

Ayatullāh Murṭadhā Muṭahharī, one of the principle architects of the new Islamic consciousness in Iran, was born on February 2nd, 1920, in Farīmān, then a village and now a township about sixty kilometres from Mashhad, the great centre of Shī'a pilgrimage and learning in Eastern Iran.ⁱ His father was Muḥammad Ḥusāin Muṭahharī, a renown scholar who studied in Najaf, Iraq and spent several years in Egypt and Saudi Arabia before returning to Farīmān.

At the exceptionally early age of twelve, Muṭahharī began his formal religious studies at the teaching institution in Mashhad, which was then in a state of decline, partly because of internal reasons and partly because of the repressive measures directed by Ridhā Khān, the first Pahlavī autocrat, against all Islamic institutions. But in Mashhad, Muṭahharī discovered his great love for philosophy, theology, and mysticism, a love that remained with him throughout his life and came to shape his entire outlook on religion: "I can remember that when I began my studies in Mashhad and was still engaged in learning elementary 'Arabic, the philosophers, mystics, and theologians impressed me far more than other scholars and scientists, such as inventors and explorers. Naturally I was not yet acquainted with their ideas, but I regarded them as heroes on the stage of thought."ⁱⁱ

For various reasons, Muṭahharī left Mashhad to join the growing number of students congregating in the teaching institution in Qum. Thanks to the skilful stewardship of the late scholar 'Abdul Karīm Hā'irī, Qum was on its way to becoming the spiritual and intellectual capital of Islamic Iran, and Muṭahharī was able to benefit there from the instruction of a wide range of scholars. He studied Jurisprudence and the Principles of Jurisprudence - the core subjects of the traditional curriculum - with Āyatullāh Ḥujjat Kuhkamarī, Āyatullāh Sayyid Muḥammad Dāmād, Āyatullāh Sayyid Muḥammad Ridhā Gulpāyagānī, and Ḥajj Sayyid Ṣadr al-Dīn as-Ṣadr. But more important than all these was Āyatullāh Burujerdī, the successor of Hā'irī as director of the teaching establishment in Qum. Muṭahharī attended his lectures from his arrival in Qum in 1944 until his departure for Tehran in 1952, and he nourished a deep respect for him.

Fervent devotion and close affinity characterized Muṭahharī's relationship with his prime mentor in Qum, Āyatullāh Rūḥullāh Khumaynī. When Muṭahharī arrived in Qum, Āyatullāh Khumaynī was a young lecturer, but he was already marked out from his contemporaries by the profoundness and comprehensiveness of his Islamic vision and his ability to convey it to others. These qualities were manifested in the celebrated lectures on ethics that he began giving in Qum in the early 1930s.

In 1952, Muṭahharī left Qum for Tehran, where he married the daughter of Āyatullāh Rūḥānī and began teaching philosophy at *Madressah* [Religious school] Marwi, one of the principal institutions of religious learning in the capital. This was not the beginning of his teaching career, for already in Qum he had begun to teach certain subjects - logic, philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence - while still a student himself. But Muṭahharī seems to have become progressively impatient with the somewhat restricted atmosphere of Qum, with the factionalism prevailing among some of the students and their teachers, and with their remoteness from the concerns of society. His own future prospects in Qum were also uncertain.

In Tehran, Muṭahharī found a broader and more satisfying field of religious, educational, and ultimately political activity. In 1954, he was invited to teach philosophy at the Faculty of Theology and Islamic Sciences of Tehran University, where he taught for twenty-two years. First the regularization of his appointment and then his promotion to professor was delayed by the jealousy of mediocre colleagues and by political considerations (for Muṭahharī's closeness to Āyatullāh Khumaynī was well known). But the presence of a figure such as Muṭahharī in the secular university was significant and effective. Many men of *Madressah* background had come to teach in the universities, and they were often of great erudition. However, almost without exception they had discarded an Islamic worldview, together with their turbans and cloaks. Muṭahharī, by contrast, came to the university as an articulate and convinced exponent of Islamic science and wisdom, almost as an envoy of the religious institution to the secularly educated. Numerous people responded to him, as the pedagogical powers he had first displayed in Qum now fully unfolded.

