

Khomeini's Face is in the Moon

Limitations of Sacredness and the Origins of Sovereignty

Olmo Gölz

Introduction

During the course of the year 1978, the person of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini¹ became regarded as the leading figure of the Iranian Revolution who “ultimately engineered the downfall of the Pahlavi monarchy”.² From his exile, first in Iraq and since September 1978 in France, he maintained his grasp on the events in Iran through his local network and developed a distinct charismatic, if not messianic appeal – so that the later success of the revolution was closely associated with both the abscondence of the detested Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in January 1979 *and* the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran some days later, culminating in the public opinion that the Shah had left by the force of the Ayatollah.³

In his persuasive evaluation of the source and significance of Ayatollah Khomeini's charisma during the Iranian Revolution of 1977–1979, the political scientist Daniel Brumberg came to the conclusion that the revolutionary leader's gravity drew on a rather multi-faceted foundation.⁴ On the one hand, the Ayatollah's example would validate Hannah Arendt's theory that mass leaders tend to use the notion of infallibility as a propaganda effect and therefore often announce “their political intentions in the form of prophecy”.⁵ In this regard, charisma is explained as the effect of deliberate use of cultural symbols by elites,⁶ and Brumberg admits that Khomeini grasped this logic, for example, when in 1978 he publicly legitimized out of exile the deviant actions of his followers as the fulfillment of a divine prophecy. On the other hand, he argues, Khomeini's alluring power was not entirely the result of his conscious efforts to manufacture it. Rather his charismatic appeal was the product of his own *biographically explained* demand for charismatic experience in juxtaposition with the Shi'ite community's expecta-

¹ Note on transliterations: This article follows the rules for transliterations of the modern Persian language formulated by the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft* (DMG). However, for the sake of readability the contemporary actors' names are given in European spelling.

² H. Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*, Cambridge, MA 2011, p. 273.

³ D. Harney, *The Priest and the King: An Eyewitness Account of the Iranian Revolution*, London/New York 1998, p. 157.

⁴ Cf. D. Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, Chicago 2001, p. 95–96.

⁵ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1973, p. 349.

⁶ Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini* (Fn. 4), p. 12.

tion of the saviour's imminent arrival. In effect, "Khomeini's charisma intensified the longings of his followers because it articulated a messianic sensibility deeply rooted in Shi'ite, and possibly Persian, culture".⁷

Having started as a heterogeneous movement, predominantly led by leftist intellectuals but also consisting of nationalist and secular as well as Islamist elements, the anti-shah demonstrators increasingly articulated their demands in religious terms during the critical year of 1978.⁸ By the end of that year, the Islamists controlled the slogans on the streets.⁹ By the same token, Khomeini managed to maintain the "general impression that he could be a figurehead for all forms of Islamic radicalism".¹⁰ Accordingly, even the Marxist-Islamist guerrilla group *Mogāhedīn-e Ḥalq* declared him to be "a famous hero and the symbol of the Iranian struggle".¹¹ Additionally, it can be observed that by September 1978 Khomeini was increasingly regarded as a messianic figure and was even stylized as being the long awaited saviour himself. This might paradigmatically be shown by the references to him published in Iranian newspapers of that time: until the closure of the daily newspaper "Eṭṭelā'āt" on November 1978 due to a general strike, Khomeini was solely referred to by the title "Grand Ayatollah",¹² which he had obtained in the ranks of the Shi'ite clergy. By contrast, starting with the day of the newspaper's reappearance on 6 January 1979 he was named "Emām",¹³ a title which in Shi'ite thinking is reserved for the early descendants of the Prophet considered the only true leaders of the Islamic community. This culminated in the headline of the newspaper after Khomeini's return to Iran on 1 February 1979 "*Emām āmad*"¹⁴ ("The Emām arrived") – a slogan which distinctly alludes to the arrival of the Messiah.

However, it is precisely this messianic appeal which raises some questions on Khomeini's perceptions of his own position in the Iranian Revolution as well as on his intentions for the future of Iran and the implementation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Unambiguously, Ayatollah Khomeini had more in mind than bringing about a successful revolution – which becomes particularly clear when reading his publications on an Islamic government and will be discussed in this paper. Nevertheless, the specific jeopardies that might arise while being *too charismatic* have hitherto hardly been touched. Therefore, it is argued here that Khomeini did not just have a utopian vision of a better Iran in mind, with him-

⁷ Ibid., p. 31 and p. 96.

⁸ A. Ashraf, Theocracy and Charisma: New Men of Power in Iran, in: International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 4.1, 1990, p. 113–152, here p. 121.

⁹ J. Afary / K. Anderson, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism, Chicago 2005, p. 1.

¹⁰ B. Moin, Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah, London 1999, p. 176.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cf. Eṭṭelā'āt, 9 Ābān 1357 (31 Oct. 1978), p. 1.

¹³ Eṭṭelā'āt, 16 Dey 1357 (6 Jan. 1979), p. 1.

