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Religion, diplomacy and identity. Some remarks on the ayatollah Khomeini's letter to Gorbachev

“Let me call on you to study Islam earnestly, not because Islam and the Muslims may need you but because Islam has exalted universal values which can bring comfort and salvation to all nations and remove the basic problems of mankind” (Ayatollah Khomeini to Gorbachev¹).

Ravil Gainutdin, the Chairman of the Council of Muftis in Russia, in his speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of the ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini delivered on 9 October 2000 in Moscow, recalled the letter of Khomeini sent to Mikhail Gorbachev some months before the ayatollah's death.² Gainutdin put the letter in the context of the changes and transformations of the Soviet Union stressing the importance of Khomeini's words for the whole Muslim community leaving under the communist rule. Yet he did not concentrate only on the religious matter but also on its political and social aspects.³ In fact that the letter is a phenomenon due to its specific form, it is

¹ *A Call to Divine Unity. Letter of Imām Khomeinī, The Great Leader of the Islamic Revolution and Founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran To President Mikhail Gorbachev, Leader of the Soviet Union*, Tehran 2008, p. 16.

² Р. Гайнутдин, *России следует серьёзно подходить к исламу*, [in:] *Ислам. Ответ на вызовы времени: выступления, статьи, интервью, документы: 1994–2008*, Москва 2011, p. 267–272.

³ Such elements are the object of debate among the Russian politicians. On 4 July 2013 in the Russian Parliament a meeting devoted to the memory of the late ayatollah Khomeini, was organized. The meeting, or the round table, as they called it, was initiated by a parliamentary party – the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Some representatives of the Iranian political elites, including the ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Russia Reza Sajjadi participated in the event. One of the key topics, enhanced from time to time at such meetings and deliberations, was the importance of Khomeini's letter sent to Gorbachev.

addressed to a particular person and at the same time accessible for public. Familiarization faces some generalizations in such a form.⁴

The Iranian scholars and politicians mostly agree in their opinions on the historical meaning of the letter, which, according to them, indicated Khomeini's personality typical more of a prophet than of a politician.⁵ Subsequently, we may consider the impact of the letter on the relations between the Soviet Union and Iran, the influence on the politicians in Moscow and in Tehran, and the reactions it caused worldwide.

The article relates to several issues, as follows: 1) the context and the circumstances of the despatch and delivery of the letter as well as its origin; 2) the reactions to the letter in the Soviet Union and in the world; 3) the goals of the letter, its intentions and its content; 4) the possible interpretations of the letter.

Context of issuing the letter

On 17 July 1988 Iran accepted the UN Security Council Resolution no. 598 sanctioning the ceasefire between Iraq and Iran, which had been earlier rejected by Iran. Khomeini was personally against the resolution, ready rather for more sacrifice in the war than for an agreement with Saddam Husain. In fact, ideologically, the end of the war was rather unattractive as one of the main goals of the Islamic Revolution – its export abroad – remained unachieved. The other reason was the impossibility to remove Saddam Husain from his post and at the same time win on the ideological battleground with the hidden ally of Husain – the Great Satan, as Iranian labelled the USA after the Islamic Revolution. But the second principle of the Revolution was still valid and summarized in the slogan: *Neither East, nor West – just the Islamic Revolution (na-sharqi, na-gharbi – enqelab-e eslami)*, which meant that in Iranian political imagination both the West and the East played an important role. The East in the above-mentioned slogan is connected to an ideology – communism. Communism shaped various social movements in the modern history: from predominantly atheistic to purely religious, and in fact, inspired the Iranian revolutionary ideas. But after the revolution the communist concepts were banned and Iranian communists were imprisoned.⁶ Going back to the events from 1988

⁴ In this article the text of letter of Khomeini to Gorbachev (original and translated into Russian) published by Embassy of the Islamic Republic in Iran was used, see: *В свете посланий пророков: письмо Имама Хомейни и другое письмо, в том же контексте*, Культурное представительство Исламской Республики Иран в Москве 2006.

⁵ There is a huge literature concerning the life and activity of ayatollah Khomeini published in and out of Iran, most recently published: *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. A. Adib-Moghaddam, New York 2014.

⁶ F. Jahanpour, *Iran: The Rise and Fall of the Tudeh Party*, "The World Today" 40 (1984) № 4, p. 152–159.

we should remark upon the important changes occurring in the Soviet Union which made Khomeini vigorous on the other ideological field – the struggle with communism. In Khomeini’s eyes Gorbachev himself along with his newly-printed book *Перестройка и новое мышление для нашей страны и для всего мира*⁷ needed some corrections and guidance. The reforms introduced by Gorbachev encouraged Khomeini to propose a new better system of values – Islam. The decision to withdraw the Red Army from Afghanistan was also of great significance. So, this is, we may say, the proper context in which we should put Khomeini’s letter sent to Gorbachev at the beginning of 1989. The letter was delivered by a special envoy – ayatollah Jawad Amali. The Iranian delegation reached Moscow on 4 January. The letter was read and translated into Russian in the presence of Gorbachev and other Russian politicians. The question is what reaction the letter caused among the Russians, Iranians, and among the other world players at that time, like Americans.

