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The Shah and the Ayatollah: Iranian Mythology and Islamic Revolution

Fereydoun Hoveyda

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Twenty-two years after Ayatollah Khomeini's ascent to power in Iran many aspects of his 1979 Islamic revolution remain obscure if not baffling. For instance, in November 1978 an offer was made to him in his Paris exile to return to Iran with international guarantees of freedom of speech and action. He refused and demanded the departure of the Shah. Americans put pressure on the monarch to leave the country. Khomeini arrived in Tehran in early February 1979, and he immediately demanded the return of the Shah and his trial before an Islamic tribunal! No one could give a valid explanation of this contradiction in Khomeini's conduct and demands. Many other mysteries in the unfolding of the revolution and the policies of the Islamic republic which replaced the monarchy have gone unexplained up to now. Scholars and experts in the West have offered the usual explanations for the Islamic revolution-corruption, deepening gaps between the rich and the poor, rapid industrialization, sky-rocketing inflation, westernizing policies that offended traditions, lack of democratic institutions, authoritarian rule, and on and on. But such characteristics which exist in other Muslim countries, especially in the Arab world, fail to clairify the particularities of the Iranian revolution.

Indeed, as Ambassador Hoveyda points out, Iran is not an Arab country. It has kept alive its ancient mythological heritage which is not Islamic. It is an Indo-European nation with a recorded history of three thousand years! To understand the real causes of the 1979 revolution one must refer to the deep-rooted beliefs of Iranians and to their very rich mythology. One must also take into account the kind of Islam-shiism-Iranians have created and nurtured. In fact, Iran is a powerful example of how mythologies remain alive and can account for the conduct of a whole nation. Hoveyda shows the influence of myths in history-in-the-making. Indeed, he has found in the Iranian revolution many points that can be clarified only by the impact of old mythology and mindsets. He provides a very original explanation of the events that led to the fall of the Shah and the ascent of Khomeini, changing the political and diplomatic situation in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea region. As such it will be of great interest to scholars, students, researchers, and foreign policy makers involved with the Middle East and Islamic fundamentalism.

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