¹⁴ Eṭṭelā'āt, 12 Bahman 1357 (1 Feb. 1979), p. 1.

self being the country's saviour. Rather, he was about to enforce a rationalized concept of an Islamic state which left no room for a saint.¹⁵ Admittedly, the establishment of a durable Islamic state system demanded the utilitarian use of his charismatic appeal with references to messianic sensitivities, and Khomeini might indeed have had a sense of mission and an intrinsic feeling of 'chosenness'. However, to fulfil his own concepts, Khomeini had to remain an ordinary human being and nothing more than the hero of the revolution.

The complexity of the interrelations and transitions between the macro level of system behaviour and the micro level of individual action – how it is problematized in rational choice theory¹⁶ – is best to be explained through the depiction of a widely known episode in which it is said that the believer would be able to see Khomeini's face in the moon, and the Ayatollah's later refusal of this 'natural phenomenon'. After depicting this episode through references in several autobiographical accounts as well as contemporary newspaper articles, its interpretation has to be read against the background of the meaning of symbols in the Iranian-Shi'ite community. In doing so, the analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini's deeds and words will show that he deliberately relinquished the claim to be sent by God, as offered to him by the people of Iran. Further, it will be shown that shortly after his return to Iran, he was zealous in building up a legitimation which invoked notions of rational-legal authority in a Weberian sense.¹⁷ In doing so, Khomeini presented himself as acting as the sovereign on the authority of the people, hence, as being the hero of the people's struggle and the leader of the community – and *not* being sent from God, or representing an aloof saint reflected in the moon.

The Man is in the Sky

The writer and journalist Tara Bahrapour in her autobiographical work "To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America" remembers a remarkable episode of her childhood during the turbulent weeks of the Iranian Revolution:

"Khomeini's face is in the moon. Everyone's talking about it. Taxicabs brake in the middle of traffic so people can jump out and look up at the sky, and neighbors gather in the alleys at sunset to point at the outlines of his eyes. [...] That night, Leila-Khanoum looks up at the moon, sees Khomeini and faints. Another night, Baba looks up and sees the face there too, beard and all, before he shakes his head and it goes away. Nanah still

15 Please note: Although the term "saint" undeniably refers to a Christian configuration, it is used here in accordance with the scholarly literature on Islam for phenomena addressed in the Shi'ite context in order to avoid confusion caused by simplified translations.

16 J. S. Coleman / T. J. Fararo, *Rational Choice Theory: Advocacy and Critique* (Key Issues in Sociological Theory; 7), Newbury Park, CA 1992, p. x; D. Friedman / M. Hechter, *The Contribution of Rational Choice Theory to Macrosociological Research*, in: *Sociological Theory* 6.2, 1988, p. 201–218, here p. 201.

17 M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Grundriss der Sozialökonomik; III. Abt.), Tübingen 1922, p. 124–130.

stands in her doorway, wrapped in a black chador, but she no longer complains about her sons beating her. ‘God is great,’ she says, her voice high and creaky and filled with delight. ‘Agha is in the sky.’¹⁸

As it has been put by another autobiographical account, besides being apparently just a memory of a little child, seeing “Khomeini’s face in the moon was a typical belief in those days and reflected the changes in thinking, belief, and behaviour of the masses at that time”.¹⁹ Furthermore, this anecdote gains pivotal importance for the analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini’s charismatic appeal when it is put in context.

During his exile, Ayatollah Khomeini was expelled from Iraq in October 1978. He then moved to France on 12 October, where he attracted world media attention. Simultaneously, the social unrest in Iran continued to grow after the Shah’s government responded to the Tehran protests of 8 September with military action. On that crucial day, soldiers were ordered to shoot at demonstrators.²⁰ The so-called “Black Friday” took a huge toll on human life and marked the implementation of martial law in Iran, forbidding any gathering of more than two people in Tehran from that date on.²¹ Against the background of both the escalation in Iran and Khomeini’s new public scope in France,²² his strategy “consisted of emerging as the only credible alternative to the Shah”.²³

As the chronographer of the revolution, Amir Taheri, and many others²⁴ vividly show, the longing for Khomeini’s return was dramatically illustrated by the following episode:²⁵ A rumour was spread that an old, pious lady from the holy city of Qom found a hair of the prophet in her Koran. On the same evening she had an epiphany from which she learned that the devout believer would see the face of

¹⁸ T. Bahrapour, *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America*, New York 1999, p. 101–102; Note: the term *Āqā* [here Agha] literally means “Mister” or “Sir”. It is often attributed to Ayatollah Khomeini while speaking about him in the 3rd person.

¹⁹ S. M. Redjali, *A Symphony of Life: Triumph of Education over Adversity*, Bloomington, Ind. 2013, p. 347.

²⁰ Moin, *Khomeini* (Fn. 10), p. 188.

²¹ *Eṭṭelā‘āt*, 18 Šahriwar 1357 (9 Sep. 1978), p. 1.

²² Cf. E. Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1993, p. 11.

²³ A. Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution*, 1. U.S. ed., Bethesda, Md. 1985, p. 241.

