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# A Union Of Negatives: Ayatollah Khomeini and the Mobilization of Dissent in the Iranian Revolution of 1979

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**A UNION OF NEGATIVES:  
Ayatollah Khomeini and the Mobilization of Dissent in the  
Iranian Revolution of 1979**

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HIS 490: History Honors Thesis**

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**You know, Ali, it's hard enough to start a revolution.  
Even harder to sustain it.  
And hardest of all to win it.  
But it's only afterwards once we've won,  
That the real difficulties begin.**

**- Film: *The Battle of Algiers* (1966)**

**What is human warfare but just this; an effort to make the laws of God and nature take sides with one party.**

**- Henry David Thoreau**

## **INTRODUCTION - MOHAMMAD REZA PAHLAVI AND THE AFTERMATH OF OPERATION AJAX**

Recent developments, collectively known as the “Arab Spring,” have renewed American interest in the Middle East. The difficulties faced by these revolutionary forces to establish more democratic, transparent, and participatory governments have their origins in a unique complex of historical and social forces in the region. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, commonly referred to as the Islamic Revolution, is arguably the most significant regional event, both in its immediate consequences and its far-reaching implications, of the twentieth century. In 1979, the Iranian revolutionaries too sought greater autonomy and accountability from their government and independence in its foreign policy. The Revolution overthrew the American-supported monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and replaced his government with an Islamic Republic directed by radical Iranian mullahs. Before Mohammad Reza Shah’s downfall, his reign was marked by significant economic growth. However, this growth also prompted riots and unrest in the years leading up to the Revolution. Despite the Shah’s close relationship with the United States of America, or perhaps because of it, his reign was a volatile one. Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, a zealous nationalist and founder of the National Front political party, advocated for a stronger, more independent Iran that would be less reliant upon the United States and Great Britain. In 1953, Mossadeq and his supporters were successful in forcing the Shah into exile. The United States government, however, was not ready to lose one of their chief allies in what they considered to be such a strategic region. As a result, in a coup d’état orchestrated by the American Central Intelligence Agency and the British Secret Intelligence Service, the Shah was

restored to power and Mossadeq was placed under house arrest. This notorious coup, known as Operation Ajax, solidified the view of many Iranians that the Shah was simply a puppet of the American government and, perhaps, foreshadowed the threat to the Shah's rule in the coming decades. After the crushing defeat of Mossadeq, a popularly elected leader, how, then, was the public organized and motivated to rise again against the Shah just two decades later?

Indeed, the major element of the Iranian Revolution that unnerved the American government, and even more broadly, the Western world, was the establishment of an Islamic cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, as the leader of the new Islamic Republic. Never before had a modern nation-state been established with a stated aim of its government to strive for a strict adherence to religious law, in this case Shari'a Law, as outlined in the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam. The Ayatollah's rise to power sent a clear message to the United States: no longer would Iran be an instrument of America's foreign policy. The Islamic takeover drastically altered the power balance in the region and radically changed the politics of the Cold War, which sent shock-waves around the world.

How did the Ayatollah overcome the strength of the Shah and his American allies? There are numerous factors that contributed to the Shah's downfall; no one explanation is sufficient to explain the defeat of the monarchy. In many ways, Ayatollah Khomeini was simply an opportunist who, though in exile throughout the revolutionary period, seized control of the precarious situation in Iran. The air of mystique that surrounded this vocal opponent of the Shah certainly engaged the various members of the opposition movement, aiding his goal to bring the Shah's rule to an end. By keeping his promises purposefully vague for the post-revolutionary period, Khomeini was able to galvanize the many facets of the opposition to the Shah. In the

wake of Operation Ajax, when average Iranians were disheartened by their inability to affect political decisions in their government without foreign interference, was Khomeini's ascent to power inevitable? Clearly, the Iranian Revolution was much more significant than the imposition of a theocracy under a radical mullah. While the religious nature of the Revolution is obviously important, there was a combination of political and economic forces, combined with the Shah's ambiguous leadership and brutal repression tactics, that motivated the average Iranian to rise up and join in the overthrow of his reign. Many opposition figures did not want to instill a theocracy, yet by the late 1970s they were left with no choice but to support Khomeini, finding it impossible to oppose the fervently religious figures of the opposition. Supporting the charismatic Ayatollah and his organized network of radical mullahs appeared as the only realistic choice which could ultimately remove the entrenched Shah. These wary opposition forces reluctantly allied themselves with Khomeini, for the alternative of retaining the Shah was unacceptable.

The traditional influence of the Islamic leadership, the *ulama*, was not the sole catalyst in replacing the Shah with Khomeini. Researching the economic ramifications of the Shah's modernization policies is key to unearthing how such an unexpected, though arguably inevitable, revolution could occur in the first place. The White Revolution, a broad program of modernization undertaken by the Shah in the 1960s, was enacted with American monetary support in order to improve the national infrastructure, industry, and economic development of Iran. However, throughout the 1970s, an ever growing wealth disparity between the few Iranians who benefited from the Shah's modernization policies and the much more numerous poor Iranians began to develop. The traditional influences of the *bazaars* as the center of economic transactions, urban production, and even religious institutions, such as the mosques or madrasas,

were threatened by this modernization program. The policies of the White Revolution had two major repercussions on the internal structure of pre-revolutionary Iran. First, these policies uprooted an increasing number of rural peasants and poor farmers and pushed them into the slums of the larger cities, inflating the *bazaars* with growing numbers of embittered, unemployed Iranians. Secondly, and arguably the most important when considering the downfall of the Shah, was his government's failure to provide political reform in addition to economic reform in Iran. The Shah's secret police force, SAVAK, enforced this policy of political repression. Widely documented cases of torture and execution of the Shah's opponents are available today. Anyone so bold as to voice opposition to the Shah was immediately silenced through imprisonment, torture, and even murder. Because of these policies of repression, madrasas and mosques were increasingly the only meeting place for the swelling number of economically disaffected Iranians to gather and voice dissent. Thus, an unlikely alliance between the economic sectors and the religious leaders coalesced, smoldering under the apparently calm surface of a modernizing and urbanizing nation-state.