The world press kept their reader informed about Khomeini’s letter and the events following the meeting held in Moscow during the first days of 1989. The New York Times in its issue from 5 January published a short article entitled *Study Islam, Khomeini Suggests to Gorbachev*, emphasising in that way the essence of Khomeini’s letter. While spreading the information, the newspaper relied basically on the official Iranian medium – the Tehran radio.

Several days later, on 19 January, the same newspaper published a short news item on the reaction of the Soviet authorities to Khomeini’s proposal, quoting the words of ayatollah Amali, a special Khomeini’s envoy. The news headline was very suggestive: “How Khomeini Made Gorbachev See Red”. According to Amali the suggestion about the end of communism and its merely museum value made the Soviet politicians red with anger. What is more, the articles estimated that population of 50 million Muslims in the Soviet Union could be potentially interested in the letter by Iranian supreme leader. However, the introduction to the letter issued in English by The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imām Khomeinī’s Works, says that the circulation of the message among the Soviet Muslims was banned.⁸

In spite of the limited access to its content in the Soviet Union, the letter opened a quite new period in the history of the relations between the Soviet and Iranian authorities.

In February 1989 Eduard Shevardnadze, a Russian minister for foreign affairs, started his 10-day visit to the Middle Eastern countries, including Iran,

⁷ For English translation: M. Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, New York 1988.

⁸ *A Call to Divine Unity. Letter of Imām Khomeinī...*, p. 2.

where he presented Gorbachev's response to Khomeini's letter.⁹ In March that year an Iranian minister – Ali Akbar Velayati paid a visit to Moscow. In consequence, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the chairman of the Iranian parliament, elected president in August, went to Moscow. It was the first visit to the Soviet Union paid by such a high rank authority since Shah's visit to Russia in 1974. It is easy to understand why such intensification in the bilateral relations is interpreted by Iranians as the result of Khomeini's letter. But the letter also played a significant role among the Russian politicians, which can be easily seen in the events which were recalled at the beginning.

What was the main purpose of the letter? Historians share a common opinion that the letter was the only official message sent directly to the head of the foreign state by Khomeini. In my opinion, it showed Khomeini's involvement in the then political affairs and his attempts to introduce Islam in its Iranian version as an alternative political system. Such attempts had two dimensions: international and internal. The letter was not only addressed to Gorbachev but also carried a message to Iranians, creating an impression of the victorious Islam in the context of the end of the war with Iraq. Written in an informal form typical of a letter, it was not reduced to the informative function only. Its function was also ideological, by creating an impression of rareness and sublimity was far more significant to the Iranians themselves.

The letter refers in its informative content to at least three main topics which can be distinguished corresponding to 1) consumptionism as an exclusively typical for the West; 2) materialism, characteristic of communism, and 3) Islam.

Consumptionism and materialism as they were seen by Khomeini could not respond to the real human needs, only Islam was able to do so. What seems to be interesting in Khomeini's analysis of the communism is his attempt to show its positive aspect, and at same time give some positive remarks on the Soviet Union. He emphasises the readiness of the Russian people to bear a revolution and their resistance to the West, which gains his sympathy. Talking about Islam, Khomeini stressed the ability of its resistance to the western values and the strength to keep the people independent. The way in which he presented Islam is of greater importance, I presume.

Khomeini tried to reveal the philosophical and mystical aspect of Islam suggesting that Gorbachev should study the great Muslim thinkers: Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Al-Arabi, and Mulla Sadra.¹⁰ Some of them, however, might be known a little even to the Muslims in the Soviet Union at that time, but some might be seen as the heritage of the Muslim culture in the Soviet Central Asia, in particular Avicenna. The list of the thinkers is by no means

⁹ М. Х. Махдиян, *История межгосударственных отношений Ирана и России*, Москва 2014, p. 90–91.

¹⁰ B. Moin, *Khomeini. Life of the Ayatollah*, London–New York 2009, p. 274–275.

accidental. Al-Farabi, for instance, postulates the necessity of the ideal society and ideal states, his ideas, however, are more of eschatological, and unrealistic character. Khomeini goes further introducing highly specialized mystical terms in his letter as, for example *fana*, which means annihilation in God. The letter showed Khomeini as a mystic,¹¹ and his attitude to the politics as idealistic and pragmatic at the same time. This is a synthesis of his main thoughts. After this short attempt to characterize the context of the letter, its goals, and content it is worth making some interpretations. We may focused on three of its aspects:

- Khomeini's letter as a sign of Iranian political culture.
- Khomeini's letter as evidence for the return of Iran to the global politics.
- Khomeini's letter as a kind of answer to history.

