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The Iranian Revolution of 1979 involved much more than a fundamentalist Islamic cleric returning from exile and stirring up a population to take an American embassy hostage. Yet, colloquial American narratives of the revolution tend to gloss over its uniqueness and complexity, often focusing solely on Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's rise to power and his sermons laced with anti-Western rhetoric. Furthermore, the same narratives tend to place the American embassy hostage crisis of 1979 to 1981 at the center of the revolution even though it took place nine months after the revolution achieved its goal of deposing the shah. While there is ample evidence to support that Khomeini and his radical inner circle were vehemently anti-American, the main causes of and reasons for the revolution among most Iranians had little to do with the United States or other Western powers. At its core, the Iranian Revolution was not a revolt against the United States and the West. Rather, it was a revolt against an unchecked despotic monarch who lived in excess while many of his people starved. Internal, domestic issues precipitated by the Pahlavi regime ultimately led to a diverse group of Iranians demanding revolution. When dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran, modern American policy makers and military leaders must first understand the true reasons for the popular revolt against the shah—and how an Islamic theocracy came into being—if relations are ever to normalize between the two nations.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**THE 1979 IRANIAN REVOLUTION:  
WHY THE WESTERN NARRATIVE IS WRONG**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**MAJOR TODD S. AFSHAR  
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE**

AY 2019-20

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** The 1979 Iranian Revolution: Why the Western Narrative is Wrong

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**Thesis:** Social, economic, and religious influences within Iran between 1963 and 1979 were more significant drivers of revolution than the modern, colloquial narrative professes.

**Discussion:** The Iranian Revolution of 1979 involved much more than a fundamentalist Islamic cleric returning from exile and stirring up a population to take an American embassy hostage. Yet, colloquial American narratives of the revolution tend to gloss over its uniqueness and complexity, often focusing solely on Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's rise to power and his sermons laced with anti-Western rhetoric. Furthermore, the same narratives tend to place the American embassy hostage crisis of 1979 to 1981 at the center of the revolution even though it took place nine months after the revolution achieved its goal of deposing the shah. While there is ample evidence to support that Khomeini and his radical inner circle were vehemently anti-American, the main causes of and reasons for the revolution among most Iranians had little to do with the United States or other Western powers. At its core, the Iranian Revolution was not a revolt against the United States and the West. Rather, it was a revolt against an unchecked despotic monarch who lived in excess while many of his people starved. Internal, domestic issues precipitated by the Pahlavi regime ultimately led to a diverse group of Iranians demanding revolution. When dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran, modern American policy makers and military leaders must first understand the true reasons for the popular revolt against the shah—and how an Islamic theocracy came into being—if relations are ever to normalize between the two nations.

**Conclusion:** The anti-Western strain of the Iranian Revolution permeates the colloquial narrative to this day. However, as the history shows, it was more the internal influences in Iran that contributed to the revolution than it was external ones.

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## Preface

My father emigrated from Iran in 1969, and I grew up hearing stories about life under Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi and the chaos 1979 brought to the Iranian people. When I started this project, I knew I wanted to write about Iran and produce an easily-digestible primer for anyone interested in the topic, but I did not know what *specific topic* to write about.

Thankfully, my thesis mentor Doctor Lon Strauss introduced me to S.A. Smith's book *Russia in Revolution*, which is an incredibly detailed, yet easy to read historical account of the events that led to the 1917 Russian Revolution. The book inspired me to ask, "What really caused the 1979 Iranian Revolution?" I wondered how complex the events leading up to the revolution really were. Given my assumptions, I also wanted to take the opportunity to challenge the colloquial American narrative of the revolution that focuses disproportionately on the U.S. embassy hostage crisis, which I discuss in the introduction and conclusion.

I would like to thank Doctor Lon Strauss for his guidance throughout this process—it has made me a better analyst and writer—thank you. I also want to thank my wife, Jane, and our children, Collin, Clara, and Gavin, who have supported this effort by proofreading, providing distractions, and being incredibly patient throughout the research and writing process—especially during the coronavirus shelter-in-place—I love you. Finally, thanks are due to my mother, Karen, and father, Shahrokh. My mother's incredible work ethic and my father's tireless dedication to bringing religious and political freedom to the Iranian people are sources of great strength and inspiration—I love you.

*“The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie--deliberate, contrived and dishonest--but the myth--persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.”* – President John F. Kennedy<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

## **Introduction**

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 involved much more than a fundamentalist Islamic cleric returning from exile and stirring up a population to take an American embassy hostage. Yet, colloquial American narratives of the revolution tend to gloss over its uniqueness and complexity, often focusing solely on Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s rise to power and his sermons laced with anti-Western rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the same narratives tend to place the American embassy hostage crisis of 1979 to 1981 at the center of the revolution even though it took place nine months after the revolution achieved its goal of deposing the shah. While there is ample evidence to support that Khomeini and his radical inner circle were vehemently anti-American, the main causes of and reasons for the revolution among most Iranians had little to do with the United States or other Western powers. Social, economic, and religious influences within Iran between 1963 and 1979 were more significant drivers of revolution than the modern, colloquial narrative professes.