## **PART I - THE WHITE REVOLUTION AND THE EFFECTS OF RAPID MODERNIZATION**

### **The Emerging Iranian-American Alliance**

After the ousting of Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953, the Shah faced a disillusioned and disheartened Iranian public that questioned his political legitimacy to lead the nation. The coup d'état, operated and facilitated by the American CIA and the British SIS, provided empirical evidence of the recurring Iranian fear of outside interference in their affairs, as noted by Matthew Axworthy. "The idea that everything that happened in Iranian politics was manipulated by a

hidden foreign hand was again reinforced, fathering dozens of improbable conspiracy theories in later years.”<sup>1</sup> Improbable or not, the message to the Iranians seemed quite clear: the Shah was willing to use his Western allies to his advantage, even if it meant going against the will of his own people with the removal of a democratically elected Prime Minister. Emboldened by Western support, the Shah believed himself to be invincible to domestic Iranian concerns. Therefore, he was encouraged to pursue policies to fulfill his personal agenda without regard to the desires of his subjects; he was effectively ruling above the people.

The Iranian population was severely disappointed in the aftermath of Operation Ajax. With such powerful allies in the West, particularly the United States, it is amazing that the Iranians were able to rally and defeat the Shah a mere twenty-six years later. The Shah’s attitude toward his subjects had a definite patriarchal nature; he made policy decisions without the consent of the people and never attempted to become a popular king. These policies “alienated many Iranians from the young Shah, making popular support for him in subsequent decades equivocal at best.”<sup>2</sup> Desmond Harney, the first Chairman of the Irano-British Chamber of Commerce, argues that the Iranian Revolution was different than past revolutions, stating that it was more than just another coup d’état against some oppressive leader. In a lecture delivered in 1980, Harney made an important distinction regarding the significance of the Iranian Revolution: “It was not the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi alone: it was the destruction of a dynasty and of fifty years of Westernization.”<sup>3</sup> Both the Shah and his father before him, Reza Shah

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 237.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>3</sup> Desmond Harney, “Some Explanations for the Iranian Revolution,” *Asian Affairs* 11, no. 2 (1 Jun 1980): 135, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed 18 September, 2011).

Pahlavi, supported first by the British and then the American governments, pursued policies of rapid modernization which were inherently Western in scope. It is important to note that when the traditional forces of Iran rejected the Shah in 1979, it was not simply a repudiation of his government. The end of the Shah's reign and instillation of Ayatollah Khomeini represented the end of an era of Westernization in Iran. By rejecting both communism and capitalism, Khomeini captivated Iranians with his famous slogan: "Neither East nor West - Islamic Republic!"

Throughout the 1960s, the Shah's desires to modernize and industrialize Iran were met with enthusiasm in the United States by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In the Foreign Relations of the United States volumes (hereafter referred to as FRUS), which contains documents from Presidential libraries, Departments of State and Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency, amongst others, there are numerous references to the desires of a relationship between the United States and Iran. These appeals towards cooperation followed the United States' Cold War policy of containment, which held that the most effective way of repelling Soviet influence would be to provide economic and military aid to any country threatened by potential communist aggression. William S. Gaud, a senior member of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), stated this goal quite clearly when he wrote, "In the case of Greece and Iran, substantial amounts of U.S. development lending are projected...it should result in satisfactory progress toward the goal of self-sustaining growth. Furthermore, by directing assistance to long-term development, we enhance the ability of these countries to assume a progressively larger share of the joint defense burden from their increased national product."<sup>4</sup> Clearly, Cold War considerations were paramount for the American

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<sup>4</sup> William S. Gaud, "Report of the Military Assistance Group," Memorandum, December 12, 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Kennedy Administration: Volume IX, Foreign Economic Policy, [http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/frus/frus61-63ix/07\\_Section\\_7.html](http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/frus/frus61-63ix/07_Section_7.html) (accessed November 30, 2011).

government in determining foreign policy decisions throughout the 1960s. The Kennedy administration wanted to build a strong alliance with Iran through extensive economic and military aid in order to stem the influence of the neighboring Soviet Union. By providing funds and encouraging social and economic development that would improve the well-being of the Iranian population, the Kennedy administration believed Iran would remain friendly to American interests and would prevent Soviet access to the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

Supported with vast amounts of funds for development by the United States beginning in 1963, the Shah embarked on his extensive reform program known as the White Revolution. It was a vast, sweeping reform movement which touched all aspects of Iranian society: “This six-point program called for land reform, nationalization of the forests, the sale of state-owned enterprises to private interests, electoral changes to enfranchise women and allow non-Muslims to hold office, profit-sharing in industry, and a literacy campaign across the nation.”<sup>5</sup> John Stempel, the U.S. Foreign Service Officer who served as the deputy chief of the political section of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran from 1975-9, argues that the lack of political development in the White Revolution was a key consideration in this period and can provide an explanation for the impetus of the revolutionary movement. Economic reform was established in the absence of political reform, for the Shah was not willing to share power with any other political body: “becoming [politically] involved never was a viable option for dedicated dissidents.”<sup>6</sup> The Shah believed that his vision for Iran’s future was ideal and convinced himself that there was no need for political engagement. The Shah was never a ruler who connected with his people. He simply

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<sup>5</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Rise of Islamic Capitalism: Why the New Muslim Middle Class is the Key to Defeating Extremism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2009), 128.

