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Martin Amis: The end of Iran's ayatollahs?

In 1979, the return to Iran of an exiled cleric marked the start of the Islamic Republic. The death in June of Neda Soltan may herald the long-overdue fall of this moribund regime

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An Iranian protester during an opposition rally in Tehran on 9 July 2009 Photograph: -/AFP/Getty Images

The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and clarifications column, Monday 20 July 2009

An essay exploring whether Iran's Islamic republic is in its death throes – referred to President Jimmy Carter's "failed Entebbe raid of April 1980" to rescue US hostages in Iran. The failed 1980 mission was Operation Eagle Claw. The rescue of airline passengers at Entebbe, Uganda, was carried out with almost complete success by the Israeli military in July 1976.

The writer Jason Elliot called his recent and resonant Iranian travelogue *Mirrors of the Unseen*; and I am aware of the usual dangers associated with writing about the future. But what we seem to be witnessing in Iran is the first spasm of the death agony of the Islamic Republic. In this process, which will be very long and very ugly, Mir Hossein Mousavi is likely to play a lesser role than Neda Agha Soltan, whose transformation (from youth, hope, and beauty, in a matter of seconds, to muddy death) unforgettably crystallised the core Iranian idea – the Shia tragedy and passion – of martyrdom in the face of barbaric injustice. Neda Soltan personified something else, too: the modern.

Elliot's title should again be borne in mind as we consider the June Events, which are open to two interpretations. Quite possibly, things are more or less as they appear: the results of a fraudulent election were presented to the people with indecent haste and laughable incompetence (with, in other words, implicit contempt for democracy); civil unrest was then followed by the application of state violence. Now consider. If, after the usual interval, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had soberly announced a 51% win for President Ahmadinejad, then Iran, and the world, might well have bowed its head and moved on. Just as possibly (the Islamic Republic being what it is), the landslide was rigged, and ostentatiously vaunted, to bring on the terror and the crackdown.

In 1997, the regime felt confident enough to sanction the surprise victory of President Muhammad Khatami, who won by the same landslide margin of 69% in a joyous election that no one disputed. Khatami, a cleric, had nonetheless far stronger liberal credentials than the technocrat Mousavi (who, during the Iran-Iraq war, was well to the right of Khamenei). Lovingly hailed as "Ayatollah Gorbachev", Khatami was soon talking about the "thoughtful dialogue" he hoped to open with America. It seemed possible that international isolation, which so parches and de-oxygenates the Iranian air, was about to be eased.

Everyone understood that this process would take time. In June 2001, Khatami was re-elected with a majority of 78%. Seven months later came George W Bush's "axis of evil" speech (one of the most destructive in American history), and the Tehran Spring was at an end. In truth, Bush was heaven-sent for the Iranian right; he blindly enhanced its regional power (with the adventurist, indeed experimental, war with Iraq), while remaining adequately "arrogant" (the most detested of all attributes in the Shia-Iranian sensorium). Now, the mullahs are aware that Barack Obama is far cannier than that. Had Mousavi won, Obama would have rewarded Iran, and in a way palpable to all Iranians. Such a "linkage" – liberalisation equals benefits – would have fatal consequences for the mullahs. The earth has already stirred beneath them, with the pro-western, anti-Syrian, anti-Iranian election in Lebanon. This, together with certain historical forces, explains the current confusion and hysteria of the armed clerisy.

For the mullahs now know that they are afloat on an ocean of illegitimacy. The great hawsers of the revolution of 1978-79 are all either snapped or fraying. Of the four foundational narratives, three are myths: the "Islamic Revolution" was not an Islamic revolution; the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), which destroyed a generation, was not the "Imposed War", as it is still called; and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was not a great man (Khomeini, as every inquisitive Iranian has long understood, was a world-historical monster). Perhaps most importantly of all, for now, the fourth narrative, or thread (anti-Americanism – "Westoxication", in the old battle cry), has been severed by the person of Obama. The Islamic Republic is also doomed by modernity (in the form of instant communications) and by demographic destiny. Persia, one of the oldest nations on earth, is getting younger and younger.

"In the history of the Iranian plateau," writes Sandra Mackey, in her stylish and magisterial classic, *The Iranians: Persia, Islam, and the Soul of a Nation*, "the sun has risen and set on nearly a million days." But before we come to the Iranian soul, and the million days, let us examine the Three Lies about the Islamic Republic.

The 1979 revolution wasn't an Islamic revolution until it was over. In its origins, it was a full-spectrum mass movement, an avalanche of demonstrations and riots, and strikes so relentless that they blacked out the Peacock's palace; the military, moreover, was

sustaining a thousand defections per day. The June Events of 2009 constitute a mere whisper of demurral when set against the deafening crescendo of 1978. The noise was not made for clerical rule; the noise was made because a decadent monarchy had lost the *farr* – the inherent aura of kingship.

