

Musa Sadr: The Imam Who Vanished

The defection of insiders within the besieged regime of Col. Moammar Qaddafi may eventually help shed light on the mysterious disappearance of Imam Musa Sadr. The charismatic Lebanese ayatollah vanished in 1978 while in Tripoli. • Had he lived, some believe his open-minded outlook toward religious affairs might well have altered the confrontational course of recent history. •

interview by **Farian Sabahi**

The NATO campaign against the Libyan regime of Col. Moammar Qaddafi combined with the defection of some of his loyal lieutenants may eventually shed light on Imam Musa Sadr, a charismatic Lebanese ayatollah who mysteriously disappeared in Tripoli in 1978. Posters of his face still adorn the streets of some Lebanese cities, particularly Beirut and cities in the country's south.

In an effort to better understand Imam Sadr's enduring legacy, east spoke to Iranian intellectual Mohsen Kadivar. Born in 1959, Kadivar studied in the holy city of Qum under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, completing the cycle of theological studies necessary to reach the rank of ayatollah.

In 1999, he earned a doctorate in Islamic philosophy and theology at the Tarbiat Modarres University in Tehran. He was later sentenced to 18 months in prison by an Iranian religious court for criticizing the controversial "velayat-e faqih" doctrine ("Guardianship of the Jurist," or rule by the jurisprudent) introduced and expounded on by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The doctrine is the cardinal principal underlying rule in the Islamic Republic. Now living in exile in the United States, Kadivar teaches at Duke University.



Who was Imam Musa Sadr?

He was a senior member of the Shiite hierarchy, and of Iranian origin, operating in Lebanon. He had traveled extensively. He was open and available. When, before the 1979 revolution, [Hashemi] Rafsanjani was arrested, Musa Sadr to put pressure on the shah to have him re-

leased. When [Iranian intellectual and revolutionary] Ali Shariati died in 1977, Sadr led the funeral ceremonies in Damascus and other cities. He believed in gender equality and in criticizing all forms of discrimination, including those directed against religious minorities. For this reason, he was beloved also by Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. If he were still alive, he would be Lebanon's most respected figure, cutting across the board among all communities.

What were centerpieces of his thought?

Among the Shiite clergy, Sadr was one of the most open-minded members ever. Those who told me about him were Ayatollah Shirazi and Ayatollah Seyed Mousavi Ardebili Abdulkarim, who now support the green movement in Iran. Musa Sadr's thought resembled that of Iran's Grand Ayatollah Montazeri and Lebanese Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadl-Allah: He believed in free will, freedom, democracy and civil society.

If it he hadn't vanished, [Sayyid Hassan] Nasrallah and other Hezbollah radicals would not have any role in Lebanon. By making him disappear, Qaddafi ruined Lebanese Shiites and committed a serious crime, probably motivated by the strength of Sadr's resistance to Israel. Maybe Gaddafi jailed him for his criticism of Israel.

When I was head of the philosophy department at the University of Mufid in Tehran, I spent considerable time with Grand Ayatollah Mousavi Ardebili, who shared his memories of Musa Sadr. An Iranian, he had gone to Lebanon on the advice of Seyed Charaffeddine to organize the Shiite community in economic, political, cultural and social terms. Sadr established the Shiite Supreme Council, the democratic organ where all currents of Shiism were represented.

How did he relate to other faiths?

He believed in inter-religious dialogue, particularly between Islam and Christianity. He was active in that direction, as well as in bringing together Shiites and Sunnis, inviting them to be one community.

One of his most well-known fatwas (a religious opin-

FACING PAGE A Lebanese Army soldier mans a roadblock in a Hezbollah stronghold. In the background are posters of Shiite leaders Hassan Nasrallah and Musa al-Sadr.

RIGHT Ayatollah Musa al-Sadr.



ion with legal standing) regards the purity of the "peoples of the book." Asked if you can taste ice cream produced and sold by a Christian, Musa Sadr replied yes, because "that ice cream is pure for us Muslims." In his fatwa, he wrote, "those who belong to the people of the book are not unclean, but as pure as Muslims." In that same fatwa he says "music is allowed in Islam, without restrictions."