²⁴ See further different versions of the event: E. Abrahamian, *The Crowd in the Iranian Revolution*, in: *Radical History Review* 105, 2009, p. 13–38, here p. 28; J.-P. Filiu, *The Return of Political Mahdism*, in: H. Fradkin [et al.] (ed.), *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 8, p. 26–38, here p. 29; M. Golābdarehi, *Laḥze-hā*, Tehrān 1986, p. 178; Harney, *The Priest and the King* (Fn. 3), p. 157; A. Minu-Sepehr, *We Heard the Heavens then: A Memoir of Iran*, New York 2012, p. 120; A. Sreberny-Mohammadi / A. Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*, Minneapolis 1994, p. 132; K. L. Pliskin, *Camouflage, Conspiracy, and Collaborators: Rumors of the Revolution*, in: *Iranian Studies* 13.1/4, 1980, p. 55–81, here p. 74; Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah*, (Fn. 23), p. 141.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Ayatollah Khomeini during the next full moon. It is said that the story was spread all over Iran in less than a day.²⁶ At the awaited day of 27 November, millions of people received the moon with cheers, actually recognized the image of Ayatollah Khomeini and shouted “*‘allāhu akbar*” from the rooftops of their houses – which became an established sign of political disobedience in the subsequent days and weeks. The emotional change transported through this mass phenomenon was exceptional: The people of Iran “experienced a festive moment that sharply contrasted with the rest of that bleak bitterly cold and bloody autumn. Tears of joy were shed and huge quantities of sweets and fruits were consumed as millions of people jumped for joy, shouting ‘I’ve seen the Imam in the moon.’”²⁷

While it was still unclear how the leading clerics or Ayatollah Khomeini himself would react to this event, it was not only being celebrated by local clerics in thousands of mosques,²⁸ but also secularists and communist activists, who were keen to confirm the Ayatollah’s appearance in the moon. As a matter of fact, even the Soviet-sponsored journal of the communist *Tūdel*-Party “Navid”²⁹ wrote: “Our toiling masses, fighting against world-devouring Imperialism headed by the blood-sucking United States, have seen the face of their beloved Imam and leader, Khomeini the Breaker of Idols, in the moon. A few pipsqueaks cannot deny what a whole nation has seen with its own eyes.”³⁰

Regrettably, it cannot easily be ascertained how or whether at all Khomeini responded to this episode soon after it occurred; due to the general strike in Iran, no public discourses can be found in the newspapers. However, the belief that Khomeini’s face could be seen in the moon and “that only miscreants and bastards would fail to see”³¹ it became so widely held that it demanded response at least two months later when history repeated itself. On 13 January, just when the first rumours of the Shah’s imminent abscondence and the Ayatollah’s return to Iran were being spread by the newspapers,³² the “people spoke of an Islamic government starting the following day, and that evening people were in the streets, ecstatic at what they saw: Khomeini’s face appearing on the moon”.³³ Allegedly, this time some people in the province of Hamadan decided to sacrifice a sheep in order to celebrate this amazing phenomenon.³⁴

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 242.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Cf. S. Zabih, *The Left in Contemporary Iran: Ideology, Organisation, and the Soviet Connection* (Hoover Press Publication; 342), Abingdon 2011, p. 50.

³⁰ “Navid”, quoted in Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah* (Fn. 23), p. 242.

³¹ Ibid., p. 241–242.

³² *Eṭṭelā‘āt*, 23 Dey 1357 (13 Jan. 1979), p. 1.

³³ Pliskin, *Camouflage, Conspiracy, and Collaborators* (Fn. 24), p. 74.

³⁴ Sreberny-Mohammadi / Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution* (Fn. 24), p. 132.

In connection with this occasion, the public response of the religious establishment in Iran as well as from Khomeini's bureau in Paris can be determined. The newspaper "Eṭṭelā'āt" – which, after the end of the general strike, was very much in line with the Islamist movement of Ayatollah Khomeini – published an article on 14 January 1979 in which leading clerics from Tehran and Hamadan (where the sheep had been sacrificed) disavowed the appearance of the Ayatollah's face in the moon and depicted it as a deliberate attempt to divide the "Islamic movement of our people" (*nabẓat-e eslāmī-ye mellat-e mā*) – a term attributed to the movement of Khomeini's supporters before it had been labelled as a revolution:

"Clerics from Tebran and Hamadan:

The rumour about the appearance of Emām Khomeini's image in the moon is the propagation of fraud and superstition.

Yesterday, some of the leading clerics from Tehran and Hamadan issued a telephonic pronouncement to the newspaper Eṭṭelā'āt on the news that Emām Khomeini's image appeared on the surface of the moon, which has been spread by mysterious groups to cause a split in the unified movement of the Iranian people. The clerics declared: "These groups seek to mislead the movement of the Iranian people. Since they currently know no other trick to divide the serried ranks of the people, they started to spread fraud and superstitious stories in order to picture the Islamic movement of our people as reactionary and superstitious. Thus, they faked the news about the appearance of Emām Khomeini's image on the surface of the moon.

But there are things more important than the moon: the image and figure of Emām Khomeini is in the heart and spirit of our people. We will find his image if we follow his will, which equals the will of the Iranian people."³⁵

Additionally, the historian Ervand Abrahamian reports a press conference held in Paris by Khomeini's advisers after the growth of the rumours about the Ayatollah's face in the moon, in which they accused the regime of the Shah for their attempt to discredit the whole opposition through the spreading of absurd stories.³⁶ Finally, Ayatollah Khomeini disavowed the phenomenon and "issued a statement from Paris asking people not to be fooled by such deliberate attempts to confuse them".³⁷

This denial is a rather remarkable act which indicates the intentions of Khomeini regarding his role in the Iranian Revolution and his plans for the country after his return, and it raises the question why the revolutionary leader refused

³⁵ Eṭṭelā'āt, 24 Dey 1357 (14 Jan. 1979), 2. Original headline: "Šāye'eh-ye zuhūr-e tašwir-e Imām Ḥomeyni bar māh entešār-e ġā'āliyyāt va ḥorāfāt ast"

³⁶ Abrahamian, *The Crowd in the Iranian Revolution* (Fn. 24), p. 28.

