

VLADIMIR KIRICHENKO. SYNTHESIS OF SHIISM AND
SOCIALISM IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF IRAN BEFORE
AND AFTER THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

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Vladimir Kirichenko,

Research Associate,

Center for Study of Common Problems
of Contemporary East, IOS, RAS,

e-mail: black-whit@yandex.ru

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Abstract. In the late 1970s, dissatisfaction with the rule of the latter Shah of Iran Reza-Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979) led to the spread of oppositional ideas in Iranian society. The works of sociologist Ali Shariati (1933–1977) were particularly popular. His ideas were a kind of synthesis of Shiite Islam and socialist principles. Ayatollah Taleghani (1911–1979). He also tolerated left-wing political forces and spoke out for public ownership of land. However, after the Islamic Revolution (1979), the ideas of Shariati and Talegani were never implemented. And supporters of the synthesis of Islam and socialism after the overthrow of the Shah, began the struggle with the new Islamic authorities.

The reign of the last Shah of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979), was marked by a number of social and economic reforms. The reforms were aimed at the speedy development of agriculture and industry. According to the 1962 land reform, the government bought 1,600 villages (19,5% of Iran's agricultural land) from landowners and transferred them to the management of peasant families. Landowners were forbidden to own more

than one village. In addition, many new enterprises were built, and industrial employment increased dramatically.¹

During the Shah's rule, Iran became one of the U.S. allies in the Middle East along with Saudi Arabia. Washington has provided Iran with military and economic assistance.² However, the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah was marked by internal unrest. In 1951, Mohammed Mossadegh (1882–1967)³ became Prime Minister. He set as his goal the nationalization of the oil industry.

Mosaddegh's policy received the support of Iranians and the country's parliament, as the prime minister sought to restore Iranian sovereignty. Mossadegh managed to take control of almost all spheres of state power, including the military power.

While in power, he imposed martial law in the country, banned civil servants' strikes, suspended elections to the Senate and Majlis and restricted press freedom. He used the profits from the oil industry to improve the domestic economic situation and tried to put an end to foreign interference in Iran's affairs.

In 1953, Mohammad Reza Shah was forced to leave Iran under pressure from the Mosaddegh government⁴. However, Mosaddegh's policy of nationalizing the oil industry contradicted the interests of Great Britain and the United States. In this regard, the American intelligence services organized a military coup and in 1953 Mossadegh was overthrown, and Shah Reza Pahlavi returned to the country.

The reign of Mohammad Reza Shah cannot be evaluated unambiguously. On the one hand, thanks to the economic reforms carried out by the Shah, Iran has become a powerful industrial power. On the other hand, the policy of Westernization pursued by the Shah did not resonate with the majority of the Iranian population. By the end of the 1970s the economy stagnated, and inflation led to a decline in living standards. British researcher D. Hiro characterizes the economic conditions in Iran before the Islamic Revolution as follows: "In the mid-1970s, the exodus from rural areas increased. This, in particular,

was due to the government's attempt to curb inflation by establishing price controls on agricultural products. The population of large centers (over 100 thousand people) was almost 30% of the total population of Iran. At the same time, living conditions in the city were deteriorating everywhere: shortage of housing, electricity and water everywhere. In the five years preceding the revolution, rents increased by 300% and amounted to about half of the income of most urban families"⁵.

All this led to the fact that many Iranians were dissatisfied with the regime. The Shah was criticized for corruption and incompetence of government officials. In addition, the Shah's regime used SAVAK, an American-trained secret police, to harass opponents of his government⁶, which also did not add to the popularity of the Iranian leader.

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Dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime led to the spread of oppositional ideas in Iranian society. Among them were ideologies that combined traditional Islamic values and socialist principles. This kind of synthesis formed the basis of the ideas of the Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati, whose works were especially popular in the last decades of the Shah's regime (especially among students).