The spoken word plays in general a more effective and immediate role in promoting revolutionary change than the written word, and it would be possible to compose an anthology of key sermons, addresses, and lectures that have carried the Islamic Revolution of Iran forward. However the clarification of the ideological content of the revolution and its demarcation from opposing or competing schools of thought have necessarily depended on the written word, on the composition of works that expound Islamic doctrine in systematic form, with particular attention to contemporary problems and concerns. In this area, Muṭahharī's contribution was unique in its volume and scope.

Muṭahharī wrote assiduously and continuously, from his student days in Qum up to 1979, the year of his martyrdom. Much of his output was marked by the a philosophical tone and emphasis, and he probably regarded as his most important work "The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism", the record of his teacher 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabāī's discourses to the Thursday evening circle in Qum, supplemented with Muṭahharī's comments. But he did not choose the topics of his books in accordance with personal interest or predilection, but with his perception of need; wherever a book was lacking on some vital topic of contemporary Islamic interest, Muṭahharī sought to supply it.

Single handily, he set about constructing the main elements of a contemporary Islamic library. Books such as "The Divine Justice", "The System of Women's Rights in Islam", "The Question of the Veil", "An Introduction to the Islamic Sciences", and "An Introduction to the Worldview of Islam" were all intended to fill a need, to contribute to an accurate and systematic understanding of Islam and the problems in the Islamic society.

These books may well come to be regarded as Muṭahharī's most lasting and important contribution to the rebirth of Islamic Iran, but his activity also had a political dimension that admittedly subordinate, should not be overlooked. While a student and fledgling teacher in Qum, he had sought to instill political consciousness in his contemporaries and was particularly close to those among them who were members of the Fida'iyan-i Islam, the Militant Organization founded in 1945 by Nawwab Safawī. The Qum headquarters of the Fida'iyan was the Madrasa-yi Fayziya, where Muṭahharī himself resided, and he sought in vain to prevent them from being removed from the Madressah by Āyatullāh Burūjerdī, who was resolutely set against all political confrontation with the Shah's regime.

His first serious confrontation with the Shah's regime came during the uprising of June 6th, 1963, when he showed himself to be politically, as well as intellectually, a follower of Āyatullāh Khumaynī by distributing his declarations and urging support for him in the sermons he gave.ⁱⁱⁱ He was accordingly arrested and held for forty-three days. After his release, he participated actively in the various organizations that came into being to maintain the momentum that had been created by the uprising, most importantly the Association of Militant Religious Scholars. In November 1964, Āyatullāh Khumaynī entered on his fourteen years of exile, spent first in Turkey and then in Najaf, Iraq, and throughout this period Muṭahharī remained in touch with Āyatullāh Khumaynī, both directly - by visits to Najaf - and indirectly.

When the Islamic Revolution approached its triumphant climax in the winter of 1978 and Āyatullāh Khumaynī left Najaf for Paris, Muṭahharī was among those who travelled to Paris to meet and consult with him. His closeness to Āyatullāh Khumaynī was confirmed by his appointment to the Council of the Islamic Revolution, the existence of which Āyatullāh Khumaynī announced on January 12th, 1979.

Muṭahharī's services to the Islamic Revolution were brutally curtailed by his assassination on May 1st, 1979. The murder was carried out by a group known as Furqān, which claimed to be the protagonists of a "progressive Islam," one freed from the allegedly distorting influence of the religious scholars. Although Muṭahharī appears to have been chairman of the Council of the Islamic Revolution at the time of his assassination, it was as a thinker and a writer that he was martyred.