<sup>6</sup> John D. Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution* (Lexington, KY: Clark Publishing, 2009), 39.

ruled above them, oblivious to the wants and desires of the rapidly changing Iranian populace. Due to the encouragement stemming from his advisors, however, the Shah was persuaded to experiment with enabling political participation in order to entertain the concept of political participation, which he hoped would appease the discontented masses.

### **Party Politics in Pahlavi Iran**

In 1957, a two-party system was established. Eventually evolving into the Iran Novin Party, the Mellioun Party was established as the pro-government party, with its counterpart available in the Mardom Party.<sup>7</sup> However, these parties were not as engaged as political parties in Western governments. “In keeping with the monarch’s concept of the people as passive participants in the policy and decision making process, the political parties were considered merely a way of organizing opinion, not an institution of government.”<sup>8</sup> The parties could propose ideas and opinions, but had no legislative authority to enact any policies, for the Shah remained as the Iran’s absolute monarch. Indeed, this two party system was a short experiment. Beginning in 1973, faced with the growing concern that the country needed to undergo political reforms in order to survive the worldwide economic depression, the Shah was advised to disband the two-party system. Instead, he established the *Rastakhiz* (Resurgence) Party in March 1975. This new, single party, was created to consolidate participation to one, manageable party that was to be solely loyal to the Shah. As would be expected, a government with one political party established to support the Shah did not appease the growing strength of the opposition movement. These moderate elements of the opposition felt marginalized by this governmental

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

restructuring and were thus compelled to join more radical movements. An important theme of the Revolution is exemplified by this decision to disband political parties: as order and stability in the country increasingly dissipated by the late 1970s, the Shah was unable to make clear, well-reasoned concessions to appease the more moderate factions of the opposition. As desperation increased for these moderate dissidents, they were compelled to join the more radical revolutionaries organized by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Axworthy analyzes another important consideration of political activity under the Shah's rule, namely, the existence of communism in Iran. The Tudeh party, established in 1941, was a pro-communist, Marxist-leaning political party. Throughout the Second World War, Soviet troops occupied large areas of northern and western Iran. Indeed, at the end of the war, after the British and American troops had left Iran, the Soviets remained in Azerbaijan, which cultivated the growth of a strong Tudeh influence. Here, the Soviets "encouraged pro-Soviet secessionist movements in Azerbaijan...with the aim of re-creating there something like the old Russian sphere of influence of 1907-1914."<sup>9</sup> The Soviets were well received in these areas and were thus able to grow significantly in importance and presence. "Under their [Soviet] protection....the Tudeh Party formed student and labor committees, printed newspapers and books, recruited large numbers of professionals and government workers, and even penetrated the military."<sup>10</sup>

Though the Soviets eventually left in May 1946, the Tudeh party continued to grow in Iranian society. Its members "took places in the government cabinet and helped to bring forward new labor laws, set maximum working hours, and established a minimum wage."<sup>11</sup> However,

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<sup>9</sup> Axworthy, 234.

<sup>10</sup> Nasr, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Axworthy, 234.

after being charged with an attempted assassination of the Shah in 1949, the party was disbanded. Resentful Tudeh Party members were forced into silence, often through arrests, exile, and executions under order of the Shah. Regardless, the initial advancement of these Tudeh members proved important in the growing anti-Shah movement. “Their [communist intellectuals] tales of the glories of Stalin’s Soviet republic, and the magnificent future that awaited the Iranian and wider Middle Eastern masses once communist revolutions swept away oppressive and decadent capitalist regimes proved enormously appealing.”<sup>12</sup> These Cold War considerations are an integral part of the global implications of the Iranian Revolution. Many themes grounded in Socialist-Marxist thought (e.g. land redistribution, creating a classless society, removing the capitalist economic model) would be adopted by Khomeini. Yet Khomeini’s adaptation was significantly distinct in a decidedly anti-communist mold, for he believed it to be an unacceptably atheistic ideology.

With the expulsion of the communists and the withdrawal of British presence in Iran after 1953, the United States felt compelled to step in and provide Iran with economic, military, and civil assistance. The militaristic nature of the American-Iranian alliance was strengthened under Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency. The FRUS volumes contain correspondence between the Shah and President Johnson in which this relationship is clearly established. In a letter written to the Shah on January 2, 1964, President Johnson praised him for his implementation of the White Revolution. “In freeing the energies of Iran's peasantry and laborers, as well as the women, you have taken a difficult and courageous step. You have proven your faith and confidence in the Iranian people and your resistance to alien pressures. You will be misunderstood and you will be

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<sup>12</sup> Nasr, 121.

maligned....But you will also be admired and loved by your people.”<sup>13</sup> The Shah responded to President Johnson within five days. In his response, he outlined the promising developments in the Iranian infrastructure and increasing economic opportunities available after the first year of the White Revolution. He also offered caution, however, underscoring the danger that his burgeoning nation faced by outside threats.

