

## **The Idea of Ommah in Imam Khomeini's Political Thoughts**

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**Abuzar Gohari Moqaddam\***

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**Sayyed Ali Latifi\*\***

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### **Abstract**

Recognition of major keywords in Imam Khomeini's thoughts is an important path to completely know the intellectual-political collection of the structure which he legally and institutionally built after the revolution of 1979 and left for us. "Ommah" is one of those keywords with religious essence and Islamic feature that came to the political thinking of Islamic thinkers specifically the great leader of our Islamic revolution. The investigation of theoretical and practical works of Imam Khomeini indicates that the word "Ommah" has been able to compete with conceptual changes of the day such as nation and nationalism in addition to maintaining its validity and Quranic origin. In fact, it has reproduced itself employing the instrument of Ejtihad, adjusting itself to the conditions of time and place in Imam Khomeini's thoughts. The present research tried to study Imam Khomeini's attitude employing descriptive-analytical technique and library method. By studying the terminology used by Imam Khomeini, it is concluded that the concept of "nation" is a marginal one, in relation with the concept of "Ommah" In fact, Imam Khomeini has not negated nationalism with the meaning of national authority in his comments, but he has negated ethnicity and clanship and their undesirable impact as the factors of separation among Islamic Ommah.

### **Keywords:**

Ommah, nation, nationalism, religious identity, Islamic unity

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\* Assistant Professor of International Relations, Imam Sadiq (a.s) University  
gohari@isu.ac.ir

\*\* M.A. Student of Islamic Teachings and Political Science, Imam Sadiq (a.s)  
University sa.latify@isu.ac.ir

## **Introduction**

The concept of Ommah as a Quranic and religious term is in the heart of religious and political thinking. This term that emerged simultaneously with Islam, doesn't have a background in Western languages. In other words, it is one of original concepts in Islamic literature. Luis Gardel, the famous French researcher on Islam believes that the word "Ommah" has its root in Arabic with no equivalent in European languages, specifically the word "Ommahonnabi" that probably has come from the original word "Omm" with the meaning of mother (Gardel, 1352, p.286).

It seems that for Imam Khomeini, solidarity among all Moslems and more importantly, among indigents of the world, and simultaneously observing the independence and the existence of all countries including Islamic countries is of the highest importance. On this topic, Imam Khomeini suggests: "The Islamic Republic is inclined to live in peace and quiet beside all neighbors and others" (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 17<sup>th</sup> edition, p.228), or "We hope that world peace will be based on the independence of nations and non-interference in others' affairs and observance of territorial integrity of other countries" (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, p.80). In the present research, more than focusing on the relationship between Ommah and nation in Imam's thinking, investigates the meaning of this term and its intellectual origin. In order to do so, the researcher, employing descriptive-analytic technique and library method, tries to explicate this hypothesis within Imam's writing to find an answer to the question of the origin of formation of the concept of "Ommah" in his thinking.

## **1. Conceptual Framework**

Since clarification of any subject depends on explanation of conceptual borders in any research, in this part, the definition of major vocabulary of the research will be represented.

### **1-1. Ommah**

In the holy Koran the word "Ommah" has come in singular and plural forms totally for 64 times (Abdolbaghi, 1391, pp.112-113), which in most cases it means a group of people. Of course, other words also have been employed to get the same meaning in the holy Koran such as "nas" (240 times), "Ghowm" (383 times), "Gharyeh" (56 times), and "Enas" (5 times). The meanings employed in this research, are five ones used in the holy Koran as follows:

1-1-1. Ommah with the meaning of a certain period of time: "And if we postpone the retribution for a certain period of time, undoubtedly they will say what factor postpones it" (Houd: 8).

1-1-2. Ommah with the meaning of leader: "Ibrahim was a leader, following the God on high, and he was a monotheist" (Nahl: 120).

1-1-3. Ommah with the meaning of way and manner, and religion: "We found our fathers following a religion" (Zokhrof: 22-23).

1-1-4. Ommah with the meaning of a group of living creatures (animals and human beings): "And there is no motile on the earth, and no bird that flies with its two wings, unless they are groups like you" (An'am: 38).

1-1-5. Ommah with the meaning of a group of human beings.

This meaning on which we focus, has been employed for 58 times in the holy Koran. In all meanings of "Ommah", the goal and destination is one thing, therefore the central factor in this word is the same single goal. In Quranic perspective, it is necessary for a group of people to have a common goal if they are to be considered as an

"Ommah" and a group. This common goal can be anything such as solidarity in time, space, religion, etc. For example, Koran has pointed to the group of prophets with the common goal of proselytization as an Ommah, although there wasn't a unity of time or place among them (Mesbah Yazdi, 1372, pp.84-91).