What was the relationship between Sadr and Khomeini?

Musa Sadr was a student of [Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abul-Qassim] Khoi, who was also the teacher of Grand Ayatollah [Grand Ayatollah Sayyid] Sistani. In 1964, when Khomeini was arrested, Sadr advanced the negotiations so that Khoi backed Khomeini. It was through him

that Khomeini was not killed but banished. As a result, the first international interview Khomeini gave, in Najaf, was given to a reporter from the French newspaper “Le Monde” and mediated by its Sadr.

He disappeared in 1978, shortly before the Iranian revolution. He didn’t believe in Khomeini velayat-e faqih’s doctrine but supported the idea of an Islamic revolution because “a democratic regime in Iran can help drive other dictators.” Had he been alive, he would have a role of great prestige and, after Khomeini’s death, would become Iran’s supreme leader in place of [Ayatollah Sayed] Khamenei, who lacks the proper theological training.

In recent months, the ruling dynasty in Bahrain cracked down on the Shiite opposition. Your thoughts.

The United Nations should uphold human rights. But no one says anything about the presence of at least 2,000 Saudi soldiers in Bahrain, a very small country, soldiers who arrested, tortured and killed hundreds of protesters. These Shiites are victims of misinformation. In an interview I saw on Youtube, [Egyptian theologian] Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi said, “the revolt in Bahrain had different root causes than those that produced rioting in

Tunisia and Egypt.” According to Qaradawi, in Bahrain “it’s sectarian, not economic revenge.” But that’s not true! The problem is that Qaradawi is a friend of Bahrain’s king, and wanted to do him favor. Furthermore, broadcaster Al-Jazeera, which based in Doha, isn’t reporting on Bahrain. Why? Because the Qataris are colluding with Bahrain’s Sunni regime, which is backed by the Saudis and other Gulf Arab countries. That regime is collapsing.

I’ve read that the dynasty of Bahrain claims to have reigned for more than 200 years, but when I was young, and I’m talking about 40 years ago, for those of us under the Shah, Bahrain was a province of Iran!

Seventy percent of people are Shiites of Iranian origin, even if they speak Arabic. It’s the same old story: different nations and double standards, one standard applied to the West and its allies. It’s unjust to suppress the Shiites, even if I understand the fears of those who see in them a possible victory for Iran.

Can we assume Tehran’s involvement in the Bahrain riots?

There’s no such evidence, but it would be interesting which ayatollah Shiite received the religious taxes of Bahrainis. I know that ayatollahs Khorassan in Qum and

Sistani in Najaf have faithful followers in Bahrain. That said, the Shiite opposition in Bahrain is composed of human beings, and they should be supported as such, regardless of the misinformation sent out by the Saudis, who fear a domino effect.

Just before Easter, the media reported a rift between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who accepted the resignation intelligence chief, and Khamenei, who allegedly told him not to resign. What’s going on?

It seems that President Ahmadinejad no longer wish to obey the supreme leader! Beyond the apparent disagreements, I believe that Khamenei and the president have a kind of tacit pact: they pretend to quarrel to suggest that Ahmadinejad is unhappy with the traditional clergy, hoping in doing so he’ll win votes that might otherwise go to reformers. In behaving this way, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad get voters involved and fight the inertia in view parliamentary elections in 2012 and the presidential vote in 2013.

Who is the emerging figure on the Iranian political scene?

Maybe [Esfandiar Rahim] Mashaei, the father-in-law of

Ahmadinejad: Mashaei’s daughter married one of Ahmadinejad’s sons. He wants to become president and if he gets the okay from the Guardian Council that means he also has the support of Khamenei. They pretend to love Iran, but in truth they don’t believe in anything. They’re merely power-hungry opportunists.

Where does the Green movement stand now two years after the disputed presidential elections of June 2009?

The Iranian government fears the opposition, which in March again staged street demonstrations. These latest demonstrations provoked the arrest of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karrubi, and their wives. The Islamic authorities didn’t think so many people would show up, and in different places, not just the capital.