A matter to which I wish, Mr. President, to call your attention is the danger which threatens this area of the world. I refer to the stockpiles of weapons of aggression in the possession of Egypt and the ever increasing delivery of offensive equipment to that country by the Soviet Union, designed to serve, overtly or under cover, as instruments of Egyptian intervention. . . . Egypt, in fact, has already prepared an "intervention force" of considerable size, equipped with long-range bombers, missiles, heavy troop transport planes, submarines, ships, and torpedo boats armed with missiles, so that if a 'change' should happen to occur in any Arab country and President Nasser be asked to 'intervene' he would willingly do so and let the world be faced with a fait accompli. I should perhaps add that even Iran does not seem to be too distant for his designs or immune from his subversive activities.<sup>14</sup>

He continued, lamenting on the inadequate size and technology of the Iranian military to combat such threats. In his concluding remarks, he clearly stated the necessity for increased military support from the United States: “If our armed forces are to function effectively and to perform their allotted duties, and if Iran, a staunch and steadfast ally of the United States, is to play her full part in the changing political climate of the Middle East, then obviously, Mr. President, these shortages [in the Iranian military’s capabilities] have to be met.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Letter from President Johnson to the Shah of Iran,” Letter, January 2, 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Johnson Administration, Volume XXII, Iran, [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxii/a.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxii/a.html) (accessed December 1, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Mohammad Reza Shah, “Letter from the Shah of Iran to President Johnson,” Letter, January 7, 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Johnson Administration, Volume XXII, Iran, [http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxii/a.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxii/a.html) (accessed December 1, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

With the creation of the United States Agency for International Development in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy, the American government allocated \$107.2 million to Iran.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, this was a major contribution to Iran's development. Stempel suggests, however, that a shift in the American-Iranian alliance occurred in 1964. Washington, which became increasingly involved in other world affairs, like the growing unrest in Vietnam, "was basically unconcerned about the internal turmoil the changes [of the White Revolution] had induced. . . . American interest shifted away from the political ramifications of the Shah's programs towards Iran's potential as a strong ally of the United States in the Persian Gulf area."<sup>17</sup> Stempel cites that in 1977, at the peak of U.S. military sales to Iran, the Department of Defense Security Assistance Agency delivered \$2,433 million to Iran, a spike from the already high expenditures of early 1970s.<sup>18</sup> The sudden obtainable capital provided to the Iranian government ironically compounded development, leading to political corruption, food shortages, and soaring inflation.

### **Economic Considerations**

The main concern of the Tudeh dissidents was the Shah's imposition of economic policies that were capitalist and pro-Western in nature. The reforms of the White Revolution were problematic to other elements of traditional Iranian society as well. The rapid economic changes without political liberalization directly threatened the traditionally strong hold of the *bazaar* on the Iranian economy. For centuries, the *bazaar* served a primary role in the development of the urban economy. "The *bazaar* includes the urban production of small goods,

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<sup>16</sup> Stempel, 68.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 77.

traditional artisans, the traditional bank and trade system, and the wholesale trade.”<sup>19</sup> More importantly, though, was the *bazaar’s* role as the community center of the city. Mosques and religious schools (madrasas) were located in the *bazaars* as well. Thus, if the *bazaaris* were threatened, then the *ulama* (Islamic clergy) would be equally threatened as well. The intertwined nature of this relationship became more pronounced as leaders from both factions of the opposition united against their common foe, the Shah.

In the early stages of the White Revolution, however, the threats facing the *ulama* and *bazaaris* were not yet realized by the wider Iranian populace. Indeed, some segments of Iranian society benefitted from the results of the White Revolution. The elite, Westernized classes that remained close allies to the Shah gained materially from the reforms, mainly through the profits from increased oil production. After the coup against Mossadeq in 1953, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Corporation (renamed British Petroleum, or BP, in 1954) soon became the most integral source of funds for the Shah’s government. By the early 1970s, thanks to the vast expansion of government expenditure, the effects of the Shah’s programs were beginning to be realized. “Per capita income in Iran increased to two thousand dollars, a Third World high. The student population reached an estimated ten million. . . . the number of industries quadrupled. And tens of thousands of acres of farmland were redistributed to some three million peasant families.”<sup>20</sup> The visibly successful effects of the White Revolution, notably the markedly increasing capacity of the oil industry and the improvements and developments of highways and roads, served as empirical evidence which represented the benefits of the reforms to the Shah.

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<sup>19</sup> M.P. Amineh & S.N. Eisenstadt, “The Iranian Revolution: The Multiple Contexts of the Iranian Revolution,” *Perspectives on Global Development & Technology* 6 (2007:131, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed 17 August, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Robin Wright, *In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 53.

Yet the benefits of the White Revolution were not equally distributed amongst all members of Iranian society. Though the developing industries like coal, textiles, and the manufacture of motor vehicles promised new jobs and opportunities to the previously isolated Iranian farmers, Robin Wright notes that “massive migrations to the cities led to housing shortages and slums. Unemployment, corruption and inflation soared. The gap between the rich, epitomized by an elite corps of families surrounding the Pahlavis, and the poor, notably those still in rural sectors, grew wider.”<sup>21</sup> Significant amounts of government money were spent on military expenditures and engineering projects rather than aiding the poor with housing assistance or other social services. “As in any other time of major change, the new often looked crass against the dignity of the old that was being pushed aside.”<sup>22</sup> After the worldwide recession of 1973, these disparities proved even larger. This uneven distribution of economic resources is critical to understanding the Iranian Revolution.

Another consideration of the White Revolution was the explosion of Western involvement in Iranian affairs. In an article for the academic journal *Social Research*, Akbar Karbassian analyzes the phenomenon of Western companies setting up joint ventures in Iran as the most popular means of foreign investment. “A law passed in 1954 protected and guaranteed all foreign investments, thus attracting many international firms to almost every field of economic activity,” including an automobile industry created in 1966 to assemble British-made Hillman-Hunter cars to a steel mill in Isafhan constructed with the help of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> Karbassian attacks the nationalization of the private sector undertaken by Khomeini’s

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, *In the Name of God*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Axworthy, 241.

