies the traveler throughout their quest. Imam Khomeini emphasizes that without the remembrance of God, the journey cannot yield a positive outcome. *(Imam Khomeini, 2002: 76)*

From an Islamic standpoint, the heart holds significant importance in matters of spirituality, knowledge-seeking, and establishing a connection. The Holy Qur'an extensively describes the heart in various chapters, and the field of mysticism delves into numerous interpretations and hidden secrets concerning it. *(Ibid, 2003a: 180)*

Imam frequently references and comments on the heart, making it one of his most discussed subjects. *(Ibid, 2002: 34)* However, it is crucial to

understand that the heart is not a singular entity and encompasses multiple meanings and conceptualizations in the Qur'an.

One significant aspect is what we can refer to as the malleable heart, denoting a heart that is receptive to influences and capable of transformation. Such a heart is also described as being in a state of turning. Turning is associated with wandering, moving from one state to another.

Imam Khomeini refers to one of God's names as the turner of hearts, implying that He can change a person's heart in favor or against them. *(Ibid, 2008: 12)*

Also, in another instance, quotes the saying, The heart of the true believer lies between two fingers of God, that He may turn it whichever way He pleases. *(Ibid, 2003: 62)*

A heart that is disconnected from God is prone to stray and lose its inherent purpose of return. The heart also behaves like a mirror or a window, that reflects whatever is contained in it. If the individual allows the entrance of others except God, that will be reflected in the individual's heart, attitudes, manners, behaviors, and even beliefs.

Imam Khomeini's theorization of the "heart" is fundamental in the sense that the heart is the compass of the believer in the search for God and the destruction of multiplicities that rest in the individual's loving potentiality. Spiritual awakening is not merely a state of disconnection from the world; But rather the intention of removing idols and combating egotism and idolatry in all of its manifestations.

Therefore, it is clear that Imam Khomeini visualized the development of the Presence of the Heart as a must for his followers and extensively, for all Iranians who embraced the revolution. Following a Qur'anic statement, the internal revolution of the hearts is a prerequisite for the external revolution:

"Truly God alters not what is in a people until they alter what is in themselves. And when God desires evil for a people, there is no repelling it; and apart from Him, they have no protector". (Qur'an, 13: 12)

2. The Theory of "Wilayat-e Faqih"

The theory of "Wilayat-e Faqih" emphasizes that, in the absence of the Imam, "those in authority among you" must fulfill some of the delegated

social duties; However, the extent to which this theory applies to certain areas of governance is debatable among the respected clerics. (Vaezi, 2004)

Imam Khomeini, nevertheless, supports a wide understanding of the notion of Wilayah, by which the highest-ranked wali, representing the authority of the Hidden Imam, can and must rule over political and social affairs; (Imam Khomeini, 2005) Of course, this idea was not created by Imam; But was the result of historical debates within the Shi'a seminary. (Mousavi, 1996)

During his exile, Imam Khomeini wrote "*The Greatest Jihad*", which builds on the themes presented in his Islamic Government lectures. This text is a refined expression of Khomeini's

beliefs about ethics and its importance in promoting moral development within society; Particularly when instilled during the early stages of religious education in the seminary.

As Legenhausem notes, it is through these teachings that we see a compassionate Imam, who acts like a father concerned with the current and future well-being of his country. This task would have been impossible without infusing a mystical tone into the already present anti-imperialist movement.

It is in the ethical dimension of religion that the Imam finds the perfect combination of mysticism and politics. The thesis of Islam as a humanizing project aiming for the betterment and constant perfection of human ethics and behavior is hereby

supported. Thus, politics is nothing but the social regulation of the better ways of behaving under God's commands and the moral conduction of humanity from oblivion back to God. (Ref: *Imam Khomeini, 2008: 7*)

3. Mysticism and Politics

One highly esteemed leitmotif of the mystical tradition is the hadith Qudsi (hadith attributed to God) quoted by Imam Khomeini in his book *"The Disciplines of Prayer"*:

"I was a Hidden Treasure, then I liked to be known, so I created the creatures to become known". (Ibid, 2002: 205)

According to various scholars who have interpreted this tradition, including Ibn Arabi, the hadith explains the purpose of God's creation: to be known by His creatures. (*Addas, 2002*)

The center of this creative action is Divine Love, which enables the existence and origin of all creatures. This Divine Love is an epistemological matter: the desire to be known or as Corbin describes it, the willingness to become the object of God's knowledge. (*Corbin, 1998a: 114*)

Ibn Arabi (2002) believed that without this movement of love and knowledge, existence would not meet its condition of possibility.

Imam Khomeini constantly refers to this hadith in many of his esoteric writings, emphasizing the central role that Divine Love plays in the ethical and spiritual reformation of human beings.

Love is the action that takes the true believer back to its origin, which is nothing else but God. When the

believer abandons the love for this temporary and illusionary world, as well as deceit and self-love, the believer can embark on the journey of repentance, detachment, remembrance, and contemplation.