³⁷ Sreberny-Mohammadi / Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution* (Fn. 24), p. 132. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi transferred this event to "autumn of 1978". Though, since it is depicted against the background of the events in Hamadan and the communiqué of local clerics from that region, a mistake in regard to the dates is very likely. It must have been after the events of January 1979.

to accept the devotedness of the masses – at least in these terms. Reading the events against Max Weber's conceptions on charisma,³⁸ one could unambiguously state that Khomeini was to be regarded as the possessor of supernatural (*übernatürlichen*) and superhuman (*übermenschlichen*) qualities. Furthermore, the country-wide celebrations on 27 November 1978 and 13 January 1979 represent precisely the distinct moments in which Khomeini was consensually recognized as a revolutionary leader, thereby justifying his claim to power as a charismatic leader. Following Weber, the recognition of such a claim by the discipleship is psychologically “a matter of complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality, arising out of enthusiasm, or despair and hope”.³⁹ Actually, all three points apply and can be found in the episode. Why then the repudiation of the offered fealty in this regard?

In anticipation of the result: Khomeini had far more in mind than a triumphant charismatic return to Iran. Regardless of any alleged intrinsic feeling of chosenness and his public declarations on the establishment of an “Islamic utopia” on earth,⁴⁰ in order to accomplish his goals, he could not be of divine origin but had to be an ordinary human being chosen by nothing but the people of Iran. To elaborate on the words of the above quoted clerics: There are more important things than the moon – the Iranian people.

The Sun rises in the West

For the evaluation of Khomeini's intentions in this case, one has to recast any possible interpretation against the meanings of symbols in the Iranian-Shi'ite context. Accordingly, one has to evaluate how the underlying feelings of individuals within the community have been addressed by the symbolism evident in the events discussed here.

The mainstream Shi'ite tradition ('Twelver-Shi'a') claims that the just governance of the Islamic community can only be accomplished through the leadership of the direct descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭima and her husband 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, who was to be regarded as the Prophet's first just heir. The *'imāma*, i.e., the right to rule, was thereby transmitted from father to son only. According to belief, the twelfth Imām in this line, Muḥammad al-Mahdī, did not die. Instead, during childhood he was taken to occultation by God, so that since the year of 941 A.D. he lives on in the 'great occultation' (*al-ḡaiba al-kubrā*), while the pious Muslim awaits his return. The Shi'ite religious expecta-

³⁸ Cf. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Fn. 17), p. 140–142.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140; English translation quoted from Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. by Guenther Roth / Claus Wittich, Berkeley 1978, p. 242.

⁴⁰ Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, (Fn. 22), p. 49.

tions are dominated by the belief that one day the Twelfth Imām will emerge as a saviour (*mahdī*), return some time before the judgment day, defeat his enemies, and establish a just rule on earth until the Last Judgement.⁴¹ Despite his absence, the rightful ruler of the community is the Twelfth Imām.⁴²

This paradigm caused some serious problems for the legitimation of monarchy in Persian history since consequently every claim to power had to be considered as usurpation.⁴³ The Safavids, who ruled the Persian Empire from 1501 to 1722, solved this problem through references to an older concept that had been prominently developed and formulated during the 11th century in order to meet with the obstacle that the religious authority “still resided in the office of the caliph although power was in the hands of the sultan.”⁴⁴ Although formulated in a Sunni context, at that time the tradition was firmly established that the actual ruler would act as ‘Shadow of God on Earth’.⁴⁵ Implementing Shi’i Islam for the first time as the official religion of the Persian realm, the Safavids used the notion of the ruler as ‘Shadow of God’ in a slightly different (i.e. Shi’ite) context to legitimize their claim to power after it had become obvious that the first rulers of the dynasty could not persuasively claim the status of *mahdī*.⁴⁶ Similar references were established later by the early representatives of the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925)⁴⁷ so that the rule of the Shahs had durably been legitimized without further authorization being needed.⁴⁸

Precisely at this point, the first reason for the denial of the episode with the moon emerges: As Abrahamian suggests, the success of the story in Iran “was probably an unconscious inversion of the ancient claim that the shah was the shadow of God on earth”.⁴⁹ Consequently, the Shah’s antagonist had to forcefully reject these perceptions of his person. Instead, Khomeini was keen to applicate

⁴¹ M. Ourghi, *Schiiischer Messianismus und Mahdi-Glaube in der Neuzeit* (Mitteilungen zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der islamischen Welt; 26), Würzburg 2008, p. 46.

⁴² V. Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, New Ed., London/New York 2003, p. 115.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 115–116.