<sup>23</sup> Akbar Karbassian, “Islamic Revolution and the Management of the Iranian Economy,” *Social Research* 67, no. 2, (2000): 630, *Academic Search Premier*; EBSCOhost (Accessed 22 September, 2011).

Revolutionary government and is highly critical of the Islamic Republic's management of the economy in the years following the Revolution.

The burgeoning private sector cultivated by the Shah was responsible for many of the infrastructural improvements and the growth of industry. Additionally, national wealth skyrocketed during the 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the policies of the White Revolution. However, this new wealth was not without consequences. For example, traditional agricultural farmers increasingly lost their jobs due to changes in technology. Forced migrations into the crowded cities, especially Tehran, to search for nonexistent jobs became an unfortunate reality for thousands of Iranians. Also, the surge in inflation beginning in 1973 is an important factor, especially in relation to world affairs. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was established in Iraq in January of 1961. Comprised of twelve developing nations, including Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East, OPEC strives to stabilize the price of oil in worldwide markets. Furious over the West's assistance to Israel, which resulted in the failed campaign led by Egypt and Syria in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the Shah led the Middle Eastern member states in a decisive political decision: in 1973, these states acted independently of the non-Middle Eastern OPEC members states and established an embargo on the United States and Western Europe.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the Shah demanded higher oil prices, because it was Iran's biggest export, and its value had not kept pace with other internationally traded Iranian goods.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these embargoes, more money pumped into the Iranian economy for development purposes and, curiously, a large amount of it went back to the West in return for

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 631.

<sup>25</sup> Axworthy, 247.

military equipment. In the mid-1970s “the Shah bought more Chieftain tanks from the UK than the British army owned, and the very latest F-14 fighters from the United States.”<sup>26</sup> This spending, Axworthy argues, is a key to understanding how the *bazaaris* became embittered toward the West. The Iranian economy was floundering due to the skyrocketing inflation caused by these military expenditures. Not wanting to entertain the notion that his misguided economic ventures were responsible for the rampant inflation and decaying economy, the Shah instead turned his attention to the traditional segments of the Iranian society. He accused the economic downturn on their traditional, “backward” practices.

The Shah blamed small traders for the price rises [of rent, food, and other necessities caused by the out of control inflation rates] and sent gangs into the bazaars to arrest so-called profiteers and hoarders. Shops were closed down, two hundred fifty thousand fines were issued, and eight thousand shopkeepers were given prison sentences - none of which altered the underlying economic realities by one iota.<sup>27</sup>

Axworthy accurately portrays the sense of apprehension and helplessness felt by the increasing majority of Iranians who did not benefit from the Shah’s flirtation with the West. The glaring deterioration of Iran’s economy under the Shah angered these people, but more importantly concentrated their rage towards the financier and supporter of the Shah’s policies, the United States of America.

### **The Intelligentsia and the Foundations of Revolution**

Various academics and thinkers from numerous disciplines, many of whom ironically earned their education in the West or from schools in Iran created with Western monies,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

supported the opposition movement against the Shah. One of the notable writers from this time was prominent Iranian thinker Jalal Al-e-Ahmad. While not quite a supporter of Marxism, he did actively support the nationalist program of Mossadeq and the National Front and was also against the rapid development and infusion of Westernized-capitalism occurring under the Shah's reign. One of his most important contributions was the idea of *gharbzadegi*, which is popularly translated as "Westoxication" or "West-strikeness." *Gharbzadegi* permeated Iranian society through discussions and a book published in 1962 under the same name. "This attacked the uncritical way in which Western ideas had been accepted, advocated, and taught in schools. The result...was the creation of a people and a culture that were neither genuinely Iranian nor properly Western."<sup>28</sup> Axworthy points out that "[Al-e-Ahmad] translated Sarte and Camus into Persian, but his firm attachment to intellectual honesty and his search for an authentic way to live did not borrow from anyone."<sup>29</sup> The influence of Al-e-Ahmad and *gharbzadegi* on the course of the revolution was momentous. The groundwork laid by Al-e-Ahmad in the philosophical underpinnings of Iranian discontent until his death in 1969 would greatly influence his students and future thinkers.

One of these future thinkers was Dr. Ali Shari'ati. One of Al-e-Ahmad's most prominent students, Shari'ati wrote prolifically during this period and was clearly influenced by the themes of *gharbzadegi*. In *Man and Islam*, a publication of a series of lectures delivered to different universities in Iran in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Shari'ati lectured on the nature of contemporary human beings. Using a powerful and highly convincing reasoning backed by the philosophical postulations of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Descartes, Sarte, Camus and others, Shari'ati

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 239.

questioned the capacity of the individual to come to terms with human nature. In a lecture titled “Modern Man and His Prisons,” Shari’ati posed a charged argument: “My basic thesis is that, today’s man is generally incarcerated within a few prisons and naturally he is a true human being only if he can liberate himself from these deterministic conditions. What are these determinisms and how can man free himself from their grips?”<sup>30</sup>

In a dynamic explanation of human nature, he posed that “man is a three-dimensional being with three aptitudes; he is conscious of himself and the world, he can choose, and he can create,” and concluded that “in short, man is what nature, history, and society make of him, and if we change the environment man will also change.”<sup>31</sup> The calls to change mankind were especially appealing to the discontented Iranians under the Shah’s reform policies. Shari’ati held that modern man is capable of extraordinary accomplishments, especially in the fields of technology. Due to the growing inter-connectedness of the world, Shari’ati argued that the free-thinkers of the world’s societies could become more aware of their society’s position in regards to the other, more developed nations and, in conclusion, could skip a few cycles in historical development. According to this theory, he writes, “we are now witnessing societies which were tent-dwellers or slaves...in Asia, Africa, and Latin America...but suddenly, by revolting against history, they leaped to the bourgeoisie stage.”<sup>32</sup> Men could now be the shapers of their own societies, based on their exposure and knowledge of sociology, political philosophies and governance, and could therefore bring rapid change to the societies in which they lived.

