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Ayatollah Khomeini

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Introduction

Few figures in modern history have so thoroughly transformed the destiny of a nation and so sharply divided opinion, both at home and around the world, as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. To his followers, he was the embodiment of religious integrity and revolutionary zeal, a man who emancipated Iran from foreign intervention and restored the primacy of Islam in public life. To his critics, he was a fundamentalist autocrat whose rule led to the suppression of freedoms, the execution of dissenters, and decades of ideological confrontation with the West. The life and legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini stand at the intersection of these clashing narratives—revered and reviled, idealized and feared.

This book navigates the complex and often contentious story of Khomeini's rise from the modest towns of central Iran to the apex of political and spiritual authority as the architect of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Beginning with the formative experiences of his childhood—marked by early tragedy, deep religious learning, and an immersion in the traditional values of Shi'ism—the biography traces how these influences shaped a man capable of uniting varied currents of Iranian discontent against the Pahlavi dynasty.

Khomeini's ascent was neither swift nor straightforward. His journey was one of intellectual rigor, religious devotion, and unyielding opposition to what he perceived as the erosion of Islamic values under foreign-backed rule. The evolution of his political and religious thought during decades of clerical scholarship and subsequent exile was critical. It was in the seminaries of Qom, among fellow jurists in Najaf, and later in France, that Khomeini developed the radical doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*—the Guardianship of the Jurist—a concept that would fundamentally redefine the relationship between religion and state in the modern era.

Beyond the revolution itself, this book examines Khomeini's decade as Iran's first Supreme Leader—a period characterized by dramatic upheaval. From the purging of political rivals and the suppression of freedoms, to the hostage crisis that captured the world's attention, to the protracted and devastating war with Iraq, Khomeini's policies changed not only Iran's trajectory, but the geopolitics of the Middle East. His tenure saw the enforcement of a deeply conservative social order, contentious debates within the Shi'i clergy, and the projection of revolutionary ideas beyond Iran's borders.

Most crucially, Ayatollah Khomeini's life is a study in contradictions—austere yet uncompromisingly powerful, spiritual yet ruthlessly political, responsive to the masses yet intolerant of plurality. His vision of an Islamic republic, once a rallying cry for the disenfranchised, became an experiment in authoritarian governance that still shapes

contemporary Iran. Decades after his death, his influence reverberates within and beyond the Islamic Republic; his portrait hangs in mosques and government offices, even as his image sparks anxious debate and latent fears in the West.

In telling the story of Khomeini's controversial life, this biography sets out neither to canonize nor to condemn, but rather to explore the depths of a personality and a movement that changed the course of Iranian—and world—history. By tracing his journey through twenty-five thematic chapters, we aim to provide context for his decisions, assess the consequences of his rule, and probe the enduring questions his legacy poses for Iran and the global community.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Birth of a Cleric: Khomein and Early Influences

The dust of central Iran holds secrets and shapes destinies, often far from the grand pronouncements of empires or the bustling chaos of burgeoning cities. It was in this arid landscape, in the small town of Khomein, nestled in what is now Markazi province, that Ruhollah Musavi was born. The exact date of his birth is a matter of some historical debate, a small puzzle piece in a life that would become defined by monumental, often contested, events. While official records and later biographies often cite September 24, 1902, some earlier documents and family accounts suggest May 17, 1900. The discrepancy, though minor in the grand sweep of his ninety-odd years, adds a touch of ambiguity from the very beginning of a life shrouded in both reverence and controversy.

Khomein itself, at the turn of the 20th century, was a world away from the rapidly changing capitals of Europe or even Tehran. It was a relatively small agricultural town, surviving on farming and traditional crafts, its rhythm dictated by the seasons and the calls to prayer. Life here was traditional, deeply intertwined with the tenets of Shi'i Islam, which permeated the social fabric, customs, and daily routines. For centuries, such towns had been the bedrock of Iranian society, places where religious authority, held by local Seyyeds and clerics, often held as much, if not more, sway in people's lives than the distant central government.

Ruhollah was born into one of Khomein's most respected and influential families, one with a distinguished lineage connecting them, or so the family tradition held, directly back to the Prophet Muhammad through the line of the Musa al-Kadhim, the seventh Shi'i Imam. This status as Seyyeds, marked by the black turbans worn by the men, bestowed a degree of inherent respect and moral authority within the community. It wasn't just a matter of lineage; it carried expectations of piety, learning, and often, leadership within the local religious sphere.

His father, Seyyed Mostafa Musavi, was a prominent figure in Khomein. A learned cleric himself, he had studied in the great Shi'i seminary centers, including the holy city of Najaf in what is now Iraq, a major hub of Shi'i scholarship for centuries. Returning to Khomein, Seyyed Mostafa became a source of religious guidance for the local population. He would lead prayers, deliver sermons, teach religious classes, and act as a mediator in disputes, fulfilling the traditional role of a local religious leader in a society where formal state institutions for justice and welfare were often distant or unreliable.