In Allameh Tabatabaee's belief also Ommah means a group of people, while sometimes it is used with the meaning of "an individual". The origin of this term is "omm" with the meaning of intention. For this reason it cannot be used for all groups of people, but only for the population having a unit destination based on which, they have solidarity and correlation (Tabatabaee, 1376, pp.172-173). The meaning and content of the word, nas, and Ommah is common people who have trust in the single God, with a single goal while there is spiritual solidarity among them.

## **1-2. Nation**

About the origin of the concepts of government and nation it should be said that in the West also the factor of religion played a role in the identification of the society for a while, so that, some people have called it "the Ommah-society".

Then, for some reasons religious components were set aside and national elements took their place. Some researchers believe that Middle Age society which was ruled by the Catholic Church, had a religious unity governed in an Ommah manner, meaning that no factor can create unity and solidarity among members of a society like religion (Naghizadeh, 1387, p.8). But the historical evolution in the West, under the influence of emergence of bourgeoisie and the disintegration of federalism and industrial revolution, contributed to formation of government-nation. Then Westphalia became the legal symbol of this agreement (Bashirieh, 1380, pp.28-29). The result of such a process was the change from the religious unity of the West to

its national unity, based on which the Western societies are today. Researchers don't have an agreement on the definition of nation, but, as a whole, this controversy can be divided into two French and German traditions. In French tradition, under the influence of the French Revolution and the Social Agreement of Rousseau, they consider unity and living in a political organization as the major characteristic and element of formation of a nation. In other words, the development and perfection of the nation is dependent on the conception of the government, and the conception of the government and political organization is logically and historically prior to the nation (Heywood, 1389, pp.161-163 & Mesbah Yazdi, 1372, p.91). On the other hand, the German tradition is interested in the cultural and linguistic understanding of the nation. From this viewpoint, cultural and linguistic factors are the main constituents of the nations not the existence of governments. The major feature of national identity is language that encompasses traditions, customs, symbols, legends, history, culture, and common experiences of any nation. Therefore there may exist several nations within a political organization (Heywood, 1389, pp.161-185). However, in this research we will consider the nation as groups of people living under the authority of a government.

## **2. The Characteristics of Ommah and Islamic Ommah**

From Quranic perspective Ommah is not a concrete and external phenomenon to be formed independent of our mind, but its formation is based on individuality of humans (Tabatabaee, 1376, pp.445-446), and thus, having specific characteristics as follows:

a. The holy Koran attributes certain behaviors and features to each Ommah: "And among our servants there is a group who guides others to the truth and behaves with justice" (A'raf: 81).

b. Every Ommah, by itself, is the same well-organized and orderly one: "And in this way, we embellished any nation's behaviors in the minds of its members" (Anam: 108).

c. Every Ommah has a birth and a death: "Every Ommah will live for a while, and when its death time arrives, it won't be delayed or retarded even for a second" (A'raf: 34).

d. God calls the Islamic Ommah as the "moderate" Ommah and introduces the life style of the holy prophet to them to follow. From Quranic viewpoint this is the criterion to know the Islamic Ommah as the best one: "And in this way we created you as the moderate Ommah so that you be witness for other people, and the prophet be your witness" (Baghareh: 143).

Allameh Tabatabaee believes that God has assigned a way for the Islamic Ommah, thereby he has provoked them toward moderation and moving toward physical and mental perfection and temperance. Therefore the Islamic Ommah is an example of complete temperateness that can be an ideal criterion to measure deviation of individuals in their behaviors. In fact the philosophy of being the witness of others origin just from this point (Ghasemi, 1389, p.135).