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<sup>30</sup> Ali Shari’ati, *Man and Islam*, trans. by Dr. Fatollah Marjani (Free Islamic Lit, Inc.: Houston, Texas, 1981), 48.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

This jump in historical cycle available to the various colonial societies altered the course of development seen in most Western countries. Iranian society, however, was not ready for the rapid modernization caused by the injection of Western ideas and petrodollars. Instead, Shari'ati argued that Iranians needed a much more gradual approach to modernization with more representation in the political process. He encouraged Iranians to realize this goal.

At this point man enters the stage of "Ithar;" a word that does not exist in any other language. Here, man chooses someone else over himself; namely, a man sacrifices himself for others. It is obvious that from among the two deaths - another person's and his own - he has chosen his own death. . . . Thus every man can free himself from the last prison [of self] - which is frightening and contains invisible walls - through the power of Ithar. It is a love which, beyond rationality and logic, invites us to negate and rebel against ourselves in order to work towards a goal or for the sake of others. It is in this stage that a free man is born, and this is the most exalting level of an Ensan. . . . in order to free himself from the prison of his self, as RadhaKrishnan states, 'He needs religion and love.'<sup>33</sup>

He argued that humanity can free itself from the current social order in which it lives. Clearly, such an influential and enticing argument would appeal to the traditional Iranian workers who were pushed out of their jobs due to the rapid introduction of Western industries and technologies in Iran. By articulating the inherent ability to overcome obstacles, to risk their well-being, and to ultimately achieve the idealized state of "Ensaniat," or humanity, anti-Shah Iranians were encouraged to take charge of their situation and become an "Ensan." Axworthy notes that, while not necessarily a Marxist, Shari'ati certainly created a revolutionary mold for the idiosyncratic

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<sup>33</sup> Shari'ati, 62. n.17. The word "Ithar" comes from the root "Thar" (blood). "Ihtar" literally means "excessive generosity," to the extent of sacrificing oneself for a cause. "Ensan" means a state of humanity that is achieved, contrasting to the term "Bashar." Though both words are found in the Qur'an, "Bashar" refers to the physical makeup of man while "Ensan" is an enigmatic understanding of man that has a special definition and cannot be repeated by any other being in nature. Achieving "Ensan," as described by Shari'ati, is the ultimate goal of humanity.

Shi'a doctrine in a comparably Marxist model. Imprisoned by the Shah in 1972 for his rhetoric, Shari'ati was eventually released in 1975, but was kept under house arrest until permitted to leave the country for England, where he died in 1977. The alleged cause of death was a heart attack, although the always suspicious Iranian subconscious attributed his death to murder by SAVAK, the Shah's security force.<sup>34</sup>

The growing number of economically destitute Iranians were highly receptive to the ideologies established by men like Al-e-Ahmad and Shari'ati. However, it is important to remember that no historical events occur in a vacuum; these ideologies fused together with the growing religious movement to bring about the end of the Shah's regime in 1979. Mangol Bayat-Philipp, a history professor at Harvard University writing prior to the upheaval beginning in 1978, argues that Shari'ati's message is unique, for it "touches the raw nerve of some of those profoundly pious youths who are so eager to become 'modern,' and yet remain faithful to their traditional system of values and beliefs."<sup>35</sup> Shari'ati criticized the existing *ulama*, accusing them of limiting the application of Islam to exclude its laws from all aspects of society. Bayat-Philipp writes, "Islam...is an ideology for a social revolution. . . . [Shari'ati] sees renovated faith as part of the complete regeneration of society; whereas present conformism he scornfully rejects as only the symbol of general stagnation."<sup>36</sup> This renewed understanding of Islam was facilitated by Ayatollah Khomeini, the first leader of the Islamic Republic established in 1979. Perhaps the Shah's government did not understand the highly organized mosque network that supported Khomeini's rise to power. Maybe these government officials did not believe that the clerics, after

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<sup>34</sup> Axworthy, 255.

<sup>35</sup> Bayat-Philipp, Mangol, *Shi'ism in Contemporary Iranian Politics: The Case of Ali Shari'ati*, ed. Elie Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim (London: Frank Cass & Company Limited, 1980), 156.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-3.

decades of asserting the incivility and backwardness of the *ulama*, were even capable of mounting a serious resistance movement. They were wrong. With the proper economic stimuli, a soaring level of distrust in the government, and a defeated intellectual movement, the mosque network proved to be astonishingly efficient in distributing information, galvanizing resistance, and inciting demonstrations against the Shah. The multi-faceted opposition movement consisted of several factions, all vying for different concessions from the Shah. Ayatollah Khomeini, a relatively unknown cleric, emerged as the unlikely candidate around whom the opposition united.

## **PART II - THE RISE OF KHOMEINI: RESURGENT SHIISM**

### **Theological Origins: The Invocation of Shi'a Doctrine**

The imposition of a government directed under the auspices of Islam dramatically altered the balance of power in the Middle East. How did Ayatollah Khomeini emerge to overcome the strong influence of the West, notably the United States, and come to rule the new Islamic Republic? The vastly modernizing and Westernizing society created under the Shah sharply contrasted with everything for which the new Republic stood, particularly the liberalization of women and the reliance upon outside powers (e.g. the United States) for economic and military support. The religious character and composition of Iran is important to understand in order to comprehend the effectiveness of Khomeini's sermons on the necessity of Islamic governance to counter the Shah's reign.