Ali Shariati⁷ was born in 1933 in a village near Mashhad. His father, Mohammad Taqi Shariati, was a liberal cleric who ran his own lecture hall and taught Islam to children at a local high school. As a schoolboy, Ali Shariati attended discussion groups organized by his father, and in the late 1940s, father and son joined a small group called the "Movement of Worshiping Socialists". This group did not set political goals for itself, and its activities were of a religious and philosophical nature. At the same time, members of this association of intellectuals for the first time in Iran tried to find common ideas in socialism with Shiism.

In 1958, Shariati entered Mashhad University to obtain a master's degree in foreign languages, specializing in Arabic and

French. After receiving his master's degree in 1960, he entered the Sorbonne University for a degree in sociology and the history of Islam. In Paris, at the height of the Algerian and Cuban revolutions, he immersed himself in radical political philosophy, as well as in revolutionary student organizations. He joined the Iranian Student Confederation and the Iranian Freedom Movement⁸, which were formed in 1961-1962, followers of Mosaddegh⁹. It was during his stay in France that Shariati began to formulate his political and philosophical identity.

Shariati saw Islam as a dynamic force that could inspire an uprising against the Shah¹⁰. Ali Shariati wrote: "Like the revolutionary party, Shiism had a well-thought-out, information-rich, deeply rooted and well-developed ideology, clear-cut and well-defined slogans, as well as a disciplined and well-trained organization. He led the unprivileged and oppressed masses in their quest for freedom and the search for justice."¹¹ At the same time, despite the fact that Shariati actively used Marxist terminology to describe the political situation in Iran, he criticized Marxism. Shariati was not satisfied with the fact that Marxism does not recognize the role of the individual in history and reduces human life only to productive activity¹². Atheism was also unacceptable for Shariati.

The Russian researcher A. Kuznetsov characterizes Shariati's attitude to Western ideas as follows: "Shariati sought to combine Islamic thinking with the achievements of Western thought, arguing that there is no need to follow any particular Western thinker, while all the best that progressive thought has achieved in the West has already been embodied in one person - Imam Ali. In the concept of Shariati, the class struggle is the embodiment of the historical confrontation between "monotheistic Islam" and "polytheistic Islam". He attributed the path of Imam Ali (Islam-e Alawi) to the first category, and groups of hypocrites fighting for their selfish interests under the slogans of Islam to the second category."¹³ The ideal for Shariati was a monotheistic classless society¹⁴.

Ali Shariati died in 1977, the official cause of death was a heart attack, but there is a version about the involvement of the Iranian special services in the death of the scientist¹⁵. After the change of the political regime in Iran in 1979, the ideas of A. Shariati were not in demand by the new authorities. Perhaps one of the reasons for this attitude to the legacy of Shariati was the critical attitude of the scientist to the Shiite clergy.

The scientist accused the Ulama of becoming an integral part of the ruling class, "institutionalizing" revolutionary Shiism and thereby betraying its original goals. According to Shariati, the clergy treated the sacred texts as fossilized scholastic parchments, and not as a source of inspiration for a revolutionary worldview. Shariati has often stressed that the return to true Islam will take place not under the leadership of the clergy, but under the leadership of the progressive intelligentsia¹⁶.

In addition, Shariati was often criticized by the clergy for some judgments concerning theological issues. An example of this is the idea of Shariati about the unity of God and man, apparently borrowed from Sufism¹⁷.

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One of the most popular religious figures of the period of the Islamic Revolution was Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani¹⁸, who was very tolerant of socialist ideas.

Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani was born in 1911, he became one of the most influential clerics who stood at the origins of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Taleghani studied religion in Qom, where he was a fellow student of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini¹⁹. Later he became a teacher in Tehran. In 1938, during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza (1919-1980), Ayatollah Taleghani was sentenced to a one-year imprisonment for criticizing the methods of Shah Reza Pahlavi's rule²⁰.