⁴⁴ A. K. S. Lambton, *Concepts of Authority in Persia: Eleventh to Nineteenth Centuries A.D.*, in: *Iran* 26, 1988, p. 95–103, here p. 97. For a detailed elaboration of the concept of the “Shadow of God” see also the further works of Ann K. S. Lambton, in particular: A. K. S. Lambton, *Quis custodiet custodes? Some Reflections on the Persian Theory of Government: I*, in: *Studia Islamica* 5, 1956, p. 125–148; *Ead.*, *Quis custodiet custodes? Some Reflections on the Persian Theory of Government (Conclusion)*, in: *Studia Islamica* 6, 1956, p. 125–146.

⁴⁵ S. A. Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi’ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies; 17), Chicago 1984, p. 94.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 180–181. See for a more detailed analysis of the Safavids claim to power: H. Halm, *Die Schia*, Darmstadt 1988, p. 107–120.

⁴⁷ Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (Fn. 45), p. 229.

⁴⁸ Lambton, *Concepts of Authority in Persia* (Fn. 44), p. 101.

⁴⁹ Abrahamian, *The Crowd in the Iranian Revolution* (Fn. 24), p. 28.

the concept of the 'Shadow of God' to the masses, arguing that every ordinary man who raised up against tyranny would act as such.⁵⁰

Thus, if he does represent the 'Shadow of God' on earth in a different way than the ordinary people fighting against oppression, could the Ayatollah, by the same token, not be the *mahdī* himself? Or at least the long awaited harbinger of his imminent return? In fact, it is this specific second possible complex of explanations for the appearance of Ayatollah Khomeini's face in the moon that caused even worse problems for the implementation of an Islamic Republic.

Shi'ite tradition assumes that the return of the *mahdī* will be heralded by a set of dreadful omens. The world will be thrown into turmoil and multifarious portents of the saviour's impending coming will appear. There will, for example, be signs of societal chaos and anarchy, so that immoral behaviour will spread. Falsehood becomes commonplace; the suppression of indigents increases; ethical values vanish; sexual licentiousness grows.⁵¹ Finally, the power of infidels will expand and false prophets will raise and fight bloody encounters all over the world.⁵² During the revolution, the activation of Shi'ite sensitivities was repeatedly achieved through references to these well-known signs for a distinct apocalyptic mood. Accordingly, Ayatollah Khomeini himself used this diction when he divided the world, its peoples and its governments into the oppressors (*mostakberīn*) and the oppressed (*mostaz'afīn*), arguing that the Western powers are among the oppressor camp,⁵³ what surely pointed to the notion of the 'growth of power of infidels'. Additionally, the terms he and his entourage used to describe the situation were very much related to the omens of the *mahdī's* return, like the accusations pointing at the decadence of the oppressors, the abasement of morality or the aggravation of the situation of the poor. Thus, the evaluation of the societal status quo in Iran showed the situation's compatibility to the signs and the Shah's regime was stigmatized in terms reserved for the enemies of the Twelfth Imām.⁵⁴ As Hamid Dabashi puts it: "The enormous arsenal of Shi'i rebellious symbolism was put to effective political use. God Almighty, the Prophet, the Twelve Infallible Imams, and all other major and minor Shi'i saints were all mobilized in the service of the revolution against tyranny. Shi'ism was in full insurrectionary posture [...]."⁵⁵ In this regard, the apocalyptic diagnosis of society indicated on all levels the imminent return of the much longed for *mahdī*.

⁵⁰ B. Ghamari-Tabrizi, The Divine, the People, and the *Faqih*: On Khomeini's Theory of Sovereignty, in: A. Adib-Moghaddam (ed.), *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, New York 2014, p. 211–238, here p. 230.

⁵¹ Ourghi, *Schiitischer Messianismus* (Fn. 41), p. 47.

⁵² Halm, *Die Schia*, (Fn. 46), p. 46.

⁵³ S. Hunter, *Iran and the Spread of Revolutionary Islam*, in: *Third World Quarterly* 10.2, *Islam & Politics*, 1988, p. 730–749, here p. 734.

⁵⁴ S. V. R. Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future*, New York 2007, p. 131.

⁵⁵ Dabashi, *Shi'ism* (Fn. 2), p. 314.

Furthermore, the Shi'ite tradition knows some preternatural incidents accompanying the societal shifts. There will be lunar as well as solar eclipse; rivers will burst their banks; fire will rain from heaven; earthquakes will cause devastating effects; and finally, the sun will rise in the West.⁵⁶ The appearance of Khomeini's face in the moon was put into this context while being celebrated in mosques all over Iran, "with mullahs reminding the faithful that a sure sign of the coming of the Mahdi was that the sun would rise in the West. Khomeini, representing the sun, was now in France and his face was shining in the moon like a sun".⁵⁷

Additionally, the cataclysmic earthquake of 16 September 1978 near the city Tabas in eastern Iran,⁵⁸ as well as a subsequent quake in the neighbouring region of Khorasan on 16 January 1979,⁵⁹ has been interpreted as signs of the imminent arrival of the saviour and brought together not only with other 'supernatural' events – such as the Ayatollah's face in the moon – but also with the social turmoil of the times. On the day of the earthquake, which coincided with the Shah's escape from Iran, the eyewitness of the revolution Desmond Harney wrote the following:

"What of the Old Man in Paris? [...] Will he release the seven avenging furies of popular revolution? A new chapter opens. To herald all this, the latest 'supernatural' event occurred: yesterday all over Iran the faithful believed they saw Khomeini's features on the surface on the moon. And yet another earthquake struck Khorasan. Oh Iran, what a year of events! But to return to the popular reaction. Irresistible not to go out. Scenes of great excitement in the streets round us. Every car hooting rhythmically, flashing its lights. Crowds gathering at every junction: men grinning and giving the V-sign; girls in *chadors* singing and laughing; boys prancing about shouting at us to put on our lights or to slap pictures of Khomeini on the windscreen; groups shouting 'Everyone is free now'; small demonstrations brandishing portraits of Khomeini aloft crying, 'By the force of Khomeini, the Shah has fled.'⁶⁰

The Guardianship of the Jurist

Theologically speaking, the only admissible hypothesis for the interrelation of all the societal and 'natural' factors and phenomena would have been that Ayatollah Khomeini himself was the *mahdi*, or, at least, that he was the harbinger of the Twelfth Imām. And presumably, the people would indeed have accepted this if he had publicly claimed to be the awaited saint himself or in contact with him –

⁵⁶ Halm, *Die Schia* (Fn. 46), p. 46; Ourghi, *Schiitischer Messianismus* (Fn. 41), p. 47.

⁵⁷ Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah* (Fn. 23), p. 242.

⁵⁸ See Eṭṭelā'āt, 26 Šahriwar 1357 (17 Sep. 1978), p. 1. The newspapers headline reads: "The city Tabas was flattened by an earthquake" ("*Zelzeleh šabr-e Tabas rā bā hāk yeksān kard*"). The estimated death toll is 15,000 people. See: http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eqarchives/significant/sig_1978.php, 27 March 2015.

⁵⁹ See Eṭṭelā'āt, 28 Dey 1357 (18 Jan. 1978), p. 8. Headline: "A thousand people died by an earthquake in Khorasan" ("*Hezār nafar dar zelzeleh-e ḥorāsān košte šodand*"). See: http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eqarchives/significant/sig_1979.php, 27 March 2015.

⁶⁰ Harney, *The Priest and the King* (Fn. 3), p. 157.

this is certainly the subtext transmitted by the above depicted episode with the moon.⁶¹ Yet, the Ayatollah never claimed to be more than an educated scholar and he consistently avoided performing in any manner to be in contact with the 'hidden world'.⁶² One might argue that he simply did not believe to have been sent by God. However, as many well developed works on Khomeini's mysticism and gnostic affectations have shown,⁶³ this leads to no definite answer, but rather to the presumption of an intrinsic feeling of chosenness. The discussion on his self-reflection is even up to this day the subject of theological and political debates in contemporary Iran – culminating in a dramatic incident, when in 2008 Ayatollah Tavassoli died in front of a camera from a heart attack. Prior to this, he had reported that Khomeini became furious and refused to see any religious figure who publicly declared Khomeini was in contact with the Hidden Imām.⁶⁴

In order to avoid speculations in this regard, it is argued here that the reasons for the disavowal of the status as a saint can be found in extrinsic factors and that these extrinsic factors demanded decisions by Ayatollah Khomeini on the basis of rational choice, in order to produce optimal social outcomes.⁶⁵

These extrinsic factors are represented through three fundamental problems for an alleged *mabdi* or his harbinger in the specific Iranian context of the late 1970s. The first obstacle: historical consciousness shows examples of rulers who dealt with the idea of being the *mabdi* themselves. Paradigmatically, the founder of the Safavid dynasty Ismā'īl (ruled 1501–1524) is to be named here. He lost his messianic appeal after the defeat at the Battle of Chaldiran (1514) against the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁶ Thus, history exemplifies that relying on a *mabdi*-status only promises short-term success for the individual. Second, the impending appearance of the Twelfth Imām would have serious implications for the society, since it would put an end to all notions of futurity in hitherto familiar forms:

“Planning for any material future, concern about day-to-day issues, interest in social, political and cultural topics and following domestic and international events suddenly become trivial and peripheral. Worldly and material life and preoccupations dim before the magnanimity of the promised return of the Messiah. How could a believer convinced of the imminent end of the world and history as we know it keep interest in daily and mundane affairs if the end was so clearly in sight?”⁶⁷

⁶¹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival* (Fn. 54), p. 131.

⁶² A. Rahnema, *Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics: Majlesi to Ahmadinejad* (Cambridge Middle East studies; 35), Cambridge/New York 2011, p. 61.

⁶³ See Ashraf, *Theocracy and Charisma* (Fn. 8), p. 115–121; B. Moin, *Khomeini's Search for Perfection: Theory and Reality*, in: A. Rahnema (ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, London 1994, p. 64–97; Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini* (Fn. 4), p. 39–54; L. Ridgeon, *Hidden Khomeini: Mysticism and Poetry*, in: A. Adib-Moghaddam (ed.), *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, New York 2014, p. 193–210.

⁶⁴ Rahnema, *Superstition as Ideology* (Fn. 62), p. 82.

⁶⁵ Cf. Coleman / Fararo, *Rational Choice Theory* (Fn. 16), p. xi–xii.