This path goes beyond the apparent religion and the hypocritical actions that people who pose as believers perform. Rather, it is through constant perfection, repentance from sins, and abstaining from passions and desires that one can reach the state of the spiritual wayfarers; But because there is a humanizing project that descends directly from God, there is also a dehumanizing project tied to Satan as the enemy of humankind.

The Holy Qur'an says:

“O! you who believe! Enter into peace altogether, and follow not the footsteps of

Satan. Truly he is a manifest enemy unto you”.
(Qur'an, 2: 208)

Imam Khomeini mobilized believers against corruption, evilness, and moral deviation through the evocation of the teachings of the prophetic and Imami figures. This was highly effective in terms of political mobilization and even gathered the attention of other ideological forces opposing Pahlavi after 1963.

In esoteric terms, Imam Khomeini evoked these narrations as a hermeneutical movement in politics and a political movement in religion. It was necessary for the context where religious classes faced opposition by both the regime and Modern ideologies, *(Martin, 2004: 100)* and it was also a call to action for quietist or non-political

clerics to support the revolutionary momentum and the rise of “Wilayat-e Faqih”.

The Aftermath of the Revolution

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran was a significant and unprecedented event in history. For Muslims, particularly those who had not experienced an Islamic government, this event was astonishing; While there were criticisms, even from within the Islamic world, the prevailing sentiment was one of openness, high expectations, curiosity, and a renewed sense of contemporary Muslim identity. (*Martin, 2004*)

Imam Khomeini proposed mysticism as a pathway to reconcile the seemingly contradictory dimensions of politics and religion.

The Constitution of the newly formed Republic was a crucial step in this direction, introducing the concept of “Wilayat-e Faqih” and establishing the institutions that supported this system. However, a significant moment that brought mysticism into public discourse occurred during the brief period when nationally televised lectures on the exegesis of the first chapter of the Holy Qur’an were aired, personally conducted by Imam Khomeini. (*Algar, 2000*)

Just as a child’s heart requires nurturing, guidance, and sustenance during its growth, the Islamic Republic was Imam Khomeini’s newborn baby, in need of proper education, guidance, and nourishment for its formation during the rapid changes and existential threats it faced.

Imam Khomeini held a deep respect for mysticism due to its educational capacity, as it provided comprehensive access to and understanding of reality and life.

Therefore, mysticism was not only far from trivial but was essential for the subsequent steps the country needed to take in its pursuit of social justice.

Imam Khomeini embarked on a serious and meticulous effort to explain the complexity of the meanings found in the first chapter of the Qur'an, using a language that the majority of Iranians, including many who lacked formal education, could comprehend.

Although the program aired for only a limited number of sessions, and the Imam did not go beyond the first verse, it served as a remarkable

example of mass public education directly led by the Supreme Leader.

Making these sources accessible to virtually anyone was an endeavor that can be seen as a movement from God to creation, aligning with Mulla Sadra's third journey.

Moreover, martyrdom holds a significant place in the Shi'a tradition of Islam, exemplified by the sacrifice of Imam Hussain and his companions in the tragic events of Karbala.

This historical event has been deeply ingrained in the Shi'a interpretation of history, symbolizing the persecution and martyrdom of Shi'a communities and leaders. The Persian Gulf War or the imposed war, targeting young revolutionary volunteers, can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of this epic narrative.

The fallen fighters were revered as true martyrs, and their memory is honored through public commemorations every year in Iran. Imam Khomeini described them as being in the contemplation of Allah, (Algar, 2000: 9) a central concept to mysticism. Consequently, this event was understood within the mystical framework of martyrdom and divine intervention leading to victory, drawing parallels with Qur'anic references:

“And whosoever fights in the way of God—whether he is slain or victorious—We shall grant him a great reward”. (Qur'an, 4: 74)

Other significant events were the establishment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the “Jihad for the

Reconstruction of Life”. As per Imam Khomeini's vision, the Guard Corps was formed as an ideological force of the Revolution, responsible for safeguarding the borders of the country while striving on the path of God, serving an ideological and cultural function. (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979: 5)

Conversely, the Jihad for the Reconstruction of Life was tasked with the esoteric struggle for improving living conditions and enhancing human welfare. This approach aimed to foster solidarity, compassion, and nation-building through practical initiatives, such as installing water pipes and building constructions. (Siddiqui, 1996: 95)

Another relevant topic was Imam Khomeini's personal leadership signature. Imam's

simple and modest lifestyle was remarkable, considering his position as the Supreme Leader of a growing superpower in West Asia and the administrator of substantial religious funds. His family home remained unchanged, and he contented himself with simple meals, devoting much of his time to studying and reciting the Qur'an.

He opted for less expensive shoes and would cover half a glass of water with a piece of paper to keep it clean and save it for later. (*Ref: Imam Khomeini, 2003b: 16*)

Unfortunately, such examples were not widely followed by most government officials at various levels of the Republic's structure. (*Siddiqui, 1996*)

Imam Khomeini consistently stressed the importance of

reforming existing institutions and implementing a comprehensive ethical program that aligned with the principles of the Islamic Republic.

This program was exemplified by the Imam himself, his family, and close associates, and it served as a model for the officers of the Islamic Republic to follow, embodying values such as modesty, humility, and detachment from worldly possessions.