After the abdication of Reza Shah from the throne in 1941, Taleghani created an Islamic Society, which began as a meeting

for the purpose of interpreting the Quran, but then expanded to include discussions of religious modernism. It was thanks to the Islamic Society that the close cooperation of Muhmud Taleghani and the long-time opponent of the Shah's regime, Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995)²¹, began.

Together they founded the democratic party "Movement for Freedom of Iran". Taleghani was also associated with the "National Resistance Movement" (NRM), which was organized in 1961. It was founded by various supporters of Mosaddegh in order to continue the policy of the prime minister after his overthrow in 1953²². Taleghani has established ties with the Iranian communists and the Islamic left-wingers²³ since the 1960s.

Subsequently, Taleghani and his family's tolerant attitude to leftist political views became one of the reasons for the conflict with Khomeini. The conflict escalated after Taleghani's two sons, who were members of various left-wing radical organizations, were arrested. After the arrest of his sons, Ayatollah Taleghani criticized the actions of the Islamic militia and revolutionary committees acting on behalf of Khomeini. The ayatollah warned that the nation could "fall back into the hands of dictatorship and despotism"²⁴.

One of his five sons, Syed-Mojtaba, was a member of the People's Mujahideen, the Islamic socialist guerrilla group Sazman Peikar²⁵. Another son was a member of the Marxist organization Fedain-e-Khalq²⁶.

Russian researcher G.P. Avdeev believes that through Taleghani's relatives, the Palestinians tried to inform the leadership of Iran about the connections with the Americans of some Islamic figures who held higher positions²⁷.

The arrest of Ayatollah Taleghani's sons caused large-scale protests, as a result of which they were released²⁸. The ayatollah did not escalate the conflict with the Iranian leadership and after the meeting with Khomeini said: "The leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini is recognized not only by me, but also by the world. He is a source of faith, sincerity, determination and honesty.

I have always approved of his struggle, his words and his projects"²⁹.

Taleghani advocated a special path of development based on the principles of "true Islam". According to the ayatollah, such a pure form of Islamic religion existed only for a short time under the Prophet Mohammed and Imam Ali³⁰. Proceeding from the idea that according to Islam, the land belongs to God, Taleghani argued that the land and its subsoil cannot be privately owned, and personal use should not go against the collective interests of society³¹.

In his teaching one can find acceptance of some socialist postulates. So, he proposed to Taleghani to create councils in Iran in which citizens would defend their interests. The primary link was the village council, and the final one was the supreme Council. Thus, the system would cover all levels of government³². Taleghani's initiative did not contradict Islamic principles, and initially Ayatollah Khomeini supported the creation of councils, but later Taleghani's initiative was rejected. Taleghani's ideas about the state structure based on the norms of Islam coincided in essence with leftist, socialist principles, but were not implemented.

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The synthesis of Islamic and socialist ideas often became the basis of the ideology of Iranian terrorist groups. One of them was the "People's Mujahideen Organization of Iran" (PMOI). It was founded in the 1960s by a group of Iranian leftists, people with higher education, opposed to the pro-Western rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The founders of this group were Mohammad Hanifnejad and Said Mohseni Aliasgar Badizadegan. The ideology of the organization was a variant of radical political Islam and echoed the ideas of Ali Shariati. At the same time, the members of the group had a Marxist understanding of politics and history³³.

According to the US State Department, for a decade, OMIP organized terrorist attacks against the state, as a result of which several Americans working in Iran, including officers and civilian specialists, were killed³⁴. In 1975, some of the members of the OMIP left the group, taking Marxist positions and forming the "Organization of the Struggle for the Freedom of the Working Class" (Paykar).

PMOI practically ceased to exist. It was recreated by the Islamic activist Masoud Rajavi, who joined PMOI as a student. In 1971, he was arrested by the Shah's special services and sentenced to death for terrorist activities. Subsequently, due to international interference, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Rajavi was released from prison during the events of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. After his release, he took over the leadership of the PMOI³⁵.