### **3. The Origin of the Islamic Ommah in Imam Khomeini's Thinking**

About the place of concepts of Ommah and nation in Imam's thinking, these two terms can be analyzed at two political philosophy and sociological levels. At the political philosophy level, the ideal Islamic society is introduced with an idealistic look, toward which the existing Islamic societies should move to realize their wishes and it is only in that case that they achieve their real unity. This collective ideal Islamic identity in Imam's perspective is the very concept of Ommah. On the other hand, at the sociological level, based on realism, Imam Khomeini is in agreement with other collective identities such as ethnicity, nation, etc. as social and political realities. In fact Imam tries

to encourage Moslems to avoid dispersed and discording identities, and move toward the ideal and genuine identity of Ommah (Barzgar, 1379, pp.140-142). Thus, Imam accepts those different types of identity as existing realities, knowing them as several features of the One reality (Fowzi Tuyserkani, 1385, pp.166-167). He believes that if all of them seek for a common objective in a common path, they are not contradictory, but very useful. In order to achieve his idealistic strategy, Imam Khomeini emphasizes on some concepts as requirements of formation and realization of the Islamic Ommah. Some of the most important of those concepts are as follows:

### **3-1. Islamic Identity**

Imam Khomeini had the highest focus on the investigation of identity at three levels of individual, national-Islamic, and religious. At individual level, he identified following of God's orders and disobeying the command of non-Gods as the base of people's identity. About national-Islamic identity, Imam Khomeini, introducing pure Mohammadian Islam and clarifying its requirements, strengthened Iranians' interest in such an attitude toward Islam in order to make consistent the ethnical-regional and linguistic identities in its light from one side, and to read out Iranian-Islamic identity through defining nationalism and Iranianism within the concept of Islam from the other side. In fact, he gave unity and solidarity to all Moslems by gathering them around the Islamic identity pivot and put them in the center of Islamic world's attention (Mansournezhad, 1385, p.116). For Imam Khomeini the key element of identity is the Islamic original culture that is a pure, humanistic and independent culture: "Undoubtedly the most important factor impacting on the life of any society is the culture of that society. Basically any society's culture forms its identity and existence and thus, with any deviation in culture the society will become meaningless, although it is powerful in

economic, political, industrial, and military dimensions. If the culture of a society becomes dependent on an opponent culture, its other dimensions also inevitably will move toward opponents, and finally that society will be destroyed by them. Independence and existence of any society originate from its cultural independence and it is naïve to think that independence in its other dimensions is possible by cultural dependence. "It is not accidental that the major goal of colonialists is to attack the cultures of nations under their hegemony. It is not accidental that Iran's cultural and educational centers from elementary schools to universities is the target of incursion of colonialists, specially Western countries, and recently Americans and Russians" (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 15<sup>th</sup> edition, p.243). Therefore, with the cultural deviation, the identity of societies is seriously damaged and in fact they lose their existence. Imam knows getting away from Koran, self-estrangement, consumerism and leaning toward the West, and the most important of all, cultural penetration of colonialists as the origin of all adversities and major difficulties of the Islamic world, while he introduces seeking refuge in Islam, bringing Koran to all dimensions of life, returning to Islam and performing Islamic orders, and self-fertilization as the solution for all troubles and the factor of Islamic grandeur and, realization of the Islamic Ommah (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 20<sup>th</sup> edition, p.198).

Since speaking about national identity necessitates the recognition of nation as group of individuals living in a certain land and under a certain political authority, it must be expressed that in Imam's thinking, nation is a level to analyze and a social-political reality while nationalism as an ideology is criticized because religious identity is more important than national identity taken from nationalism. In fact, he defines identity within the Islamic framework and believes that being a Moslem is prior to being an Iranian (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, p.508). "We recognize nationality in the light of



Islam... the Limit of nationality is limits of Islam" (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, pp.123-124). This is while Imam mentions "nation" and "Iranian nation" in his works for several times and this, indicates that he recognized nation as a whole and a collective unit in the modern international system, but he doesn't accept those collective units as some kind of ideology, that is ethnicity, racism, localism or nationalism, but he mentions it as a means of naming. This kind of attitude has roots in the Quranic thinking in which, collective units are only the factor of their identification (Fowzi, 1379, p.72).

### **3-2. Islamic Unity**

Imam Khomeini as one of inspirers of Islamic unity, knows formation, victory, and duration of Islamic Ommah, based on Islamic unity. He introduces real unity as the requirement of Islamic unity. (Mousavi Khomeini, 1378, p.38), and believes that real unity is in the unity of hearts. He follows his unity strategy through an ideological and intellectual base and not by aggression and breaking borders. The study of Imam's works shows that emphasis on unity in his works has roots in a strong theoretical base and this emphasis is based on his philosophic and gnostic thinking (Mousavi Khomeini, 1376, p.14). For him, moving toward real unity in any society is one the signs of trust in Allah while its opposite point, discord and greediness are among the qualities of polytheism and disunity. He, pointing to the Quranic verse of "Resort to God's rope and don't scatter", believes that real unity is defined only through two characteristics of resorting to God and not scattering (Mousavi Khomeini, 1381, p.62). He, frequently introduces the lack of "unity" among Moslems as the origin of most of trouble in their lives. Accordingly, he speaks of "verbal unity among different layers of Iranian people as the major factor of victory of their Islamic Revolution, and encourages other nations to