Imam Khomeini held a strong conviction that the transformation of society should be achieved gradually and through comprehensive means, which encompassed the establishment of resolute institutions and the promotion of religious-based education.

In this context, the revitalization of Islamic social

sciences was seen as a valuable tool, aimed at redirecting scholars and students towards their Islamic foundations instead of relying on theories derived from Western influences.

These Islamic social sciences and universities were expected to serve a dual purpose: first, to address the challenges of the contemporary world through the creation of Islamic institutions, and second, to restore and refine cultural resources (Ref: *Shariati, 2021*) that would reorient Iranians to their values and identity.

It is worth noting that this twofold objective is not limited to Iranian citizens alone, as scholars and religious authorities can also be influenced and absorbed by Western culture and identity. As a result, Imam Khomeini cautioned against such deviations and emphasized the importance of a humanizing endeavor, as expressed in “*The Greatest Jihad*”. (Imam Khomeini, 2008: 39)

The following table summarizes some of the main actions and effects of Imam Khomeini’s mystical footprints on the Islamic revolution and aftermath.

Table 1. Effects of Mysticism on the Islamic Revolution

Dimension	Actions	Effects
Social/ Political	Publicly addressing the Pahlavi regime as oppressive and evil	Redirected the social unrest to specific goals through organized actions by inspired people.
	Actualization and remembrance of Ahl al-Bayt and sacred figures in the present	Called for the continuous hermeneutics of Islamic history as cyclical and inspired the interpretation of current-day affairs as part of a social duty, linked to the legacy of Prophets and Imams.
Cultural	Speeches, lectures, books, and other texts on mysticism and philosophy	Impacted jurisprudence-centered debates within the seminary and reached larger audiences.
	Public exaltation of martyrs	Linked cultural values within Shi’ism with national interests to preserve the revolutionary spirit during conflicting times while recalling the goal of hastening the appearance of Imam Mahdi.
	Qur’anic exegesis on national TV	Advocated for public and mass education in mystical concepts for Iranian society. Enabled interest in the topic and educated in ethics.
Institutional	Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran	Instilled philosophical theories such as “Wilayat-e Faqih” in

		the structure of the Islamic Republic through congruent political, institutional, and mystical terms.
	Creation of institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Jihad for the Reconstruction of Life	Conveyed ideological and cultural inputs in the minds and hearts of thousands of volunteers through programs that physically and morally rebuilt the nation.
Educational	Revitalization of Islamic social sciences and universities	Impulsed the development of Islamic university programs, primary and secondary education, research, and intellectual advancement from an indigenous civilizational perspective.
	Promotion of mystical themes such as the heart, the divine presence, and the spiritual journeys in different scenarios	Cultivated the spirit of mysticism in and outside the religious seminary, enabling the appearance of vast mysticism-inspired productions in arts, sciences, and education.
Moral	Exemplification of a virtuous personality	Imam Khomeini became a model of humbleness, modesty, and proper exemplification of the union of ethics, mysticism, and political/social leadership.
	Politicization of religion in speeches and texts	Called clerics to action, pushing for a non-quietist role during the Pahlavi regime.

Conclusion

Imam's political struggles can be summarized in three key actions:

1. Discarding the alleged separation between politics and religion, thereby pushing clerics to state their position.

(Fahami and Pourkeyvan, 2022: 160)

2. Directly accusing the regime of its actions, crimes, and omissions, which was never publicly denounced by high-ranking members of the clerical class.

3. Attacking foreign powers, including the United States, and their intentions in Iran and West Asia.

Moreover, one of Imam's main struggles was to deliver mystical concepts and complex philosophical themes to the Iranian and larger

worldwide Muslim audience that was not used to such languages.

This struggle aimed at awakening the spiritual and political souls of millions in the context of a revolutionary transformation. Thus, it is clear that Imam's discourses, statements, rulings, works, writings, and even TV broadcasts were aimed at providing clear and comprehensive examples of the relationship between politics, ethics, and spirituality.

The legacy of Imam Khomeini is multifaceted and difficult to condense; But it is crucial to acknowledge a frequently overlooked aspect in Western narratives of his legacy.

This article aimed to highlight the profound influence of Imam Khomeini's

mystical perspective on the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Viewing the revolution solely as a Modern movement that amalgamated religious, economic, social, and cultural factors diminishes the significance of mysticism in shaping Imam vision for a renewed society.

Despite the dominance of jurisprudence-centered discussions and attempts to downplay the educational role of Islamic institutions, Imam Khomeini successfully introduced mysticism to the public sphere. He not only validated the 19th-century theory of “Wilayat-e Faqih” in the contemporary world;

But also established institutions that facilitated its implementation. In essence, Imam Khomeini was a modernizer and traditionalist, reviving seemingly obsolete terms and theories to address Modern challenges.

Above all, Imam Khomeini embodied humility and dedication as he strived to reconnect society with its origins and promote human perfection. His legacy extends far beyond his efforts to bridge the gap between mysticism and revolutionary politics, leaving an indelible mark on Iranian society and the global stage.

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