## **Background**

In the weeks and months following the fall of the Pahlavi regime, the provisional Iranian government eagerly worked with the Carter Administration to normalize relations between the two nations and resume American arms shipments to Tehran.<sup>3</sup> However, during the same period both the U.S. and Iranian government committed mistakes that tainted their relations for over 40 years. By the spring of 1979, Khomeini and other revolutionaries misinterpreted a meeting between American and Iranian generals as a precursor to another U.S.-backed military coup that

would reinstate the shah.<sup>4</sup> This led Khomeini's Revolutionary Courts to execute a number of Iranian military officers, prompting the U.S. Senate to pass a resolution condemning the Iranian government.<sup>5</sup> The Senate resolution derailed the Carter Administration's attempts to arrange direct contact with Khomeini and in turn gave Khomeini and his supporters more reason to suspect an American plot to subvert the revolution. In October 1979, President Carter reluctantly granted the shah medical asylum in order to seek cancer treatment within the U.S., pushing U.S.-Iran relations to its breaking point. Since the shah kept his terminal illness secret from the world up until then, Khomeini and his supporters had reason to believe the cancer story was part of a U.S. plan to reinstate the shah.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, Iranian university students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and took American hostages for a total of 444 days. Shortly after the end of the siege in 1981, Iranian hostage-takers stated that taking the embassy was a direct response to the U.S. granting the shah asylum and believed the entire event would last only a few days at most.<sup>7</sup> However, while there is debate as to whether Khomeini knew about the plan to take the embassy prior to events unfolding, he publicly supported the siege and used the event to marginalize his political enemies and consolidate his power just as much as he used it to shame the U.S. – a fact left out of most narratives.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, once inside the U.S. embassy, the hostage-takers discovered classified communiqués and documents that led the revolutionaries to believe the U.S. was actively working against the revolution as opposed to establishing relations with the interim government and Khomeini. As stated by one of the hostage-takers, “The major lesson of the documents is the deep American enmity towards the Islamic revolution and its leader Imam Khomeini. The revolution was so unpalatable to America that it could not for a moment neglect plotting against it in order to destroy it or to detour it by backing Iranian compromisers.”<sup>9</sup> Thus,



the stage of mutual distrust between governments was set and further missteps in American-Iranian relations continued to widen the rift between the two nations.

The anti-Western strain of the Iranian Revolution has permeated American thought and policy toward Iran since 1979. The revolution appeared anti-Western not just because of Khomeini's rhetoric of the U.S. as the imperialist "Great Satan...[gathering] around other devils" to control Iran, but because of the Islamic government's wholesale rejection of American involvement in Iran.<sup>10</sup> This drove the Carter Administration to handle the revolution as the precursor to greater Soviet influence in the region, which also proved a catastrophic misinterpretation of unfolding events.<sup>11</sup> At its core, the Iranian Revolution was not a revolt against the United States and the West. Rather, it was a revolt against an unchecked despotic monarch who lived in excess while many of his people starved. Internal, domestic issues precipitated by the Pahlavi regime ultimately led to a diverse group of Iranians demanding revolution. When dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran, modern American policy makers and military leaders must first understand the true reasons for the popular revolt against the shah—and how an Islamic theocracy came into being—if relations are ever to normalize between the two nations.

### **Social Influences**

As the last monarch of Iran, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi had immense social influences on Iran. He came to power immediately following the overthrow of his father's regime by British and Soviet invaders in 1941. As a result, the shah went to great lengths to ensure his regime would never be defeated, whether by external or internal forces. Twenty years after his ascension to power, the shah's economy was booming, his military was stronger than any in the region, and his aggressive social reforms under the White Revolution of 1963 rivaled

those of any nation at the time. To outside observers, the shah's regime appeared to be a progressive bulwark in the Middle East that would last for generations. However, not all Iranians appreciated the manner in which he achieved these goals; thereby, leading to the Iranians' overthrow of the Pahlavi Dynasty in a popular revolution in 1979. When examining the events leading to the revolution, scholars note a lack of telltale markers that were present in revolutions that predated it.<sup>12</sup>

The shah's aggressive reform movement under the White Revolution was significant because he did not want to face the same fate as his father. Doctor Abbas Milani, expert on Iranian history and author of several books on the Iranian revolution, explains the shah's upbringing under his father, Reza Khan, as terrifying and harsh.<sup>13</sup> Even so, the shah viewed his father as an invincible military strategist who commanded his officers' respect.<sup>14</sup> Yet, when the British and Russian governments banded together to depose Reza Khan in 1941 for fear he would cut off vital supply lines in favor of Nazi Germany, the shah saw a very different man than the one who raised him.<sup>15</sup> Even with his credentials as a famous Cossack commander, proven military leader, and brutal administrator, Reza Khan was unable to muster the Iranian military to defend against the Anglo-Soviet invasion.

Because of Iran's swift defeat at the hands of outside invaders, the shah determined he would never put his regime in the same militarily-weak position his father had in 1941. Reza Khan's abdication laid the foundation for the shah's insatiable desire for a strong military and even stronger international alliance structure to ensure he had access to the tools of modernization necessary to avoid the same fate as his father.<sup>16</sup> To achieve this, the shah believed all aspects of Iranian society needed to modernize. Furthermore, he was so humiliated by his father's defeat that shortly after his coronation, he began a persistent yet subtle whitewashing of

Reza Khan's reign to give the impression that the Pahlavi Dynasty began with him in 1941, and not with his father.<sup>17</sup>

This deliberate cultural and historical reset began paving the way for the shah's coming social revolution. Yet, he did not disagree with everything his father had done while in power. One key policy agreement between the kings was maintaining a secular Iranian government. Both monarchs believed secularism was the answer to limiting the power held by Islamic leaders, specifically in the country's rural areas where their power outweighed that of the central government. While the shah relaxed some secular policies enacted by his father—such as reversing the hijab ban as a means of gaining support from the conservative citizenry—he maintained a strict separation of religion and state, instituting far-reaching social reforms that often put him at odds with the conservative Shi'a population.<sup>18</sup> This rift was exacerbated when the shah began seizing land from Shi'i leaders—also known as the *ulema*—across the nation.