Letter in the context of Iranian political culture

Khomeini's letter, especially in its Iranian interpretations, may be traced to the Muhammad's letter sent to the kings who were reigning at his time. The stories about Muhammad's letters, simply apocryphical, inspired popular imagination. In Iran, after the Arab's conquest, the story about the letter of Muhammad sent to Persian king Khosrow Parviz became popular, in the letter Muhammad predicted the collapse of the Sassanid Empire if the king did not accept Islam. This is the only example of a political letter, but we can find many more in the modern history of Iran. Bahauallah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, wrote several letters to the noble persons of his time, like the pope, Queen Victoria and many others, introducing them to the principles of the new faith and proclaiming the new era. In consequence, we may assume that Khomeini kept such a tradition and announced the new era of Islam through his letter. In that case a letter has a real power of changing the reality. It is a kind of pragmatic act of speech in Austin's term.

Such beliefs in the power of a letter could be observed in the activity of the former Iranian president Ahmadinezhad, who sent several letters to the world's important persons, including Bush. Returning to Khomeini's letter and its connection to the tradition, we may conclude that it is treated as a manifestation of the Muslim unity, demanded many times, but never achieved.

¹¹ More about mystical aspect of Khomeini's writings: A. Knysh, *Irfan Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy*, "The Middle East Journal" 46 (1992) № 4, p. 631–653; A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Khomeini the Poet Mystic*, "Die Welt des Islams" 51 (2011) № 3–4, p. 438–458.

Letter in the context of global politics

The letter of Khomeini – from the Iranian point of view – is a successful attempt to return to the global politics, not only by its critics and critics of the West.

While analysing the Iranian Revolution, Peter Beyer treated it as a form of a protest against globalization.¹² He noticed, however, some paradoxes of the Iranian protest, which means that Iranians rejected not only globalisation but also the way in which the world was becoming globalized and the marginal role of Islam in the process. The answer to globalization – as we see in the letter – is Islam, as a new and better world system. Why? – one may ask. “Islam has exalted universal values which can bring comfort and salvation to all nations and remove the basic problems of mankind”¹³ – Khomeini answers in the letter.

Russia plays a special role in the process of Iranians returning to the world politics. Khomeini says: “I declare outright that the Islamic Republic of Iran as the greatest and most powerful base of the Islamic world can easily fill the vacuum of religious faith in your society. In any case, our country, as in the past, honours good neighbourhood and bilateral relations.”¹⁴

Letter as an answer to history

In a broader sense we may treat the letter as a Khomeini’s answer to history. First of all, the answer of Islam to the Bolshevik Revolution. That is why I analyse the letter with connection to the decree of November 1917 issued by the People’s Commissars Lenin and Stalin and addressed to the Muslims in Russia, Persia, Turkey and India. They called them to throw the yoke of Imperialism and join the new equal society¹⁵. Years later Khomeini calls to unity under the banner of Islam and his message is also addressed – like in 1917 – to the Muslims in Russia. Thus, the reaction of the Russian Muslims is important. In his text devoted to Khomeini, the Russian Muslim Ravil Gainutdin praised Khomeini’s letter and his role in the awakening of the Muslims in Russia. Gainutdin admired the deep understanding of the changes which were occurring during the time of Gorbachev. Gorbachev is portrayed in the letter as an initiator of such changes. Khomeini says:

„By granting certain liberties to some of your Republics in matters pertaining to religious practices, you have shown that you no longer consider religion as the

¹² P. Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, London–Thousand Oak–New Delhi 1994, p. 160–184.

¹³ *A Call to Divine Unity. Letter of Imām Khomeinī...*, p. 16.

¹⁴ *A Call to Divine Unity. Letter of Imām Khomeinī...*, p. 16.

¹⁵ *Обращение Совнаркома России «Ко всем трудящимся мусульманам России и Востока». 20 ноября (3 декабря) 1917 г.*, [in:] *Ислам и советское государство. Сборник документов*, Вып. 2 (1917–1936), Сост. Д. Ю. Арапов, Москва 2010, p. 19–25.

“opium of the people”. Indeed, how can Islam be the opium of the people—the religion that has made Iranians as firm as a mountain against superpowers? Is the religion that seeks the administration of justice in the world and man’s freedom from material and spiritual shackles, the opium of the people?”¹⁶.

In the original text for ‘opium’ the word مخدر [makhaddar] with broader meaning ‘narcotics’ is used.

To sum up, we may say that the main feature of the letter is the combination of a personal call to Gorbachev with its open and public character. The letter is also Khomeini’s will, as we see, his last will, to change the social order by implementing Islam as progressive and human values. The events following the despatch of the letter such as the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan and, finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union determine its interpretations. They allow to treat Khomeini as a politician, a mystic or even a prophet. But we should remember that such interpretations are changing depending on who reads it. And depending on the audience it may lose its informative function and become a more religious text. Probably the only function among the Iranians, who supplement the letter with the subtitle: *A Call to Divine Unity*.

Abstract

The letter sent by Ayatollah Khomeini to Gorbachev seems to be important in modern Iranian historiography presenting Khomeini as an influential and prophet-like “father of the revolution”. The letter brings Khomeini’s personal insights into the situation of the Soviet Union offering to its leader Islam as the only solution for internal and external problems. The letter in fact may be consider an example or rather a product of Iranian political culture, an attempt to return to the global and finally as a Khomeini’s answer to history.

Keywords

Khomeini; Iran; Gorbachev; Soviet Union; letter

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