follow Iran's model (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, p.63), and keep their unity against the enemy. "Moslems' major problem is the very "get away" from Islam and Koran. In fact all political-social, and economic difficulties of Moslems would be solved if they followed God's command and resorted to him and didn't scatter as he says in his holy Koran. (Mousavi Khomeini, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, p.129). The great leader of Islamic Revolution criticizes discord and dispute among Islamic societies at three levels of dispute among their decision makers, disagreement among decision makers and their people, and finally dispute and discord among people themselves. (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p.255, and Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, p.129, and Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, p.238). He points to the disability of Arab countries to liberate Palestine from the Zionist regime as one of the most prominent reasons of non-existence of unity among them. He believes that the only way to escape from this abjection is gathering under the flag of God (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, third edition, p.254). He, with complete awareness of the conditions of the Islamic societies, and looking deeply at their troubles, finds the secret of their difficulties in their verbal and practical disunity (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 15<sup>th</sup> edition, p.124), and believes that colonial governments attempt to destroy the Islamic unity and consistency, employing their internal instruments such as the corrupt decision makers, dependent cultural agents including courtier clergymen, and stipendiaries, and trouble-makers and suggests that making discord among Moslems is one of great crimes to which the powerful colonialists resort, and all of them, the courtier clergymen are the worst who increasingly worsen this condition (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, fourth edition, p.3). He frequently points to the attempts of enemies to create religious and ethnical disunity among Islamic Ommah, emphasizing on the necessity to avoid falling in this trap and introducing the unity of Moslems as the only solution to

avoid the dependence on colonialists (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385 18<sup>th</sup> edition, p.91). He suggests: "If all Moslems either those who are under the hegemony of the United States, or those who are dependent on other powers don't awake and don't become united with each other, the satanic hegemony of colonialists won't finish. All of us should try to realize the unity among the oppressed, from any religion or any group" (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 17<sup>th</sup> edition, p.429). He suggesting "the world Party of the oppressed" attempted to create some unity and consistency among the oppressed of the world and made a common institution in order to study the conditions and resolve their problems. He believed that with the formation of that party all adversities of Moslems will be resolved and no power can resist against them (Mousavi Khomeini, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, p.331).

### **3-3. Struggling Against Oppression and Desiring for Justice**

With a deep look at the Islamic Ommah in Imam's thinking it can be seen that struggle against oppression within the framework of fighting with colonialism originates from his most important factors of thinking. Imam Khomeini, pointing to the initial parts of Alrahman sura of Koran speaks about the inherentness of the tendency of people toward fighting against oppression, saying, "God created humans from his own mercy, thus, humans are part of God's blessing". That is why even cruel individuals don't like inherently cruelty, and are interested in kindness and mercy (Mousavi Khomeini, 1377, p.240). With a glance at Imam's Lectures and his writings, we can interpret fight with oppression as a reflection of his gnostic and scientific sight about religious and Islamic base of thinking, along which all prophets have stepped and for which have struggled. For Imam Khomeini, the goal of prophet was much wider than setting aside the oppressors and giving assistance to people to bring them prosperity in this world (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, 530). He, pointing to the

Quranic verses and the moralities brought by God's prophets, begins his words with inviting people to fight with the title of "God's uprising", introducing it as the only means of improvement of the two worlds. (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, p.21). It is in this direction that he offers the announcement of faith toward the right and hatred toward the wrong as the only means of realization of religiousness: "If all oppressed peoples of the world either by the US. or by other governments don't get united against them, the realization of religiousness will become impossible and "the pure love of monotheists" won't be accessed other than by the emergence of hatred toward polytheists" (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 20<sup>th</sup> edition, p.315). That is why he assigns fighting against the cruelty of rulers as the duty of clerics of Islamic society in the first stage and believes that: "Islamic clerics are supposed to struggle against monopolism and illegal abuses of tyrants. They shouldn't allow them to live in affluence and luxury while the majority of people are hungry and needy. This fight against oppression is so great in Imam's vision that he believes that even if there is not enough power in a group to prevent from cruelty, that group shouldn't remain silent, because silence against oppression is never permissible. On this issue he says": You who are currently unable to prevent oppressors from their deeds, at least don't sit silently; bearing the oppression is worse than being an oppressor; show your objection, and shout against it" (Mousavi Khomeini, 1383, p.114). These words firstly show that indigence is not merely palpable, so that indigents can be equal to needies and vulnerable groups of the society; secondly, this concept is not specific to Moslems, because it encompasses all individuals who somehow suffer from injustice (Eftekhari, 1391, p.251). Thus, observing the rights of all humans and not intervening in other countries' internal affairs according to international law, considers defending the justice and the oppressed all over the world as the duty of the Islamic