In 1961, the Iranian government began the first of many modernization efforts by implementing an aggressive land reformation campaign that stripped landowners of their properties overnight. These land reforms became one of the most destabilizing factors of the monarchy by uniting disparate groups of former landowners and peasants from various socio-economic backgrounds against the shah. At the time, Iran measured landownership in villages rather than areas of land, and classified its landowners as either large owners or small owners. Large owners controlled approximately fifty-five percent of cultivated land in Iran, yet made up less than two percent of all landowners.<sup>19</sup> Most large owners possessed between twenty and forty villages, while the shah owned over 2,000 villages until he redistributed most of his land in 1951 in a failed attempt to get other landowners to voluntarily follow suit. Large owners included members of the royal family, senior military officers, high-ranking local and national

government officials, leaders of large tribes, wealthy bazaar merchants, and prominent members of the *ulema*.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, small owners included financiers, bureaucrats, teachers, bazaar merchants, and members of the *ulema*. Since the Iranian government had little-to-no influence in the rural areas, landowners enjoyed considerable political power not only in the villages they owned but also in the regions where they owned property.<sup>21</sup> While the shah planned for the divestiture of landownership to increase his power base, it actually fostered discontent and revolutionary language amongst a diverse group of Iranians.

In 1954, less than a year after the coup that removed Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq from power and returned the shah from self-imposed exile, the monarch called upon landowners to follow his lead and voluntarily redistribute their land under the guise of modernization. In response, the vast majority of landowners refused to give up their villages. At the time, the shah felt he had little choice but to drop the matter as he did not wield enough power or influence in the rural regions to take the land by force. Furthermore, during the failed-then-successful coup of 1953, the Iranian military had waived in its support of the shah, which made the monarch believe he did not have the necessary backing of his security forces to exert his will upon the defiant landowners.<sup>22</sup> However, by 1961, the shah felt he had the full power of the military at his disposal and officially declared land reform one of his key objectives.

By redistributing land, the shah sought a number of political advantages. First, if he could remove the large landowners from the rural areas, the central government would be able to assert its influence without opposition. Second, by reinventing himself as a great reformer, he hoped to gain support from the intelligentsia and urban middle classes, two groups that were not favorable toward the shah. Third, by giving peasants their own tracts of land, the shah hoped to receive their support in return. Finally, and most importantly for the shah, he hoped the land

reformation campaign would attract the favor of the John F. Kennedy administration, which was espousing land reform as a remedy to developmental and modernization problems—and as a defense against communism—in many parts of the Third World.<sup>23</sup> To the last point, Doctor Hushang Ram, director of the shah's land redistribution program, admitted during a private meeting with Arthur Kellas, Counsellor at the British Embassy in Tehran, that the land reforms were purely political in nature.<sup>24</sup> The shah, according to Ram, viewed the appearance of feudalism as a liability in the West's struggle against communism.<sup>25</sup> By forcibly seizing land from the nation's landlords and redistributing it to the peasant class, the shah viewed the land reforms as a demonstration to Western powers that Iran was not a feudal nation. By targeting landowners, the shah hoped to instigate a type of class warfare that would pit peasants against their masters. Yet, this ultimately backfired on the shah as both peasant and landowner would eventually work to overturn the monarch.

In the months leading to the land reforms, the shah's principal advisor introduced the need for a sweeping reform movement as a method of avoiding a similar coup d'état that had recently struck neighboring Iraq.<sup>26</sup> The advisor claimed that in order for the Iranian people to support the shah in this movement a common enemy would have to be provided.<sup>27</sup> In this case, landowners made an acceptable target given their small size relative to the general population of Iran. Therefore, the shah's propaganda machine fully mobilized to pit the general population of Iran against the nation's landed gentry, painting them as reactionary and a great barrier to Iranian modernization.<sup>28</sup> The government accused landowners of perpetuating the exploitative system of feudalism, a claim that incensed them as they denied the feudal lifestyle existed in Iran.<sup>29</sup>

Modern scholars agree with the landowners' assessment that feudalism did not exist in Iran. For example, Doctor Kazem Alamdari, an expert in Iran's land tenure systems, claimed

Iran's landowners were not feudal lords for a number of reasons, with the more prominent ones listed here. First, in the feudal system, the monarch derived his power from the influence of the feudal lords. Under this construct, the king relied on the armies of the feudal lords to fight his battles as he did not have an army under his ownership. Second, feudal peasants were subordinate to their lords, not the king. If a feudal lord did not support a king, the king had no control over the lord or the peasants. Lastly, feudal lords lived in their own territories. This was not the case in Iran, since all large landowners were absentee owners and lived in the urban centers.<sup>30</sup> This lends credence to the statement one landlord made in reaction to the shah's move to label Iran's landowners as feudal: "If this kind of ownership has a feudal root it has vanished since [sic] a long time ago to the establishment of constitution and law and relations between the villages and towns...Owing to the above factors feudalism in the shape as existed in Asiatic and Western countries never existed and cannot be coincident with land ownership in Iran."<sup>31</sup>

Whether intended or not, the land grabs affected more classes than the elite minority. For example, many common merchants within the Iranian marketplace—or *bazaar*—owned modest parcels of land, which the regime seized. Furthermore, the *ulema* were major landowners—both large and small—in Iran at the time and viewed private land ownership as a sacrosanct right granted to them under Islamic Law.<sup>32</sup> Despite the shah's request for his public support of the reforms, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Borujerdi, the top cleric in Iran, issued a *fatwa*—a legal ruling within Islamic law—that stated the land reforms were an affront to Islam, further pitting the *ulema* against the monarch.<sup>33</sup> In response, the shah sent a message to the grand ayatollah through Iranian Prime Minister Manouchehr Eqbal, stating he would launch a "white coup d'état" against the nation's *ulema* if the ayatollah did not reverse the *fatwa*.<sup>34</sup> The letter did not give specifics as to what the coup would look like, but it did mention stripping the clerics of the

privileges they had left after losing their landholdings, implying the shah would move forward with the reforms with or without the grand ayatollah's blessing.