It is instructive to compare the Iranian revolution with the two Russian revolutions of 1917: the February revolution, a popular revolt, and the October revolution, a Leninist coup (with an impotent Provisional Government in the interim). Trotsky said that the Bolsheviks found power lying in the street and "picked it up like a feather". And then, of course, the really warm work began – against the Whites, against the Greens (the peasantry), against the trade unions, against the church, and so on, until every alternative centre of power (and opinion) was eradicated, down to and including any gathering of three.

On 16 January 1979, Muhammad Reza Shah fled out of Tehran – to exile in Cairo. On 1 February, Ayatollah Khomeini flew into Tehran – from exile in Paris (where one of his more regrettable neighbours, I feel obliged to mention, was Brigitte Bardot). Thus the political revolution was over; now the cultural revolution began. The Provisional Government was successively eroded by the *komitehs* (mosque-based militias, later the Basij), by the Revolutionary Guards (later the Pasdaran, or the Iranian army), and by the revolutionary tribunals (which dealt out rough justice to survivors of the old regime, and various other undesirables). On 4 November, a group of pious students spontaneously infiltrated the US embassy and seized the 53 hostages. Khomeini manipulated this V-sign directed at the Great Satan to such effect that in the imminent referendum on the new constitution "99.5%" of a turnout of 17 million gave their blessing to Islamic autocracy.

But there was still that "0.5" to deal with. And Khomeini faced vigorous opposition from almost every quarter – most formidably from the Mujahedin-e Khalq. Established a decade and a half earlier, in opposition to the Shah, the Mujahedin (Marxist, left-Islamic, and committed to women's rights) had half a million adherents and could field a guerrilla army of 100,000 experienced fighters. When Khomeini excluded them from the new political order as "un-Islamic", they turned to terror. In 1981, if you recall, the Mujahedin were blowing up mullahs by the dozen (74 in a single strike in Tehran); and they went on to assassinate more than a thousand government officials in the latter months of that year. What followed was terroristic civil strife. By September, Khomeini's Revolutionary Guards were executing 50 people a day for "waging war against God" (the same crime, and the same punishment, now being invoked by the clerics of 2009). Fired by a zeal both revolutionary and religious, the mullahs bloodily prevailed.

Revolutions, almost by definition, are fiercely anti-clerical. As late as 1922, to take the fiercest possible example, Lenin executed 4,500 priests and monks, plus 3,500 nuns. Contrarian Iran, however, swam upstream. By December 1982, Khomeini had more or less secured the monopoly of violence, and the Iranian people found themselves living under the world's only revolutionary theocracy. The Islamic Republic was Islamic, now, but it was no longer a republic. Iranians have since enjoyed only a shadow of popular sovereignty; and by 1982, besides, they had something else to think about – the meatgrinding confrontation with Iraq.

The Iran-Iraq war can rightly be thought of as the Imposed War, but only if we understand that the war was imposed by Khomeini. It tests the historical imagination

to get a sense of the horrified dismay engendered, throughout the region, by the advent of the meshuga ayatollah. Stalin, after a while, was content with "socialism in one country". Khomeini, proclaimedly, wanted Shia theocracy in every country on earth. Throughout the course of the Iran-Iraq war, Khomeini put himself about elsewhere, with bombings, assassination attempts, and armed subversion, in Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. In Mecca, the hajj became the scene of annual agitation; in 1987, a clash between Iranian militiamen and Saudi riot police left more than 400 dead.

And Iraq? In 1979 Saddam Hussein reached out a trembling hand of friendship to the new Iran, and was clearly hoping for the continuation of the detente he had established with the Shah. Iran responded by resuming support for the separatist Kurds (suspended since 1975) and for the Shia underground; there were assassination attempts on the deputy premier and the minister of information, and the successful murder of at least 20 prominent officials in April 1980 alone. Khomeini, meanwhile, withdrew his ambassador from Baghdad; in September, Iran shelled the border cities of Khanaqin and Mandali.

In *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, Efraim Karsh lists in his chronology eight Iraqi offers of ceasefires, the first on 5 October 1980, 12 days after the war began, the last on 13 July 1988, five weeks before it ended. Khomeini's war aim was the theocratisation, or de-Satanisation, of Iraq; thus the war became a (failed) test of Islam, and devolved, in Mackey's words, into "a daily enactment of Shia themes of sacrifice, dispossession, and mourning". So: 12-year-olds were attacking Iraqi machine gun emplacements on bicycles, and 750,000 Iranians filled the multi-acre cemeteries, and perhaps twice that number were left crippled in body or mind. Eleven months later, Khomeini himself joined the fallen in the land of the dead.