Although the group took part in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the ideology of the PMOI, which is a mixture of Marxism and Islamism, contradicted the views of the new Islamic authorities³⁶. In 1981, the organization blew up the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party. As a result, 73 Iranian officials were killed, including one of the leaders of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti³⁷. Iranian President Mohammad Ali Rajai and Prime Minister Mohammad Javad Bahonar³⁸ were killed by members of the organization. After the prohibition of the activities of the PMOI in Iran, the headquarters of the organization was moved to France (1982), and then to Iraq (1986)³⁹.

The PMOI sided with Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. In 1986, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein created the Ashraf military camp for members of the organization, located north of Baghdad. PMOI units were fighting against the Iranian army.

Also, the armed formations of the PMOI allegedly took part in suppressing the uprisings of Shiites and Kurds in Iraq in 1991-1992⁴⁰. In April 1992, PMOI members attacked 10 Iranian embassies, including the Iranian UN mission in New York. These

actions were accompanied by hostage-taking, as well as arson of buildings and cars. Several Iranian ambassadors were injured⁴¹. Masoud Rajavi disappeared in Iraq in 2003 during the US invasion of the country. His whereabouts are unknown. After that, the PMOI was headed by his wife Maryam⁴².

Currently, a significant number of members of this organization have emigrated and live in Europe and the USA. It is noteworthy that in 2012 the United States excluded the organization from the list of terrorist organizations. According to the press service of the US State Department, the reason was the rejection of violence, the absence of new terrorist attacks and the group's assistance in the peaceful closure of the Ashraf camp in Iraq⁴³.

Another terrorist organization whose ideology combined Shiism and socialism was the Forkan group. It owes its name to the Surah of the Quran "Al-Furqan" ("The distinction [between truth and falsehood]"). The organization was founded in 1976 by a former student Akbar Gudarzi, a native of Lorestan province⁴⁴. Gudarzi believed that Shiism implied full equality of people, while he had a negative attitude towards the clergy and large merchants. He also had a negative attitude towards liberalism and Marxism⁴⁵.

Forkan began its terrorist acts in 1979. One of the first victims of the group was the first chief of staff of the Iranian army, appointed after the Islamic Revolution, General Mohammad Gharani. He was murdered on April 23, 1979 in his home⁴⁶. The organization also claimed responsibility for the murders of the leading thinker of the Islamic movement and the head of the Council of the Islamic Revolution, Mortaza Motakhhari, TV presenter Said Behbehani, the head of the Qasr prison, Mehdi Araghi, Khomeini's representative in Tabriz, Ali Kazi Tabatabai. All these murders were committed in 1979. In total, about 20 terrorist actions of this group have achieved their goal⁴⁷.

On June 27, 1981, an attempt was made on Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei. At that time, Ayatollah Khamenei was Imam Khomeini's representative in the Supreme Defense Council. During Khamenei's speech, an explosion occurred in the south of Tehran, but the ayatollah remained alive⁴⁸. The assassination attempt on Khamenei was the last terrorist action carried out on behalf of Forkan. It is noteworthy that even before the terrorist attack, on January 18, 1980, Gudarzi and his supporters were arrested. And on June 3, 1980, the leader of Forkan and his associates were shot on charges of terrorism. Several dozen people received long prison terms. The investigation concluded that the perpetrator of the assassination attempt on Ayatollah Khamenei was Javad Gadiri, a member of the PMOI⁴⁹. There is a version that there was a connection between the two terrorist organizations, and Forkan was the combat wing of the "People's Mujahideen Organization of Iran"⁵⁰.

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Summing up, it is worth noting that the synthesis of Islam and socialism by Ali Shariati or, in fact, the left-wing ideas on the structure of Iran's political life, which were expressed by Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani, turned out to be unclaimed by the Iranian leadership after the Islamic Revolution. The negative attitude of the authorities towards leftist ideologies was also intensified due to the fact that Islamic groups with leftist views, after the overthrow of the Shah, began fighting against the Islamic republic.

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