In the end, the various waves of land reforms enabled the Iranian government to forcibly purchase land at market price and resell it to peasants at approximately thirty percent below market rate.<sup>35</sup> With the peasantry making up forty percent of Iran's population, the shah believed he had a strong support base and had effectively removed all political hindrances in rural Iran. However, the peasants who received land were those who already owned small parcels of land or at the very least had cultivation rights.<sup>36</sup> That left roughly seven million peasants without any land whatsoever. These landless peasants faced the choice of either becoming agricultural laborers for the new landowning peasants or moving to the cities in search of whatever work they could find. Most opted for the latter, which only exacerbated their condition as unskilled jobs were scarce in the cities. As a result, unemployment and poverty amongst the landless peasants increased substantially, fueling discontent against the monarch who disrupted their way of life.

During this same time, Iran began importing a vast majority of goods it had traditionally cultivated for export, such as wheat, barley, and rice. With domestically-produced grain prices hitting all-time lows, it cost landowners more in labor to harvest than they received in selling the yield.<sup>37</sup> This led to fewer agricultural labor jobs for peasants. Official records show that between 1966 and 1975, nearly five million peasants migrated to the cities in search of work.<sup>38</sup> While this figure does not include the number of migrants in the years immediately following the land reforms, one can assume that migration was taking place during that time as well. According to Doctor Kazem Alamdari, expert in Iranian sociology, the peasants migrating to the cities established slums on the outskirts because they found themselves at odds with the urban

populace: “The migrated population carried within itself the characteristics of village life, such as poverty, illiteracy, religiosity, traditionalism, and naivety.”<sup>39</sup> Almadari argues the aforementioned characteristics created a situation ripe for revolutionary messaging to take hold amongst the peasant population. The shah believed that the land reforms would endear himself to the peasant population. However, the opposite occurred and many peasants eventually participated in the 1979 revolution as a direct result of the reforms.<sup>40</sup>

While some landowners were amenable to the shah’s land reforms, overall reactions to the measures were harsh. The rapid implementation and lack of coordination among government offices—namely the Ministry of Agriculture—left many landowners scrambling to understand why generations of land ownership ended overnight.<sup>41</sup> Not only did landowners find themselves coping with political and economic disenfranchisement, but they also found themselves labeled as the shah’s top enemies of modernity.<sup>42</sup> Historian Doctor Ali Ansari outlines the main grievances landowners took up against the shah:

The landlords and *ulema* challenged the land reform on three grounds: first they contested the notion that they were feudal; second they attacked the notion that the land reform represented progress, arguing instead that it would cause social and economic dislocation; and third, and probably most damning, was their argument that the reform as administered by [Iranian Prime Minister Ali] Amini, and subsequently the Shah, was illegal in that it both contradicted Islamic law and had been implemented in the absence of a sitting [parliament], and was therefore unconstitutional.<sup>43</sup>

This division between the classes remained in place until the shah’s fall from power, largely due to the monarch’s insistence that progressive reform was impossible while reactionary peoples held any sort of power or influence in Iran.<sup>44</sup>

Once the shah’s government presented landowners as the enemy of modernity for Iranians to unite against, the shah realized that sweeping reforms were a way to legitimize the monarchy. While the landowners found the shah’s social reforms reprehensible, the shah held a



referendum in 1963 to sanction the progressive plans for modernization. The proposal passed with an overwhelming ninety-nine percent of the population approving it, thus giving the regime the ability to say the Iranian people consented—even mandated—the “revolution.”<sup>45</sup> However, critics question the validity of the results, citing the shah’s own views on referenda, which he stated two years earlier:

Communist dictators resemble Fascist ones in that they enjoy holding elections. They hope to give the ordinary working man the idea that he has a voice in the Government of his country. But the Communist rulers allow only one political party; anybody who tries to start another, or who speaks against the ruling party, is likely to be liquidated. In the elections (if you can call them by that name), the voter has no choice, for the only candidates listed are those of the ruling party. Purely as a matter of form, the citizen is urged or ordered to go and vote; the authorities then triumphantly announce that, let us say, 99.9% of the votes cast were for the ruling party. I wonder how many intelligent people are fooled by that sort of thing.<sup>46</sup>

While no proof of ballot tampering exists, Ansari argues that the shah held the referendum as a stunt to show the West that he was a democrat.<sup>47</sup> The White Revolution derived its tenants from six reform bills. In total, the bills abolished the feudal system, nationalized forests and pastures, implemented the sale of state-owned factories to the private sector as security for land reform, established Western-style profit-sharing schemes for employees in industry, extended suffrage to women, and established a literacy corps and implemented mandatory universal education.<sup>48</sup>

With the passage of the reforms, the shah formally unveiled his plan to modernize all aspects of Iranian life through what he called the White Revolution. The revolution was a “white” one because it was meant to be bloodless. It sought to rapidly change all aspects of Iranian society in the name of modernity. In his memoirs, the shah described the White Revolution as critical to Iran becoming the “great civilization” and one of the top five economic powers in the world. He wrote, “The great civilization towards which we are now moving is not just a chapter in the history of this land. It is its greatest chapter.”<sup>49</sup> That path to greatness, however, precipitated

suppression of political opposition to the government. While most of the reforms were meant to benefit all Iranians, the underlying purpose of the White Revolution was designed to preserve the regime's authoritarian status quo, which was best demonstrated through the land reforms that both predated and continued under the "revolution" until the monarchy's demise in 1979.<sup>50</sup>

On the surface, one of the more successful programs the shah launched under the White Revolution was education reform, which fostered a tremendous growth in access to education for Iranians both within the country and abroad. One of the key pillars of the shah's education reform policy was to provide free education to all Iranians. From 1963 to 1979, literacy rates increased from twenty-six to forty-two percent, while domestic school enrollment at all levels increased threefold.<sup>51</sup> Largely spurred on by increasing oil profits, the education reforms allowed for an increase in Iranian students studying at predominantly Western universities, which exposed a growing number of young Iranians to life under liberal democracies. Many of these Western-educated Iranians became critical of the shah's authoritarian governance and began calling for true democratic reform.<sup>52</sup>

Prior to the White Revolution, an average of 18,000 Iranians studied abroad annually, compared to 80,000 at the revolution's apex.<sup>53</sup> As a result, tens of thousands of degree-holding Iranians returned to their homeland every year, many of whom spent their university careers in Western democracies. As early as 1961, two years before the shah's education reforms were announced, British ambassador to Iran, Sir Geoffrey Harrison assessed the growing cultural divide between the educated Iranian youth and the authoritarian monarchy when he wrote that the returning graduates "have been members of students' unions and debating clubs; and above all they have escaped for a few years from the autocratic system of domestic relations of Iranian family convention. They are acutely conscious, not so much of the absence of political freedoms

in their own country, as of social injustice, nepotism, corruption and incompetence.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, according to Harrison, the shah’s intent for a well-educated populace to further the “great civilization” had the opposite effect and led more Iranians to doubt their government and ultimately support revolution. While Western education contributed to revolution, so, too, did traditional Islamic practices.