What remains, then, you might wonder, as you deplane at Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport, and enter a city where no cab-driver will stop for a cleric – what remains of the legacy bequeathed by the Father of the Revolution, or alternatively by "that fucking asshole", as he is reflexively called, in English, by the youth of the cities of Iran? Khomeini's notion of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, or rule by the vice-regent of God (ie, the top mullah, ie, Khomeini), was so unhistorical that many of its angriest opponents came from the clergy. Political participation, in Shia theology, is seen as a contaminant. And with good reason: that power corrupts is not a metaphor; and absolute power, combined with absolute self-righteousness, defined the insane nightmare of Khomeini's rule.

His moral imbecilities provide a rich field. I will confine myself to two examples. After President Carter's "fiasco in the desert", the failed Entebbe raid of April 1980, Khomeini announced that God had personally thrown sand into the helicopters' engines, to protect the nation of Islam. To hear this kind of talk from an eight-year-old is one thing; to hear it from a bellicose head of state, on public radio, is another. The second example comes from Mackey (the time is 1981):

A film run on government-controlled television showed a mother denouncing her son as a Marxist. The son, sobbing and grabbing for his mother's hand, desperately tries to convince her that he has given up Marxist politics. The mother rejects his pleas saying, "You must repent in front of God and you will be executed." The picture fades to Ayatollah Khomeini telling the people of Iran, "I want to see more mothers turning in their children with such courage without shedding a tear. This is what Islam is."

Well, it may or may not be what Islam is. But it is not what Iranians are.

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Iran is one of the most venerable civilisations on earth: it makes China look like an adolescent, and America look like a stripling. And its 2,500-year history is sliced almost exactly in two by the rise of Islam. Accordingly, the Iranian heart is bipolar, divided between Xerxes and Muhammad, between Persepolis and Qom, between the imperially sensuous (with its luxury and poetry) and the unsmilingly pious. You will, I think, acknowledge that dividedness when I tell you that the author of this quietly beautiful quatrain –

I am a supplicant for a goblet of wine

From the hand of a sweetheart.

In whom can I confide this secret of mine,

Where can I take this sorrow?

– is the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Not Ferdowsi, not Rumi, not Hafez, not Omar Khayyam: Khomeini. It is perhaps the most beguiling single feature of Iranian life that its people go on pilgrimages, not only to the shrines of their martyrs and imams, but also to the shrines of their poets. The Iranian-Persian soul resembles the goddess Proserpina in Ted Hughes's masterly Tales from Ovid –

Proserpina, who divides her year

Between her husband in hell, among spectres,

And her mother on earth, among flowers.

Her nature, too, is divided. One moment

Gloomy as hell's king, but the next

Bright as the sun's mass, bursting from clouds.

In 1935, Iranians found themselves living in a different country – not Persia but Iran, the specifically pre-Islamic "land of the Arians". This was the work of Reza Shah (the army strongman who seized the throne in 1925). Reza Shah was a modernist and seculariser – Iran's Atatürk or Nasser. He was also a friend of Nazi Germany (and was deposed by the Allies in 1941). In 1976, Iranians found themselves living in a different millennium, not 1355 (dated from the time of the Prophet) but 2535 (dated from the time of Cyrus the Great). This was the work of Reza Shah's son. Installed by the coup of 1953 (the west's very grave historical crime, whose disastrous consequences are still with us), Muhammad Reza Shah was a "miserable wretch", as Khomeini rightly called him; but he was quite closely attuned to Iran's divided self. Reza Shah beat women who wore the veil; Khomeini beat women who didn't; Muhammad Reza Shah beat neither.

After 1979, Iran was subjected to militant and breakneck re-Islamisation. The Zoroastrian era was declared to be *jahiliyyah*, a benighted slum of ignorance and idolatry, and a dire embarrassment to all good Muslims. In the mid-1990s, for

example, the historian Jahangir Tafazoli was put to death simply because he was the best-known specialist on ancient Iran. We would call this "killing the messenger", and we would call the entire tendency "delusional denial". The 30-year suppression of the mixed Iranian soul – which says yes to freedom and tolerance, yes to love and life and art, yes to Islam, and yes to modernity – provided the energy and courage of the June Events, and entrained the hideous murder of Neda Soltan.

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So now we have another four years of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who will be more purple-gummed with insecurity than ever, and another four years of troubled dreams about the Iranian bomb. I find that the one thing Ahmadinejad mandates, with full legitimacy, is a tone of ridicule – because it is impossible to write solemnly about the man who, among other absurdities, clinched the 2005 election by the simple feat of not having a Jacuzzi. And you needn't reread that sentence: the "Jacuzzi moment", or the no-Jacuzzi moment, when the candidate revealed that yes, he had no Jacuzzi, was widely credited with securing his majority. This was enough, apparently, to make him shine out in the smog of pelf and hypocrisy that passes for the Islamic Republic.