government. For him, the duty of the Islamic Republic is defined not only at the national level, but also at the universal level. He suggests: "We are the supporter of all the oppressed of the world, and fighting against oppression is not limited to a certain geographical region (Mousavi Khomeini, 1378, p.32).

#### **3-4. The Culture of Intizar (awaiting the savior)**

With completely deep thinking, Imam Khomeini considers the revival of waiting culture as one of important columns of the revival of Islamic identity and a means of realization of Moslems' past glory around the world. He suggests: "We are all awaiting for relief, and we should continue to serve while awaiting, wait for relief is Islam's power and we should attempt to realize Islam, and prepare the first steps for the coming of our Last Imam, God willing (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 8<sup>th</sup> edition, p.374). This interpretation of Intizar indicates that Imam, contrary to many mentalities, believed that Intizar is not merely a wish, but it is a wish with action and endeavor. That is why in traditions, it is pointed to Intizar as the best task and the most desirable worshipping, or else, mere having a wish without any attempt and action can never be considered as a devotional task. Apart from playing the role of giving identity to Moslems, Intizar culture is an independent factor in mobilization of the society toward realization of Islamic Ommah. The importance of Intizar culture in realization of Islamic Ommah appears when we learn that Islamic Republic of Iran was formed on the base of Imam's attitude toward the issue of Intizar. And it is the first step to reach the universal ruling of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam. For Imam, Waiting means the individual and social preparedness for the formation of the Justice Government, and all Moslems should be at its service. He believes that Intizar is the culture of Islamic power, and we all try to help the realization of Islam in the world and support the preliminaries of Imam's coming (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 7<sup>th</sup>

edition, p.255) for this reason, he interprets the Islamic Republic as the "safekeeping of Allah supposed to be returned to its owner that is the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam, so that worldly issues won't prevent us from thinking about our main duty and the reason for formation of the Islamic Republic. He suggests: "Individuals in charge should know that our revolution is not limited to Iran. It is the start point of the great Universal Islamic Revolution with the leadership of Imam Mahdi (p.b.u.h); we hope that God will be gracious and let Imam Mahdi to come very soon. If economic and material issues cause our people to neglect their duty even for a moment, it will be a great risk and terrible crime" (Mousavi Khomeini, 1385, 21<sup>st</sup> edition, p.108).

### **Conclusion**

The study of religious resources including the holy Koran shown that the word "Ommah" has been used with different meanings; sometimes it stands for the whole human society, sometimes the Islamic society, while in some occasions with the meaning of ceremonies and manner. But in Imam Khomeini's thinking, it conveys the meaning of targeted societies who have accepted Islam as a salvational religion within the material and spiritual domain and look at it beyond national borders and geographical limits. Regarding this definition, all Moslems, either in Islamic countries, or in non-Islamic ones are living within the circle of Ommah with a common meaning of nation. Thus, Imam Khomeini, accepting the national identity as an existing reality, introduces it as the diverse features of a single reality, because all of them are in a common path, follow the same objectives, and not only are not contrary to each other, but also they are useful to one another. In this research, Ommah and nation were analyzed at two political philosophy and sociological levels. At the level of philosophical analysis, with an idealistic tendency, it introduced the desirable and ideal type of Islamic society toward which the existing Islamic societies should move to realize that

idealistic sample and it is in that case that they can find real collectivity. For Imam, this collective, desirable identity is the very concept of Ommah. On the other side, at the sociological level analysis and based on realism, Imam Khomeini accepts other collective identities such as ethnicity, nation, etc. as social and political realities. For this reason, Imam Khomeini emphasizes on such concepts as Islamic identity, Islamic unity, fighting against oppression, tendency toward justice and Waiting culture in order to reach his idealistic strategy. In fact, accepting nationalism with the meaning of national sovereignty, Imam Khomeini rejects ethnicity and clanship and their undesirable outcomes which contribute to separation of members of the Islamic Ommah.

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