Another of the great social influences that contributed to revolution in Iran was the ability of the *ulema* to rally people *en masse* at a moment’s notice. By 1978, demonstrations against the shah and his regime increased in size and number. Because of the seemingly intricate coordination between demonstrators across the nation, the shah and his allies were convinced that a well-funded government apparatus was behind the uprising; namely the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).<sup>55</sup> Similarly, when asked his thoughts on the popular uprisings in a January 1979 interview with *Time*, Henry Kissinger boldly claimed that the Soviet Union was behind the demonstrations for the same reasons the shah believed the CIA was involved.<sup>56</sup> What the shah and Dr. Kissinger failed to realize were the intricacies of Shiism and how they naturally lent themselves to organizing demonstrations, which was a vital component in rallying disparate members of Iranian society in 1979. As an answer to the West’s misunderstanding of how the Iranian people managed a successful revolution without outside help, Iranian historian Yahya Armajani analyzed the influence the *ulema* had in the Iranian uprising. He wrote, “In the Shi’i religion there are a great number of religious processions, the most important of which occurs on the tenth of Muharram, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Husayn. The lay leaders organize these processions with the help of ‘committees.’ The Persian word for procession is *dasteh* and the organizers are called *dastegardan*. Whenever necessary these groups and their processions become political.”<sup>57</sup> With the *dastegardan* strategically located in communities throughout Iran,

Armajani argued the *ulema* were able to seamlessly transition the organizers from managing religious processions to organizing nationwide political protests. Not only did the *dastegardan* organize, but, according to Armajani, they also managed the day-to-day logistics of resourcing the tens of thousands of Iranians who came out to protest the regime. The same was true at the turn of the Twentieth Century when the *dastegardan* organized secret societies and public protests that successfully led to Iran's Constitutional Revolution.<sup>58</sup> This misunderstood aspect of Iranian culture explained the ease in which the 1979 revolution became a well-organized and popular revolt.

Over a year before Armajani wrote on the subject, analysts within the U.S. State Department began seeing the activity he described. On January 4, 1978, under the direct order of the shah, Iranian newspaper *Ettela'at* published an essay that attacked and insulted Khomeini.<sup>59</sup> In response to the essay, angry protests against the regime erupted in Khomeini's home city of Qom and, with the help of the *dastegardan*, quickly swept the nation. While the shah and Dr. Kissinger were unable to grasp the internal mobilizing abilities of the Iranian people, a February 1978 report authored by American diplomat George Lambrakis at the U.S. embassy in Tehran revealed what would turn out to be a far greater social and cultural understanding of events than the Carter administration understood at the time:

Though based on incomplete evidence our best assessment to date is that the Shia Islamic movement dominated by Ayatollah Khomeini is far better organized, enlightened, and able to resist communism than its detractors would lead us to believe. It is rooted in the Iranian people more than any Western ideology, including communism. However, its governing procedures are not clear, and probably have not been totally worked out. It is possible that the process of governing might produce accommodations with the anti-clerical, intellectual strains which exist in the opposition to produce something more closely approaching Westernized democratic processes than might at first be apparent.<sup>60</sup>

However, due to the length of the report, those charged with transmitting communiqués from the embassy opted to send the report to the State Department as an airgram in a diplomatic pouch—

not a telegram—without conferring with Lambrakis. In the decade after the 1979 revolution, Gary Sick, director of Iran affairs for the Carter White House wrote that he never saw the Lambrakis report, likely because the embassy opted to transmit it by airgram, which limited its distribution. Had he seen the report, Sick argued, it would have better informed the Carter administration in its dealings not only with the shah but Khomeini as well.<sup>61</sup>

At the heart of the mobilization process was the money to finance the resistance against the Pahlavi regime. As the shah's modernization efforts increased in speed and scale, a close relationship between a great number of the bazaar merchants and the *ulema* began to develop. While many of their grievances against the regime overlapped, the shah's land reforms were a key unifier for the merchants and clerics. According to Lambrakis, a symbiotic relationship developed between the two classes; the *bazaari* relied on the *ulema* to organize and carry out demonstrations against the regime, and the *ulema* relied on the *bazaari* for financial support.<sup>62</sup> According to the aforementioned report, "Millions of dollars pass through the hands of the top ayatollahs every day or week. These go for a variety of good works and support the movement."<sup>63</sup> The *bazaari* also underwrote some 1,500 private religious schools established by the *ulema*, which became symbols of resistance against the shah when the White Revolution secularized all public education in Iran.<sup>64</sup> This further demonstrated the merchants' willingness to partner with the *ulema* to subvert the shah's regime. While social influences drove revolutionary feelings among many Iranians, economic influences exacerbated them.

