3 A Revolutionary Furnace

Some knowledge of the early months and years of the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Iran may help the reader to understand what has conditioned and motivated the Iranian government to use terrorism to further its Islamic aims; to strike at enemies in countries with liberal political regimes, free speech and free movement; and to help subversive elements embarrass and destabilise regimes it regards as unfriendly.

From the beginning of its existence the Islamic Republic of Iran was threatened by violent internal terrorism, and in order to survive it fought back by employing even greater terrorism, mass detention, torture, secret trials, executions and selective assassinations. Having both felt its effects and used it ruthlessly against its enemies at home and abroad, the Islamic Republican government understands the effectiveness of terrorism. Searing experiences have given it a taste for both overt and covert terrorism, and it has become a hardened and skilful manipulator of this form of warfare.

On 1 February 1979 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini arrived by air at Mehrabad Airport, Tehran, to a tumultuous and rapturous reception, estimated by attendant international media representatives as involving up to three million people. Nearby roads were so packed that Khomeini had to complete his journey into Tehran by helicopter. He was returning from exile in France, where for months he had been taping revolutionary sermons and sending the cassettes to the mosques of Iran to be played to captive congregations every Friday. His aim had been to rouse his countrymen into rebellion. Khomeini had returned to head the Islamic fundamentalist revolution, establish his authority and sweep aside the shahist regime. Not everyone was pleased to see him, and Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, who was much senior to him in the Islamic hierarchy and an old protagonist, remarked, ‘Fancy, he has come to liberate us, travelling First Class in a French Airliner’ (Heikal, 1982).

The weeks following Khomeini’s arrival in Tehran can aptly be thought of as a time of ‘revolutionary furnace’, as during
that period Khomeini's regime had to fight off armed opposition groups to ensure its survival, which it did by outterrorising its opponents. Iran had been awash with armed opposition groups protesting against the autocratic and despotic shahist regime, and in a rare moment in history practically all, many with varying aims and motivations, eventually came together to topple the regime and support Ayatollah Khomeini unquestioningly.

Mohammed Reza Shah had already left Tehran on 16 January, officially for a vacation and medical treatment. He had not departed willingly, but had been pushed out by US General Robert Huyser, deputy commander of the United States Armed Forces in Europe and supervisor of the US Military Assistance Advisory Groups in the Middle East. Huyser had been sent by President Carter, as his special envoy, to Tehran early in January to urge the Iranian high command to support Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar, thus ensuring there would not be a military coup. Bakhtiar had been appointed barely hours before the shah departed. Carter had wanted the shah to go, but did not want him to be replaced by a military junta. Nor did he want the revolutionary firebrand Khomeini to come to power, hoping that Bakhtiar, with Iranian military support and covert US assistance, would be able to establish a Western-type democratic government in the country, while at the same time keeping the Islamic cleric at bay.

For a long time Iran had been stricken with strife and unrest, and during 1977 and 1978 the internal situation had steadily deteriorated until it verged on anarchy, as protests, demonstrations, strikes and acts of terrorism mounted in frequency and intensity. Mohammed Reza Shah had become the focus of hatred, stirred up by the some 120 000 mullahs who preached against him in the 80 000 mosques as they writhed under his secular, unsympathetic rule. Lacking cooperation from the mullahs, whose influence extended throughout the country, law and order was breaking down, rendering the authorities unable to cope with the oppositional activities.

By January 1979 central authority had been so weakened in some towns and parts of the country that self-appointed 'Revolutionary Committees' (Komitehs) sprang into existence to fill the political and administrative void. Most were Islamic