On Tuesday, May 1, 1979, Muṭahharī went to the house of Dr. Yadullāh Saḥābī, in the company of other members of the Council of the Islamic Revolution. At about 10:30 at night, he and another participant in the meeting, Engineer Katira'i, left Saḥābī's house. Walking by himself to an adjacent alley where the car that was to take him home was parked, Muṭahharī suddenly heard an unknown voice call out to him. He looked around to see where the voice was coming from, and as he did, a bullet struck him in the head,

entering beneath the right earlobe and exiting above the left eyebrow. He died almost instantly, and although he was rushed to a nearby hospital, there was nothing that could be done but mourn for him. The body was left in the hospital the following day, and then on Thursday, amid widespread mourning, it was taken for funeral prayers first to Tehran University and then to Qum for burial, next to the grave of ‘Abdul Karīm Hā’irī.

Āyatullāh Khumaynī wept openly when Muṭahharī was buried in Qum, and he described him as his “dear son,” and as “the fruit of my life,” and as “a part of my flesh.” But in his eulogy Āyatullāh Khumaynī also pointed out that with the murder of Muṭahharī neither his personality was diminished, nor was the course of the revolution interrupted: “Let the evil-wishers know that with the departure of Muṭahharī - his Islamic personality, his philosophy and learning, have not left us. Assassinations cannot destroy the Islamic personality of the great men of Islam...Islam grows through sacrifice and martyrdom of its cherished ones. From the time of its revelation up to the present time, Islam has always been accompanied by martyrdom and heroism.”^{iv}

The personage and legacy of Āyatullāh Muṭahharī have certainly remained unforgotten in the Islamic Republic, to such a degree that his posthumous presence has been almost as impressive as the attainments of his life. The anniversary of his martyrdom is regularly commemorated, and his portrait is ubiquitous throughout Iran. Many of his unpublished writings are being printed for the first time, and the whole corpus of his work is now being distributed and studied on a massive scale. In the words of Āyatullāh Khamene’ī, leader of the Islamic Republic, the works of Muṭahharī have come to constitute “the intellectual infrastructure of the Islamic Republic.”

Efforts are accordingly under way to promote a knowledge of Muṭahharī’s writings outside the Persian-speaking world as well, and the Ministry of Islamic Guidance has sponsored translations of his works into languages as diverse as Spanish and Malay. In a sense, however, it will be the most fitting memorial to Muṭahharī if revolutionary Iran proves able to construct a polity, society, economy and culture that are authentically and integrally Islamic. For Muṭahharī’s life was oriented to a goal that transcended individual motivation, and his martyrdom was the final expression of that effacement of self.

ⁱ This sketch of the life and works of Āyatullāh Muṭahharī is based chiefly on Muḥammad Wa’izzāda Khurāsānī’s, *Sayrī dar Zindagi-yi ‘Ilmī wa Inqilābīyi Ustad Shahīd Murtadhā Muṭahharī*, in *Yadnāma-yi Ustād Shahīd Murtadhā Muṭahharī*, ed. ‘Abdul Karīm Surūsh, Tehran, 1360 Sh./1981, pp. 319-380, an article rich in information on many aspects of the recent history of Islamic Irān. Reference has also been made to Mujtabā Muṭahhari, *Zindagi-yi Pidaram*, in *Harakat* (journal of the students at the Tehran Faculty of Theology), no. 1 (n.d.), pp. 5-16; M. Hoda, *In Memory of Martyr Muṭahharī*, a pamphlet published by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, Tehran, April, 1982; and Āyatullāh Muṭahharī’s autobiographical introduction to the eighth edition of *‘Ilal-i Girayish ba Maddīgarī*, Qum, 1357 Sh./1978, pp. 7ff.

ⁱⁱ *‘Ilal-e-Girayish ba Maddīgarī*, pg. 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Muṭahharī’s name comes ninth in a list of clerical detainees prepared by the military prosecutor’s office in June, 1963. See facsimile of the list in *Dihnavi*, *Qiyam-e-Khunin-i 15 Khurdad 42 ba Rivāyat-e-Asnād*, Tehran, 1360 Sh./1981, pg. 77.

^{iv} Text of Āyatullāh Khumaynī’s eulogy in *Yādnama-yi Ustād-i Shahīd Murtadha Muṭahharī*, pp. 3-5.