### **Economic Influences**

During the same period, Iran's economy grew exponentially as a result of increasing oil profits. Yet, as profits soared so did the gap between the wealthy and the destitute, further fomenting discontent toward the monarchy. Beginning in 1954, Tehran began increasing crude

oil production and quickly became the fourth-largest oil producer and second-largest oil exporter in the world.<sup>65</sup> From 1954 to 1955, Iran's oil exports generated \$34 million in revenue. Iran's oil revenues skyrocketed in 1973 when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) instituted an embargo on exports in response to the Arab-Israeli War, which increased international oil prices by 400 percent.<sup>66</sup> As a result, between 1973 and 1976, Iran's oil revenues spiked, generating \$25 billion in income. Of the nearly \$55 billion received in oil sales from 1954 to 1976, approximately \$33 billion funded the Iranian government, thus further enabling the shah to fund his vast modernization campaign.<sup>67</sup>

However, while oil revenues imbued already-wealthy Iranians with more cash, the vast amount of income generated by oil sales did little to elevate the economic status of most Iranians. When oil revenues spiked between 1973 and 1974, the wealthiest ten percent of Iranians were responsible for nearly forty percent of all goods and services purchased within the country. On the other hand, the poorest ten percent were only responsible for one percent of goods and services purchases.<sup>68</sup> While the wealth disparity was less evident in rural areas of Iran, it was undeniable in urban centers like Tehran where the wealthy lived in palaces and the poor lived in makeshift shantytowns with no basic amenities. As more Iranians moved to the capital in search of work, the high cost of goods and services along with unemployment rates among unskilled peasants began taking their toll. Without a decent public transportation system, the population boom in Iran made it nearly impossible to drive anywhere in a reasonable amount of time. To illustrate the disparity in wealth and to appreciate the disparity among Iran's elite, a rumor in Iran at the time quoted a member of the Pahlavi family as opining, in all seriousness, that, "If people [don't] like being stuck in traffic jams why [don't] they buy helicopters?"<sup>69</sup> Yet, rather than invest in public transportation or social welfare programs for the growing number of

impoverished citizens moving to urban centers in search of work, the shah opted to distribute the nation's oil profits to his allies. These allies were the court-connected elite; they consisted of the richest 0.1 percent, second only to the royal family in wealth.<sup>70</sup> In theory, the trickle-down model allowed the shah's inner-circle to create and invest in farming businesses, industrial plants, and private firms that created a robust job market for both skilled and unskilled laborers.<sup>71</sup> The model also assuaged the shah's paranoia by retaining the wealth and power among those he trusted. In reality, however, the shah's vision of a burgeoning job market never came to fruition because the wealth seldom made it out of the hands of the wealthy elite, who used the funds to increase their status in Iran and around the world. In the few instances where wealth did trickle down, it often stayed in the coffers of the top ten percent, never benefiting the majority of the population.<sup>72</sup> As a result, the gap between rich and poor widened at an exponential rate in Iran.

In 1971, two years before the OPEC embargo, the shah held a lavish ceremony in the ancient city of Persepolis to mark the 2,500-year anniversary of the Persian Empire.<sup>73</sup> While many outside observers believed the event would be used to stir nationalistic fervor amongst the Iranian people, the shah intended for it to not only elevate Iran's status, but to increase his personal status among world leaders as well.<sup>74</sup> This desire to prove himself to the world stemmed in part from the Tehran Conference in 1943 when the shah took great offense to neither Churchill nor Roosevelt treating him as an equal head of state. It was only Stalin who followed protocol and visited the royal, but only after insisting the shah dismiss his guards and replace them with members of the Red Army for the duration of the meeting.<sup>75</sup> Now the head of one of the most oil-rich nations in the world, the shah spared no expense with the anniversary celebration. The party was dubbed the "most extravagant party on record" by the 1980 edition of the *Guinness Book of Records*.<sup>76</sup> Only foreign dignitaries were invited to the event; Iranians

outside of the royal court were relegated to watching the event unfold on television. While estimates vary greatly, the official cost for the event as published by the Pahlavi regime was \$22 million—roughly \$141 million in today’s costs.

Although the event demonstrated the shah’s great power and access to wealth to the world, many heads of state viewed the event as excessive and self-serving. In a communiqué from the British embassy, an official described the event as well-intentioned, but ultimately ruined by the shah’s prevalent megalomania, a sentiment echoed by many Iranians leading up to and following the event.<sup>77</sup> When asked his thoughts about the celebration, a young Iranian stated, “We, the people, knew nothing of it. We paid for it. It was in our name but we could not get within a mile of it. Literally. The road was blocked by soldiers—real soldiers, not walk-on operetta parts.”<sup>78</sup> While in exile in Iraq, Khomeini received regular reports of the growing civil disdain for the monarchy as a result of the economic disparities placed center-stage by the Persepolis event. Capitalizing on the people’s enmity, Khomeini delivered a scathing sermon in Najaf, Iraq as the Persepolis party commenced. In his message he called upon all Iranians to protest the event: “It is the duty of the Muslim people of Iran to refrain from participation in this illegitimate festival, to engage in passive struggle against it, to remain indoors during the days of the festival, and to express by any means possible their disgust and aversion for anyone who contributed to the organization or celebration of the festival.”<sup>79</sup>

For many Iranians, the Persepolis event was a microcosm of everyday life under the Pahlavi regime. The White Revolution, launched a decade prior, promised so much yet did not deliver on most of those promises. As a result, the shah’s modernization plans had raised the public’s expectations to an untenable level. American sociologist and political scientist James C. Davies developed the J-Curve theory to address why certain people revolt against their



governments. In essence, the theory states that during periods of increasing public expectations the government's need to satisfy those expectations also increases. If the populace receives an extensive portion of what it expects to receive, the chances of revolution are less. However, if public expectations continue to rise or remain at a level considerably higher than what is being satisfied, revolution is inevitable.<sup>80</sup> Despite Iran's concentrated wealth and economic solvency, most of the population expected a great deal more from its government than what it was actually receiving, and Khomeini and his allies were acutely attuned to this. Teamed with social and economic instability, religious influences both inside and outside of Iran effectively paved the way for revolution.