The world outside Khomein was in a state of flux, even if its tremors were only faintly felt in the town's quiet corners. Iran was still nominally ruled by the Qajar dynasty, a period marked by internal weakness, financial troubles, and increasing encroachment by foreign powers, particularly Britain and Russia. The recent Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) had promised reform and a more representative government, but its outcomes were complex and contested, leading to periods of civil strife and instability across the country. While Khomein was far from the centers of revolutionary fervor or foreign intrigue, the ripple effects of national weakness and local power struggles could nonetheless penetrate its relative calm.

Seyyed Mostafa was not merely a quiet man of faith confined to the mosque and madrasa. Like many clerics of his time and standing, he was involved in the affairs of the community, which sometimes brought him into conflict with those holding temporal power, particularly local landlords and government agents. His position as a respected religious leader meant people would turn to him for help or intervention against perceived injustices. In a world where land ownership was key to wealth and power, disputes between landowners and peasants were common, and a cleric advocating for the latter could easily make powerful enemies.

Tragically, it was this intersection of religious authority, community leadership, and likely conflict with local power structures that led to Seyyed Mostafa's premature death. The details remain somewhat obscured by time and later political narratives, but the accepted account is that he was murdered in 1903, while traveling on the road between Khomein and the nearby city of Arak. The killing was reportedly linked to a dispute with a local landlord, a stark reminder that even in a quiet corner of Iran, the life of a cleric involved in community affairs could be fraught with danger.

For young Ruhollah, born just five months before his father's death, this tragedy meant he would never know his father. His earliest years would be shaped by the women who raised him: his mother, Hajar Agha Khanum, the daughter of another prominent cleric, and his aunt, Sahebeh Khanum. These women took on the responsibility of nurturing the infant Ruhollah, providing him with the foundational care and early religious atmosphere expected within a Seyyed family.

The household itself would have been a center of traditional learning and piety. Clerical families often maintained small libraries of religious texts, and conversation would frequently revolve around Islamic law, history, and ethics. While specific formal schooling started a bit later, the early environment was one of constant, informal exposure to religious knowledge and practice. Even as a toddler, Ruhollah would have absorbed the rhythms of prayer, the recitation of the Quran, and the stories of the prophets and imams that formed the core of Shi'i belief.

His initial formal education began in a local *maktab*, a traditional primary school

typically attached to a mosque or run by a mullah. These schools focused on basic literacy and, most importantly, memorization of the Quran. For a young boy from a clerical background, mastering the recitation and understanding of the holy book was not just a matter of education; it was a fundamental step in following in the footsteps of his ancestors and fulfilling the expectations placed upon him by his lineage and community.

Beyond the *maktab*, young Ruhollah would have likely received further instruction from other local clerics and perhaps elder members of his own family. His elder brother, Mortaza (who would later become known as Ayatollah Pasandideh), ten years his senior, was already pursuing religious studies and would eventually play a significant role in Ruhollah's life, especially after further family tragedies. These early teachers would have introduced him to basic Arabic grammar, elementary Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and ethical principles derived from religious texts and the lives of the Imams.

Life in Khomein for a young boy was not solely confined to religious study, however. It would have included the experiences common to children in rural Iran at the time: playing in the dusty streets and surrounding fields, observing the agricultural cycle, and participating in the routines of a close-knit community. Yet, for the son of a murdered, respected cleric, there was an unspoken weight, an expectation of carrying on a legacy of learning and, perhaps implicitly, standing against injustice, the very thing that had cost his father his life.

The political landscape continued its slow, uneven evolution. While Khomein might have felt removed from the maneuvering in Tehran, the growing power of Reza Khan (who would become Reza Shah in 1925, founding the Pahlavi dynasty) was beginning to assert central government authority more forcefully across the country. This rise of a strong, modernizing central state, often at the expense of traditional local powers, including the clergy, would become a defining tension throughout Khomeini's life, though its full impact was years away from being felt directly in the quiet religious household in Khomein.

By the time Ruhollah was a young boy, the environment of Khomein had thus provided him with a foundation built on deep Shi'i religious tradition, the prestige and expectations of a Seyyed family, and an early, tragic encounter with the intersection of clerical involvement and local power struggles. This early life, steeped in piety and marked by absence, laid the groundwork for a figure who would later champion the role of the clergy in confronting injustice and governing society, even if his understanding and methods would evolve dramatically over the coming decades. His formative years in Khomein were the quiet prelude to a life that would eventually shake nations and redefine the role of religion in the modern world.

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