⁶⁶ Halm, *Die Schia* (Fn. 46), p. 46; Ourghi, *Schiitischer Messianismus* (Fn. 41), p. 109.

⁶⁷ Rahnema, *Superstition as Ideology* (Fn. 62), p. 74.

In other words: how to bring about a revolution while the people wait for the *mabdi*? Admittedly, this question is highly suggestive and it is very likely that an emotionally conducted Islamic *revolution* would have been successful even if Khomeini had approved the episode with all its interpretations. However, the second question is of bigger importance: how to build up a durable Islamic *state*, when there is no necessity for planning the future any longer? Again, there would have been just short-term success – this time for the individual *and* the society. In addition, it is this question which transcends to the third and probably most important obstacle: Khomeini aimed at implementing an Islamic *government* and he himself developed the foundations for the accomplishment of this task.

In his recent evaluation of the history of Shi'ism, Hamid Dabashi argues that this Islamic tradition has “doctrinally and historically been a religion of protest” which typically lost its moral legitimacy as soon as it was politically successful in the course of history.⁶⁸ In comparison, Ayatollah Khomeini developed a theory on the Islamic state (*ḥokūmat-e eslāmī*) aiming to implement a durable religio-moral legitimized Shi'ite government. The theory on the just Islamic state is again based on the assumption that the rightful ruler of the Muslim community is the Twelfth Imām. In Iraqi exile during the late 1960s he further developed his early idea that in the time of the greater occultation ‘general agents’ of the Imām would be his rightful representatives in political matters.⁶⁹ Back then teaching religious seminary students in Najaf, he delivered a series of lectures between 21 January and 8 February 1970 in which he elaborated his views on the ‘guardianship of the jurist’ (*velāyat-e faqīh*),⁷⁰ later published under the title *Ḥokūmat-e eslāmī* (‘Islamic government’).⁷¹ Here he argued that during the infallible Imām’s occultation, the jurisconsult (*faqīh*) has the mandate and the responsibility not only to teach the Islamic community on matters of personal affairs – representing the quietist position promoted by most leading Ayatollahs in Iran and Iraq until the 1960s – but also to guide the people “in the social realm, and to manage the state’s affairs on behalf of the Imām. In other words, the jurisconsult’s authority is an extension of that enjoyed by the infallible Imāms.”⁷² In effect, the whole political apparatus must not be composed of religious scholars. Rather, officials need to obey the *faqīh* in any affair. However, this by far does not indicate that the *faqīh* is conceptionally raised to a level above an ordinary human being.⁷³ On the contrary, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, the “governance of the *faqīh* is a

⁶⁸ Dabashi, Shi'ism (Fn. 2), p. 313.

⁶⁹ Martin, Creating an Islamic State (Fn. 42), p. 119.

⁷⁰ Moin, Khomeini (Fn. 10), p. 152.

⁷¹ R. Khomeini, *Ḥokūmat-e eslāmī*, transl. by Hamid Algar, <http://www.al-islam.org/islamic-government>, np., 30 March 2015.

⁷² H. Mavani, Ayatollah Khomeini’s Concept of Governance (*wilayat al-faqih*) and the Classical Shi'i Doctrine of Imamate, in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 47.5, 2011, p. 807–824, p. 807.

⁷³ Ghamari-Tabrizi, *The Divine, the People, and the Faqih* (Fn. 50), p. 224.

rational and extrinsic matter; it exists only as a type of appointment”,⁷⁴ which may be contrasted with the intrinsic spiritual pre-eminence of the Imāms, deriving from their *personal* qualities.⁷⁵ Consequently, the leading jurist is nothing more than a well-educated religious scholar who is considered to be the right person to interpret the Islamic law (*ṣarīʿa*) in all affairs.⁷⁶ Apart from his learning, the *faqīh* is an ordinary believer with no claims on divinity or the infallibility of the Imāms,⁷⁷ so that “any impression that they may aspire to supernatural status, higher than that of ordinary human beings, is dispelled.”⁷⁸

The educational system of the Shiʿite jurisprudence defines who is qualified for the position of the leading jurist. However, it is the role of the people to choose the *faqīh* – again with the guidance of the clergy.⁷⁹ These conceptions became part of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was formulated by Khomeini and his followers during his French exile.⁸⁰ The later implemented constitution states in Article 5 that during the occultation of the Twelfth Imām the leadership of the Muslim community “devolve[s] upon the just and pious person, who is fully aware of the circumstances of his age, courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability, will assume the responsibilities of this office in accordance with Article 107”. Article 107 on the “Religious Leader” determines that the *faqīh* is to be appointed by experts who are elected by the people. By the same token, he “is equal with the rest of the people of the country in the eyes of law”.⁸¹

That being said, due to Khomeini’s own conception of an Islamic state, the Ayatollah had to remain an ordinary human being – equal to the rest of the people. Therefore, not being a saint was the best Ayatollah Khomeini could wish for and it promised the best outcome for himself *and* the community he felt responsible for. Only through a close connection to the people would it be possible to successfully transform the ‘religion of protest’, as Dabashi coined it, to a morally legitimised ‘religion of rule’.