### **Religious Influences**

During the early years of his reign, the shah enjoyed the support of a majority of the nation's religious leaders—the *ulema*. However, this support base began to erode with the government's implementation of the 1961 land reforms. The *ulema* believed landownership was sacrosanct—a right granted to them by Allah—and viewed the land reforms as an affront to Islam. When the shah began seizing land that the *ulema* owned, the monarch was not only attacking the clergy's social and economic status, but their religion as well. Then, in 1963, the friction between monarch and clergy intensified with the implementation of the White Revolution, specifically with the modernization campaign's secularizing of public education. By defunding religious schools, the shah removed a critical source of income to many *ulema* who were employed by the schools, further pitting the clergy against the monarchy.<sup>81</sup>

During this same period, the Pahlavi regime mandated state-administered licenses for those wishing to become members of the clergy. In essence, Islamic clerics required ordination if they desired government recognition. However, under the traditional practice of Shi'ism in

Iran, the *people* chose their religious leaders, not the state.<sup>82</sup> State Department analyst George Lambrakis described this widening religious rift between the people and the shah in his communiqué to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1978. In his report, Lambrakis described two types of mosques within Iran: "...those built by the shah and supported by him, and those built by the people and prayed in by them."<sup>83</sup> The congregational prayer leaders licensed and appointed by the government were not respected by devout Iranians who sought out their own *ulema*. To those *ulema* they selected, the Iranian people obeyed their edicts and paid their tithes, while many of the state-sponsored mosques sat empty during calls for prayer.<sup>84</sup> This demonstrated the religious disconnect between the shah and his people.

Armajani would later corroborate the Lambrakis report by noting that while the shah practiced Islam, he lacked a scholarly knowledge of it, but he acted as though did. Shi'i theology teaches that there is a Hidden Imam (literally the Messiah) who is the only true Islamic ruler in the world. Mohammed Reza Shah claimed on numerous occasions that the Hidden Imam appeared to him and as a result he was as much an ayatollah or *mojtahed* (those who have the divine right to interpret the law of Allah) as any member of the *ulema*.<sup>85</sup> This claim incensed Khomeini and other members of the *ulema* because the shah claimed he was an appointed religious leader. However, most Iranians realized *mojtaheds* could not be appointed, nor could someone earn a degree making themselves one. Like the *ulema* in the mosques, a *mojtahed* had to be accepted by the people as one, and according to Armajani, no one in Iran took the shah's self-proclaimed status as *mojtahed* seriously.<sup>86</sup> Regardless, with the shah instituting religious licenses, the regime threatened to replace the *ulema* in most Iranian communities, which would have effectively made Islam subordinate to the shah. This was not only a threat to *ulema* identity, but their very existence as well.<sup>87</sup>

While many critics fault the shah for being aloof and ignorant to the myriad internal troubles threatening regime stability, he was acutely aware of the power the *ulema* held over the population, which is why he aggressively sought to marginalize them and place the power of the monarch over that of the mosque. In addition to confiscating most of the *ulema*'s land and thrusting them into a lower economic and social class, the shah ordered his secret police—the SAVAK—to place most of them under regular surveillance.<sup>88</sup> Lambrakis captured this in his report: “By keeping the [clergy] as far out of public sight as possible, seeking to ridicule them, locking up many of the leaders in SAVAK prisons, and by insisting on non-religious models of the future for Iran, the Shahs have attempted to push Iran through a period of Westernization involving a separation of church and state which took centuries to develop in Europe.”<sup>89</sup> In short, Lambrakis was worried the shah's drastic policies were challenging the very cultural identities of most Iranians—a fight the shah would not win.

As a result of these drastic policies, by 1977, Khomeini and his followers were gaining support within Iran. In response, the shah began a deliberate campaign to further marginalize the most popular members of the *ulema* who did not support the regime. He labeled many of the opposition as terrorists and leaders of subversive groups.<sup>90</sup> Even the shah's wife, Empress Farah, made it a point to “[devote] time and public utterance to placating the faithful and...to draw them (and their religion) into a supportive relationship to the government.”<sup>91</sup> According to a member of the Empress' Special Bureau, many of the rural development efforts launched under the White Revolution were carried out specifically for “drawing more of the religious fundamentalists into the modern sector through greater participation in secular projects.”<sup>92</sup> However, the royal family's campaign of forced secularization and modernization failed to achieve its goals as more and more devout Iranians flocked to the privately-funded mosques.

The *ulema* did not oppose modernization as the shah and many members of the regime believed. However, the religious leaders did oppose the monarchy's attack on their identity and status. When the shah secularized public education under the White Revolution, many *ulema* found themselves out of a job and without a primary source of income.<sup>93</sup> Seemingly overnight, members of the *ulema* went from enjoying respect and premier social status to becoming some of the main enemies of the state and labeled as reactionaries by the shah himself. Many members scoffed at the accusation that they opposed the concept of modernity. When asked by an Iranian reporter what he thought of the shah's accusations, a prominent ayatollah in Qum denied the notion saying, "It is silly to insist on riding a camel when there is the automobile."<sup>94</sup>

By January 1978, the notion of a theocratic government propagated by Khomeini and his supporters offered all classes of Iranians a familiar counter to an oppressive and secular monarchy. Regardless of economic or social standing, most Iranians understood and could identify with the religious language and symbology Khomeini used in his sermons. In addition to the aforementioned social and economic factors, Iranians unified under a religious banner and Khomeini's influence and popularity increased significantly. Knowing the urban poor felt marginalized the most by the shah, Khomeini focused his efforts to mobilize the impoverished Iranians to his revolutionary cause with great success.<sup>95</sup> Khomeini's anti-regime sermons were a relief for many, providing them an outlet for their anger, while giving them hope that someone in a position of power appreciated their plight and was working for a better life on their behalf. By refusing to strike any balance with the monarchy and opposing all notions of colonial influence within Iran, Khomeini was able to offer a solution to the troubles plaguing Iran by instituting a theocracy, an idea that resonated more and more with the disparate classes in the country. Because of the shah's repression, Khomeini and his inner-circle of conservative clerics became

