

Becoming Anti-American

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

Aug 24, 2015

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Supreme Leader Khamenei once warned that animosity toward the United States could harm Iran, but this and other hardline positions eventually became core means to sustain his power.

In November 1979, while getting ready to sleep on the rooftop of a building in Mecca, Iranian politicians Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei turned on the radio to listen to the news. When the radio said that the U.S. embassy in Tehran had been seized by angry students calling themselves "Followers of the Imam's Line" they were shocked. Immediately, Rafsanjani and Khamenei interrupted their trip and returned to Tehran. They both knew that such an incident could have a dramatic impact on the course of the Islamic Revolution when the power of pro-Khomeini revolutionaries was not yet consolidated. But when they arrived in Tehran, they discovered that Khomeini, who was previously unaware of the students' plan to attack the embassy, had endorsed the students' initiative and labelled it "the second revolution" in order to show its significance for the new government.

During the Islamic Republic's first decade, particularly after revolutionaries finished purging the ancient regime's elements from the military and other important institutions, great fissures divided the revolutionaries. The main rivalry was between religious revolutionaries -- Islamists -- and leftists. Marxism developed into a serious threat for religious strata in the decades prior to the revolution. While traditional clergy were trying to respond to Marxism by revitalizing their theological apparatus and strengthening their social network, Islamists had more difficulty. On one hand, Islamism as a modern ideology was born outside the traditional clerical establishment and was seen as a rival, and, on the other hand, Islamism had to compete with strong leftist factions that had effective ideological arsenals to mobilize the dissatisfaction of a rapidly developed society with uprooted social classes against the monarchy. Islamists needed to prove that they have the best of each world; unlike leftists they are authentic because they are not disconnected from tradition and unlike traditional clergy they can change the status quo and fully adopt modern thought and have a detailed map for running the economy and creating the "new man."

Ali Shariati, who died a year before the revolution, was the most prominent theoretician of Islamism, who greatly shaped the discourse of all Islamist revolutionaries including Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Shariati was born in Khorasan and grew up in Mashhad, the same city where Ali Khamenei was born and raised. Shariati and Khamenei were friends, and when news of Shariati's death arrived in Iran, his friends asked Khamenei to pass the news to Shariati's father.

An exceptional orator -- like Khamenei himself -- Shariati masterfully used a Marxist framework to invent a revolutionary interpretation of Islam. For him, there are only two versions of Shiism. The first version, pro-status quo, is represented by the traditional clergy who advocate for monarchy and the separation of religion and politics. The second version is "red Shiism," a revolutionary and sociopolitically dynamic Shiism whose aim is to subvert the existing order and establish a just social and political system. This binary was repeated by Khomeini years later when he contrasted "American Islam" with "Mohammadan pure Islam." The first is represented by both traditional clergy and Arab governments who do not believe that society should be governed by Islam and Islamic jurists and therefore pose no threat to the evil forces in the world, especially America. The second version is revolutionary Islam, which calls for radical changes to society in order to implement Sharia and make religious leaders political leaders. This emergence of the Islamic left captured the essence of Marxist ideology with adapted Islamist notions. For instance, they replaced the proletariat with the Islamic notion of the Umma (the global community of Muslims), substituted historical determinism with divine providence to make deprived people the owners and rulers of the earth, and swapped class conflict for the struggle between the oppressed and oppressors, which would lead to the victory of the oppressed at the end.

Shariati's interpretation of Islam is the best example of such trends becoming extremely popular among youth, including young clerics, because he adopted a modern social and economic ideology such as Marxism without getting contaminated by its philosophical materialism. This Marxist reading of Islam, or Islamic version of Marxism, proved very successful in mobilizing youth for revolution and preventing them from being absorbed by atheist-revolutionary ideologies.

Khamenei himself led a small circle of young university students and seminarians in Mashhad. In their gatherings he lectured on "Islamic Ideology" based on what he learned from Muslim Brotherhood theoreticians like Sayed Qutb, whose works were partly translated into Persian by him as well as other Iranian thinkers like Shariati. When Habibollah Ashouri, a young cleric and one of the circle members, published an essay titled "God's Unity" (Tohid), Khamenei became angry. A bitter fight arose between him and Ashouri due to Khamenei's claim that this essay consisted of notes Ashouri took from Khamenei's lectures. After the plagiarism accusation, they broke up. Soon after the revolution, Ashouri was arrested and executed. One of the charges against him was his heretical beliefs as reflected in his essay "God's Unity," in which he uses the theological principle of unity of God for elaborating an Islamic vision for a classless society promised by Karl Marx.

Islamist ideology steals the attractive elements of Marxism, wraps it in traditional and Islamic mythologies, symbols, concepts, and language, and, in sum, domesticates it so it possesses not only all the advantages of Marxism but is also perceived as an "original," "authentic," and "sacred" ideology that can defeat all "worldly," "imported," and "alien" ideologies which attracted Muslim intellectuals in the twentieth century.