The Shi'a doctrine developed differently than the Sunni during the origins of Islam in the seventh century due to disagreements in understanding the nature of succession of the Prophet

Muhammad's Caliphate.<sup>37</sup> Ali ibn Abi Talib was elected the fourth Caliph of Islam in 652 AD, but he was murdered in 661 by rivals as he entered the mosque at Kufa to pray. While the Sunnis (which often translates as Orthodox Muslims) believed in the community selection or election of the next Caliph after Ali's murder, a minority group of thinkers instead supported the notion of hereditary spiritual leadership known as the *Imamate*. "The Imam is recipient of spiritual and political pre-eminence by virtue of possessing special grace, miraculous power and special knowledge."<sup>38</sup> These thinkers, the founders of Shi'a doctrine, believed that Ali had an absolute right to spiritual leadership which, after his murder, was inherited by his sons. Therefore, the Shi'a believed that Ali was not the fourth Caliph but, rather, the first Imam. Shi'a Muslims are a prominent minority, consisting of just about ten percent of the world's Muslims.<sup>39</sup> However, a large concentration of Shi'a Muslims constitute the Iranian and Iraqi populations, making them unique among the other Muslim countries in which Sunni Muslims dominate.

Another significant aspect of Shi'a doctrine utilized by the revolutionary forces is the theme of martyrdom. Hussain, the last surviving son of Ali, and his supporters advocated a hereditary succession to the Caliphate. Hussain and his six hundred followers were besieged by a much larger Umayyad force (those who supported the election of political leaders to the Caliphate) of 6,000 men at Kerbala in 680. Hussain and his followers were slaughtered, and their martyrdom was a significant component to the establishment of Shi'a Islam. "The day of Kerbala, the 10th day of the month of Muharram, is known as Ashura. . . . Among the Shi'a it is

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<sup>37</sup> Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Islam* (London: New Internationalist Publications, Ltd., 2004), 60. The caliphate refers to Islam's first system of government and political unity in the Muslim *Ummah*, or community. The caliph, or successor, is the leader of the caliphate.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

a day of mourning and commemoration when certain groups parade the streets mortifying themselves with self-inflicted wounds as an expression of guilt for having abandoned Imam Hussain in his hour of need.”<sup>40</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini capitalized on these Shi’a traditions during the revolutionary movement. Indeed, in a declaration issued on October 31, 1971, Khomeini stated that “the greatest disaster that befell Islam was the usurpation of rule by Mu’awiya from ‘Ali (upon whom be peace), which caused the system of rule to lose its Islamic character entirely and to be replaced by a monarchical regime.”<sup>41</sup> By invoking the massacre at Kerbala and the duty of honoring the martyrdom of Ali, he galvanized support amongst both the religious and secular components of the opposition to topple the Shah, who he depicts as the last remaining vestiges of the initial corruption of Islam.

Before the Revolution, however, Khomeini dedicated his attention to developing the idea of an Islamic state. While always an advocate of the infallibility of Islam, he did not apply these concepts to government until his banishment from the country in 1963. *Islamic Government* was the best known of Khomeini’s works. Published in Najaf, Iraq in early 1970, it originated from a series of lectures that were recorded and transcribed by a student. A primary component of his arguments is that the *fuqaha* (religious scholars) have long been absent from holding any kind of executive power in Muslim countries which has, consequently, contributed to the decline of the preeminence of Islam in these lands.<sup>42</sup> He begins by acknowledging that “Islamic government does not correspond to any of the existing forms of government.” Yet, more importantly, was that “in Islam the legislative power and competence to establish laws belongs exclusively to God

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*, trans. Hamid Algar (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul PLC, 1981), 200.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 55.

Almighty.”<sup>43</sup> He attacked the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States of America as representatives of governments that exist to pursue policies contrary to the benefit of their people; according to Khomeini, their decisions were solely self-benefitting to the leaders of these governments. He thought that both the communist and capitalist models were condemnable because both do not utilize the laws of Islam.

“It is the duty of the Imams and the just *fuqaha* to use government institutions to execute divine law, establish the just Islamic order, and serve mankind.<sup>44</sup> Khomeini continued, advocating that “blood must sometimes be shed,” invoking the legacies of the martyr Ali and his son, Imam Hussain. “This duty is particularly important under the present circumstances, for the imperialists, the oppressive and treacherous rulers, the Jews, the Christians, and materialists are all attempting to distort the truths of Islam and lead the Muslims astray.”<sup>45</sup> He also outlined instructions for his students in madrasas in cities such as Qom, Tabriz, and Tehran, to follow in their attempts to address the grievances of these misinformed governments. “You, the younger generation in the religious institution, must come fully to life and keep the cause of God alive. Develop and refine your thinking, and lay aside your concern with the minutiae and subtleties of the religious sciences, because that kind of concentration on petty detail has kept many of us from performing our more important duties.”<sup>46</sup> By compelling the younger religious students to act by resurrecting Shi’a origins, and by reaffirming the idea that “blood must sometimes be shed,” he was advocating for the violent overthrow of the Shah. The Ayatollah’s bold

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 128.

declamations are significant. It is important to note his advice to “lay aside your concern...on petty detail[s].” Khomeini essentially stated that any differences in religious interpretations were inconsequential so long as the primary obstacle to progress, the Shah, remained in power. The Ayatollah’s strategy of galvanizing support from diverse elements against the Shah would become an extremely effective one as the revolutionary fervor spread during the late 1970s.