The American politician whom Ahmadinejad most closely resembles – in one vital respect – is Ronald Reagan. General similarities, I agree, are hard to spot. Ahmadinejad doesn't live on a ranch with a former starlet. Reagan didn't have a degree in traffic control. Ahmadinejad doesn't use Grecian 2000 (as his rapidly greying hair triumphantly attests). Reagan, as a young man, wasn't involved in the murder of political adversaries. And so on. But what they have in common is this: both figures are denizens of that stormlit plain where end-time theology meets nuclear weapons.

Now we can return, for a while, to dissimilarities. Ahmadinejad is not checked and balanced by democratic institutions. Reagan did not actually spend public money on civic preparations for the Second Coming, and was not the product of a culture saturated in ecstatic fantasies of morbid torment. Ahmadinejad does not have a temperament in which "simple-minded idealism" (in Eric Hobsbawm's formulation) might lead him to recognise "the sinister absurdity" of the arms race. And Reagan was not answerable to some millenarian vicar in the holy city of, say, Baltimore. Finally, whereas Reagan wielded enough firepower to kill everyone on earth several times over, Ahmadinejad does not yet have his Button.

Jesus Christ, according to both presidents, is due very shortly, but in Ahmadinejad's vision the Nazarene will merely form a part of the entourage of a much grander personage – the Hidden Imam. Who is the Hidden Imam? In the year 873, the bloodline of the Prophet came to an end when Hasan al-Askari (in Shiism, the 11th legitimate imam) died without an heir. At this point, among the believers, a classic circularity took hold. It was assumed that there must be an heir; there was no record of his existence, they reasoned, because extraordinary efforts had been made to conceal it; and extraordinary efforts had been made because this little boy was an extraordinary imam – the Mahdi, in fact, or the Lord of Time.

In Shia eschatology the Mahdi will return during a period of great tribulation (during, say, a nuclear war), will deliver the faithful from injustice and oppression, and will then supervise the Day of Judgment. Not only Ahmadinejad but members of his cabinet have been giving the Hidden Imam "about four years" – well within the president's second term. And where has the Hidden Imam dwelt since the ninth

century? In "occultation", wherever that may be. The Hidden Imam is at least intelligibly called the Lord of Time: he is 1,100 years old.

Rule number one: no theocracy can ever deploy nuclear arms. And Iran, we respectfully suggest, is not yet ready for the force that drives the sun. We all know what Ahmadinejad thinks of Israel (and we remember his Islamists' conference, or his goons' rodeo, in Tehran, on the historicity of the Holocaust). Yet this is what Ali Rafsanjani thinks of Israel – Rafsanjani, the old, much-jailed revolutionary chancer, a pragmatist and reformer, hugely worldly, hugely venal: "The use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything", whereas a counterstrike on Iran will merely "harm" the Islamic world; "it is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality". Indeed, given the Shia commitment to martyrdom, mutual assured destruction, as one Israeli official put it, "is not a deterrent. It's an incentive."

Nuclear weapons, it seems, were sent down here to furnish mankind with a succession of excruciating dilemmas. Until recently the mullahs' quest for the H-bomb seemed partly containable: the nuclear powers could give face to Tehran, and begin to scale back their arsenals towards the zero option. But now those powers include North Korea (already the land of the living dead); and the Islamic Republic, in any case, no longer seems appeasable. Equipped with weapons of fission or fusion, the supreme leader may delegate first use to Hezbollah, or to the Call of Islam, or to the Legion of the Pure. Or he may himself become the first suicide bomber to be gauged in megatons.

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Meanwhile, the memory of the June Events, and of Neda Soltan, will do its work, and add weight to the mass of unendurable humiliations meted out to the Iranian people. Meanwhile, too, the senescent regime (I again warily predict) will reach beyond crackdownism for the supposedly unifying effects of war. Not a war against someone its own size, or someone bigger. Tiny Bahrain, which is 60% Shia, looks about right.

As for apocalyptic Islamism, in all its forms, I cannot improve on the great Norman Cohn. This is from the 1995 foreword to *Warrant for Genocide* (1967), where the subject is the Tsarist fabrication *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and what Jewry calls the Shoa, or the Wind of Death:

"There exists a subterranean world where pathological fantasies disguised as ideas are churned out by crooks and half-educated fanatics [notably the lower clergy] for the benefit of the ignorant and superstitious. There are times when this underworld emerges from the depths and suddenly fascinates, captures and dominates multitudes of usually sane and responsible people, who thereupon take leave of sanity and responsibility. And it occasionally happens that this underworld becomes a political power and changes the course of history."

• [Martin Amis's](#) novel *The Pregnant Widow* will be published by Cape next February