the leaders of the revolution and members of the government, military, and bazaar played crucial roles; it was Khomeini and Iran's religious leaders who took center stage by using easily-identifiable religious symbols, politicized sermons, and by turning mosques into sanctuaries for political mobilization away from the eyes of the SAVAK.<sup>96</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The anti-Western strain of the Iranian Revolution permeates the colloquial narrative to this day. However, as the history shows, it was more the internal influences in Iran that contributed to the revolution than it was external ones. Mohammed Reza Shah greatly misjudged the support the *ulema* had amongst the Iranian people and further alienated the citizenry by disenfranchising the clerics in his quest to remove all opposition to the throne. Furthermore, the shah unwittingly created a strong alliance structure between the *bazaari* and *ulema* by seizing their properties in 1961 and 1963 under sweeping land reforms. As a result, the *ulema* grew in power and influence as the *bazaari* were able to maintain a steady flow of finances to support the religious leaders as a direct counter to the monarchy.

While a largely agrarian populace flocked to the major cities of Iran in search of jobs, poverty increased exponentially as unskilled workers could not find work in a developing, skilled labor market. To make matters worse, the urban poor could see the massive economic disparity between the wealthy and the destitute, and questioned—loudly—when the White Revolution and vast amount of oil revenue would improve their lives. With the Pahlavi regime overselling its modernization efforts and under-delivering to a majority of Iranians, Khomeini was able to capitalize on the widespread animosity toward the shah and unite a disparate group of Iranians by using Islamic symbology and language in his sermons that all Muslims could identify with regardless of class or status. While Khomeini was undeniably anti-Western and demonized the

United States in many of his sermons, the revolution that toppled Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979 was not fueled by anti-Western fervor.

Because of the unifying message of Islam, Khomeini and his close allies were in the best position to lead the revolution. Yet, this did not mean that all revolutionary Iranians agreed with Khomeini's anti-Western views. Opposing the shah did not automatically mean opposing the West, yet that is what the colloquial narrative propagates. With greater education and cultural understanding, it is possible to undo the damage done by the colloquial narrative. However, as long as it is politically expedient within Western governments to preach the colloquial versions of the Iranian Revolution, it may take several generations for women and men of reason to prevail.

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- <sup>67</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 124.
- <sup>68</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 141.
- <sup>69</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 141.
- <sup>70</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 140.
- <sup>71</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 140.
- <sup>72</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 140.
- <sup>73</sup> Abbas Milani, *The Shah*, 322.
- <sup>74</sup> Abbas Milani, *The Shah*, 323.
- <sup>75</sup> Abbas Milani, *The Shah*, 112.
- <sup>76</sup> Abbas Milani, *The Shah*, 325.
- <sup>77</sup> Abbas Milani, *The Shah*, 325.
- <sup>78</sup> Eric R. Chamberlin, *Preserving the Past*, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1979), 25.
- <sup>79</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. by Hamid Algar (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1981), 200.



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- <sup>80</sup> James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution." *American Sociological Review* 27. (Sage Publications Inc, 1962, doi:10.2307/2089714), 5; Nikki Keddie, "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective," *The American Historical Review* 88, no. 3 (1983): 580; Mohammad Hassan Tajalli Tehrani, "The Causes of Revolution: A Case Study of Iranian Revolution of 1978-79," (master's thesis, North Texas State University, 1982), 11; American political scientist Ted Gurr built on Davies' J-Curve theory under the umbrella of "relative deprivation."
- <sup>81</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, & World Affairs, *Iran: Religious Elements of the 1979 Islamic Revolution* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2013), 7.
- <sup>82</sup> George Lambrakis to the Secretary, "Iran: Understanding the Shi'ite Islamic Movement," memorandum. February 3, 1978, The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., 42.
- <sup>83</sup> George Lambrakis to the Secretary, "Iran: Understanding the Shi'ite Islamic Movement," memorandum. February 3, 1978, The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., 42.
- <sup>84</sup> George Lambrakis to the Secretary, "Iran: Understanding the Shi'ite Islamic Movement," memorandum. February 3, 1978, The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., 42.
- <sup>85</sup> Yahya Armajani, "What the U.S. Needs to Know About Iran," *Worldview Magazine*, May 1979, 14.
- <sup>86</sup> Yahya Armajani, "What the U.S. Needs to Know About Iran," *Worldview Magazine*, May 1979, 14.
- <sup>87</sup> Yahya Armajani, "What the U.S. Needs to Know About Iran," *Worldview Magazine*, May 1979, 14.
- <sup>88</sup> William Sullivan to the Secretary, "Straws in the Wind: Intellectual and Religious Opposition in Iran," memorandum. July 25, 1977, The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., 179.
- <sup>89</sup> George Lambrakis to the Secretary, "Iran: Understanding the Shi'ite Islamic Movement," memorandum. February 3, 1978, The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., 40-41.
- <sup>90</sup> William Sullivan to the Secretary, "Straws in the Wind: Intellectual and Religious Opposition in Iran," memorandum. July 25, 1977, The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., 179.
- <sup>91</sup> William Sullivan to the Secretary, "Straws in the Wind: Intellectual and Religious Opposition in Iran," memorandum. July 25, 1977, The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., 179.
- <sup>92</sup> William Sullivan to the Secretary, "Straws in the Wind: Intellectual and Religious Opposition in Iran," memorandum. July 25, 1977, The National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., 179.
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- <sup>94</sup> Yahya Armajani, "What the U.S. Needs to Know About Iran," *Worldview Magazine*, May 1979, 13.
- <sup>95</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, & World Affairs, *Iran: Religious Elements of the 1979 Islamic Revolution* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2013), 12.
- <sup>96</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, & World Affairs, *Iran: Religious Elements of the 1979 Islamic Revolution* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2013), 14.

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