Conclusion

As has been shown at the beginning, the messianic appeal of Ayatollah Khomeini helped to create a charismatic gravity in the frame of the Shiʿite community of Iran. Furthermore, it was precisely this allure which during the revolutionary

⁷⁴ Khomeini, *Hokūmat-e eslāmi* (Fn. 71), np.

⁷⁵ Martin, *Creating an Islamic State* (Fn. 42), p. 121.

⁷⁶ M. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*, London 2013, p. 137.

⁷⁷ Martin, *Creating an Islamic State* (Fn. 42), p. 116.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁷⁹ Moin, *Khomeini* (Fn. 10), p. 155.

⁸⁰ Halm, *Die Schia* (Fn. 46), p. 46; Ourghi, *Schiitischer Messianismus* (Fn. 41), p. 163.

⁸¹ Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, <http://iran-un.org/en/constitution>, 30 March 2015, np. Effective since 3 Dec. 1979.

process culminated in the enthusiastic devotedness of the masses – far beyond narrow circles of disciples. The episode with the moon shows that this enthusiastic devotion was directly connected to the substantial hope raised by the belief in the imminent arrival of the awaited saviour. By the same token, the analysis of the Shi'ite expectations in juxtaposition to revolutionary rhetoric and processes has documented that the camp of Ayatollah Khomeini performed in accordance with the messianic sensitivities in order to mobilize the masses. Especially while addressing the grievances of the societal status quo in Pahlavi Iran, he himself rhetorically pointed to the imminent return of the *mabdi* and brought his movement in connection to the fulfilment of a divine prophecy. Furthermore, during these turbulent years he never publicly disclaimed any links to the 'hidden world'. It is even reported that he just did not answer when he was asked if he was the promised saviour.⁸² Therefore it can be affirmed that Khomeini used the "propaganda effect of infallibility" as stated by Brumberg with reference to Hannah Arendt.⁸³

However, the investigation of the nationwide rumour of Khomeini's face in the moon also indicates the utilitarian limits while playing with the messianic sensitivities. These limits arise from the fact that on the one hand, the Shi'ite tradition recognizes no conceptual opportunity for a durable mundane state of affairs in the face of the impending return of the Messiah – at least until the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the other hand, the person who formulated a solution for the implementation of a legitimised Shi'i state system (deliberately) did not incorporate a position for a saint. Therefore, it has been argued that the denial of being sent by God in any way, might be explained through regress on intrinsic aspects. However, this denial has been presented here as an actor's strategy of optimizing the societal outcomes of his individual behaviour.⁸⁴ Therefore, regardless of the answer to the question if Khomeini believed he was the *mabdi* or in contact with him, his own as well as his advisers' and cohorts' disavowal of the depicted episode was purposive and intentional⁸⁵ – because it represented the only path to the implementation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This hypothesis can further be verified through a short look at Khomeini's first speech after his return to Iran on 1 February 1979 when he presented himself as being the one "who decides on the exception", therefore as the sovereign in the sense of Carl Schmitt.⁸⁶ While doing so, he did not perform as God's "acknowledged representative on earth",⁸⁷ but rather identified himself "directly

⁸² Cf. Nasr, *The Shia Revival* (Fn. 54), p. 131.

⁸³ Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini* (Fn. 4), p. 95.

⁸⁴ Cf. Coleman / Fararo, *Rational Choice Theory* (Fn. 16), p. xi–xii.

⁸⁵ Cf. Friedman / Hechter, *The Contribution of Rational Choice Theory to Macrosociological Research* (Fn. 16), p. 202.

⁸⁶ C. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, transl. by G. Schwab, Chicago 2005, p. 5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

with the people”:⁸⁸ When he arrived in Tehran, up to five million people lined the streets to welcome the Ayatollah.⁸⁹ He directly moved to the Cemetery of Martyrs *Bebešt-e zabrā* south of Tehran, where he delivered a long speech to approximately 250,000 listeners.⁹⁰ In a remarkable section of this speech, the Ayatollah claims: “I will appoint the government! I will strike the present government on the mouth! With the support of the people, I will appoint the government! I will do this, because the people approved me!”⁹¹ Hence, he claimed to do so, not because God sent him, but rather because the people chose him. He thus acted as the hero who is the subject of the community’s sovereignty – because it helped him to create the Islamic Republic of Iran and become its legitimate Supreme Leader for life.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ BBC, “Exiled Ayatollah Khomeini returns to Iran”, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/1/newsid_2521000/2521003.stm, 21 November 2016.

⁹⁰ The live broadcast of Khomeini’s arrival and his speech can be seen here: baharaan, Return of Imam Khomeini to Iran on Feb 1, 1979, Youtube, 16 February 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ITsee9TIIIE>, 30 March 2015.

⁹¹ *Eṭṭelāʿāt*, 14 Bahman 1357 (3 Feb. 1979), p. 3. The newspaper published “The full speech of Imam Khomeini at *Bebešt-e zabrā*” (“*Matn-e kāmel-e soḥānān-e Imām Ḥomeynī dar Bebešt-e zabrā*”). The text of the quoted passage: “Man doulat ta’yin mikonam. Man tū-ye dahan-e in doulat mizanam. Man beh poštibāni-ye in mellat doulat ta’yin mikonam. Man beh vaseṭehi-ye keh in mellat marrā qabūl dārad.”