During the revolution, secular leftists allied with Islamists because at that stage the goal was to topple the Shah and empower anti-imperialism. Fighting imperialism or anti-Americanism had unique potential to attract youth, and Islamist leftists or religious revolutionaries had no choice but to adopt and incorporate it into Islamic ideology too. In order to demonstrate originality, Islamic ideology sometimes chose a more aggressive or bold approach to shared values, enemies, or causes with Marxism. If Marxists are anti-American, leftist Muslims should show that they are more effective and sincerely anti-American in order to win the competition. "Followers of the Imam's Line" -- i.e., the

Islamist leftist students who seized the embassy -- won the political battle on two fronts: they defeated Muslim nationalists who were neither anti-American nor revolutionary-minded people but used by Khomeini to facilitate the transition from the ancient regime to the new government, and they defeated other leftists who did not intend to be fully absorbed by Khomeini's camp. The embassy seizure was mostly driven by motivation to change the internal power equation, and it had much less to do with foreign policy as such.

But pro-Khomeini Islamists did not win the competition through the power of their ideas and intellectual debate. After the revolution, pro-Khomeini Islamists won the three-year battle against their rivals by banning their parties, closing their newspapers, forcing them to leave the country, imprisoning their members, and executing hundreds of their high-ranking members and leaders. What ended the competition was not words but rather guns and prison keys.

But this was not the end of all fissures in the newly established government. Islamists themselves started to divide into two camps: right-wing -- those who were mostly connected to the "bazaar" or traditional business class, who were also historically the main funders of the religious establishments and institutions; and left-wing -- those who mostly belonged to the middle class created or reshaped by Pahlavi's modernization, connected to universities and having strong affinities to leftist groups that were suppressed. While Khamenei had an intellectually leftist tendency, he was close to the "bazaar" and opposed the left-wing, especially on its economic agenda.

The first decade of the Islamic Republic witnessed the climax of leftist Islamists' power. During Khamenei's presidency, leftist Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi held executive power while Khamenei was a figurehead. Although Khamenei disagreed with Mousavi regarding his leftist welfare-state agenda as well as on other issues, he was unable to dismiss or constrain him. While speaking about rapprochement with the U.S. was taboo, Khamenei privately warned of the ramifications of U.S.-Iranian animosity for the future of the country. Being anti-American was only helping the status of left-wing socialization of the economic structure, and weakening the bazaar's economic strength and its sociopolitical power base.

When Khomeini died in 1989, western media described his successor, Ali Khamenei, as a moderate figure who might open the doors of the country to the West. The West's window of hope was a troubling concern for Iranian leftists, however. Ali Khamenei, then fifty years old, was neither a powerful politician nor possessing advanced religious credentials. His appointment to the position of Supreme Leader was due to the fact that no one expected to find a charismatic leader similar to the Islamic Republic's founding father. Since leftists could make Khamenei weaker by portraying him as a pro-American right-winger ineligible to succeed the most outspoken anti-American Muslim leader in the twentieth century and therefore unable to be a true guardian of the revolution's heritage, he swiftly reversed his position. In order to strengthen his power and disarm critics, he became so anti-American that he developed into the loudest anti-American voice in Iranian politics. Due to the domestic dynamism of Iran and also the global decline of communism, marginalized leftists started to revise their ideology and political attitudes. Powerless leftists became reformists and revisionists who advocated detente with the West and attempted to break the taboo of relations with the U.S. While many of the same students who climbed U.S. embassy walls began to write about liberal democratic values such as tolerance, pluralism, civil society, and freedom of expression, the hard core of the regime remained anti-American.

As president, Khamenei was not happy with Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie. He tried to find a solution for dismissing the fatwa, but Khomeini publically bashed him. He also supported powerful elements who tried to prevent the parliament from cutting diplomatic relations with Britain after the revolution. Furthermore, when the leftist prime minister wanted the support of the ruling jurist to issue an executive order to enforce tough regulations on employers, Khamenei opposed this leftist approach and in a public speech said that the authority of the ruling jurist is not unlimited. Immediately Khomeini denounced his weak understanding of *velayat-e faqih*, or

guardianship of the jurist. This changed, however, when Khamenei became a Supreme Leader himself. Ironically, when he became Khomeini's successor, not only did he endorse the fatwa but also advocated the absolute authority of the ruling jurist (now himself). He became the country's anti-American par excellence and the word "enemy," meaning America, became the most frequent term in his literature.

For Khamenei as Supreme Leader, anti-Americanism is something which transcends ideology. His true beliefs are secondary in importance to that which makes him powerful. Anti-Americanism is one of the main components of his political identity. Abandoning anti-Americanism not only means abandoning animosity with the U.S. but, more importantly, forfeiting against his domestic opponents and critics in a battle that started in 1989 and continues today. Regarding its approach toward normalizing relations with the U.S., the Islamic Republic can change, as the People's Republic of China did, but probably not under Ayatollah Khamenei.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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