The lack of success of the Green movement is due to the peculiarities of the Iranian regime: It’s young, energetic, anti-American, and uses heavy-handed tactics. In my opinion, this will be the t hardest year for activists, who at this point are unable even to maintain contacts between them. Political parties are banned.

There is freedom of expression. The opposition lacks the basic freedom of movement that Egyptians and Tunisians had, permitting them to overthrow Mubarak and Ben Ali. But sooner or later, the Green movement will be reborn.

With Grand Ayatollah Montazeri gone, who has picked up the mantle in defense of human rights?

Many are the grand ayatollahs who support the opposition movement. In addition to Grand Ayatollah [Yousef] Sanei in Qum, don’t underestimated Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Mohammad Dastgheib Shirazi, a member of the Assembly of Experts, who dared criticize the supreme leader by writing a letter in support Mussa and Karrubi.

Then there is Ayatollahs Ardebili, Ayatollah Zanjani Ayat and, most important of all, Ayatollah Wahid Khorassan of Qum, the father-in-law of Sadeq Larijani, who heads Iran’s judicial system. Every day, 4,000 students attend his courses. He’s a major authority figure, and has begun to criticize the government and its leaders traditional ways, suggesting that arresting people and putting them in jail, treating them badly, “is not Islamic.”

You must be patient. Many events are on the horizon. We just have to wait for them. ●

A SUSPICIOUS DEATH

Fausto Biefeni Olevano, the Italian investigative journalist whose March 2011 book *La verità nascosta* (“The Hidden Truth”) probed the mysterious disappearance of Imam Musa Sadr, was found dead in his Rome on Good Friday. The cause of death remains unclear and local authorities have ordered an autopsy and an investigation

Introducing his book before the Italian Chamber of Deputies on March 9, Olevano claimed that Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi was probably behind the disappearance of the popular Lebanese Shiite Iman, who vanished along with two others men during a 1978 stopover in Tripoli on his way to Rome.

Sadr and two companions, Sheikh Muhammad Yaacoub and journalist Abbas Badreddine, were in Libya to meet government officials. Qaddafi has insisted the men all left for Italy and denied involvement in their disappearance. Sadr’s son asserted in 2006 that his father was in a Libyan jail but he failed to provide any supporting documentation. In Au-

gust 2008, the Lebanese government indicted Qaddafi in connection with Sadr’s disappearance.

The arrest warrant was issued under a Lebanese law that allows for the indictment of any suspect who fails to respond to a summons for questioning.

“If judges read my book carefully,” Biefeni Olevano said, “it’s hard not to see the outlines of what seems like a criminal offense on the part of those people who have trampled on the human rights of three people and their families, who have waited for more than 30 years to know the real truth. Leads have emerged in Italy that are worth looking into and concern possible government awareness of what happened.”

Recently, Biefeni Olevano and I had been guests on a Radio Città Futura broadcast hosted by Giorgio Stamatopoulos. Before the broadcast, I’d read Fouad Ajami’s 1992 book “The Vanished Imam: Musa Al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon,” and also interviewed Rabab Sadr, Musa Sadr’s sister, in Tyre, Lebanon.

But Biefeni Olevano’s on air declarations went well beyond

anything I knew or had even read about. He went so far as to suggest Israeli involvement in what he described as a kidnapping plot. I don’t remember his exact remarks, but he said something to the effect that Qaddafi’s mother was Jewish and that as a result Qaddafi had worked with Israel to eliminate the Iman, to do a favor to Israel. It was an odd statement, the idea that Qaddafi’s mother was Jewish, though I’ve found the same suggestion on an Israeli website, Israelinsider.com. Apparently it’s based on a television interview with women who claim to be part of the Qaddafi clan.

I’m a historian by training so there’s no way for me to comment the accuracy Biefeni Olevano theories, which weren’t well attributed. At the same time there’s no lack of conspiracy theories on the subject, and blaming Israel is always fashionable.

In recent years, Biefeni Olevano had traveled extensively through the Middle East, visiting Israel, Palestine, Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon.

He produced a documentary on Musa Sadr case before beginning research on his book. ●