Islam is unique amongst the world’s major monotheistic religions in the fact that it ascribes laws and codes to govern the social and political spheres of life in addition to the religious: “It covers business deals and banking, hygiene, marriage and divorce, defense and taxes, penal codes, even family relationships.”<sup>47</sup> The Shah’s reforms fundamentally uprooted several of these established cultural Iranian traditions, many of which drew upon Islam as their foundation. Particularly, the traditional role of Islam in the *bazaaris*’ business transactions became increasingly removed from the new Iranian economic sector because of the rapid imposition of foreign investment and new industrialization. Many conservative, traditional Iranian thinkers believed that the reforms of the Shah directly threatened the very nature of Islam itself. This very real threat mobilized many Iranian religious leaders, students, and scholars, yet they were often brutally repressed by the Shah through SAVAK.

SAVAK’s reputation of terror was not confined within Iran. Amnesty International’s (AI) Annual Report for 1974/1975 includes accounts of political repression and human rights violations worldwide. The report states, “the Shah of Iran retains his benevolent image despite the highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of

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<sup>47</sup> Wright, *In the Name of God*, 46.

torture which is beyond belief.”<sup>48</sup> In the Middle East particularly, it states that “the greatest causes of concern in the area [the Middle East] are the continuing high incidence of official and unofficial executions in Iran.”<sup>49</sup> SAVAK regularly tortured and murdered both secular and religious outspoken critics of the Shah’s reign throughout the 1970s. Politically, the Iranians could do nothing to change the policies of the Shah. As the economic situation spiraled out of control in the late 1970s, however, not even the repression tactics of SAVAK could subdue the massive numbers of disaffected Iranians. As the economic realities became more dire, the moderate elements of the opposition became inexorably drawn to the radical, Shi’a fundamentalist teachings of the Ayatollah.

### **Khomeini Before Exile**

Robin Wright uncovers the background and motives of the first leader of the Islamic Republic in her book *In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade*. Ruhollah Khomeini was born in 1902 into a religiously powerful family: “both his grandfather and his father...were mullahs ‘of the Musavis’...a family line that descended from the Prophet Mohammad. Such noble heritage entitled them to wear a black turban, rather than the white headgear of an ordinary cleric.”<sup>50</sup> This black turban would eventually serve as a rallying sign to the dissenting masses. One must remember that during the hectic pre-revolutionary and revolutionary years, the Ayatollah was not even in the country, for he was exiled in 1963 after publicly denouncing the Shah. How, then, was he able to amass such an organized and focused opposition force against the Shah’s reign?

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<sup>48</sup> “Amnesty International Annual Report 1974/5,” September, 1975. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/POL10/001/1975/en/5e0e8396-d196-4382-a6b5-7f531d6a773c/pol100011975eng.pdf>, 8 (accessed December 9, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, *In the Name of God*, 41.

Khomeini was relatively unknown throughout a significant segment of his lifetime, even during the Revolutionary years. As a teacher at the seminary in Qom, he was incredibly influential to his students, but this sphere of influence did not expand much beyond the boundaries of the seminary. Yet his activities against Iran's path towards modernization date back to the first Pahlavi Shah. "By the 1930s, as Reza Shah was in the full throes of modernization, Khomeini had quietly but methodically begun campaigning to preserve beliefs long central to the Iranian way of life."<sup>51</sup> He underwent a rigorous education in ethics and philosophy in Qom. Axworthy notes that he was unconventional when compared to the other Iranian mullahs. His interests in poetry and mysticism was frowned upon by more conservative mullahs.<sup>52</sup> However, these idiosyncrasies did not diminish his following. "Khomeini had a strong sense of himself as well as the dignity of the ulema as a class."<sup>53</sup> This purpose and conviction certainly inspired loyalty amongst his students in Qom in his early years as a teacher. These initial years spent reading, writing, and teaching allowed Khomeini to formulate an ideology supported by an intellectual background. By the time he was made an Ayatollah in 1961, he had already established an intensely loyal, if at this point small, base of support.

Many of the far-reaching reforms of the White Revolution were very Western-inspired and, hence, un-Islamic in nature. In Khomeini's mind, the Shah's platform posed a direct threat to the cultural and religious foundation of Iran. Even the seemingly smaller concerns, such as the banning of the veil and the adoption of Western dress, were troubling for Khomeini. In a series of sermons delivered from the Faziya Madrasa in Qom in March, 1963, the Ayatollah denounced

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>52</sup> Axworthy, 244.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 245.

these reforms, emphasizing that the real purpose behind the White Revolution was to increase the Shah's own wealth and to continue to intensify Iran's subordinate relationship with the United States. Indeed, during the celebrations marking the Iranian New Year in March, 1963, Khomeini issued a *fatwa* (religious promulgation) that condemned the White Revolution which inspired demonstrations of religious students across the country.<sup>54</sup>

Always fearful for potential enemies, the Shah did not want to let Khomeini's public outcry against his will go unchecked; the Shah's paranoia over power-consolidation was particularly acute in the beginning years of the White Revolution. Khomeini's *fatwa* and the objections of the other radical *ulama* threatened to prevent his desires to bring Iran to Western modernity. The Shah responded by sending troops to Qom to suppress the demonstrations and to regain control of the city. Several students were killed and the madrasa was ransacked by the police in punishment for Khomeini's excesses. On April 3, 1963, forty days after their deaths, Khomeini issued a declaration in commemoration of these students in which he questioned why they were killed.

Our crime was defending the laws of Islam and the independence of Iran. It is because of our defense of Islam that we have been humiliated and brought to expect imprisonment, torture, and execution. Let this tyrannical regime perform whatever inhuman deed it wishes - let it break the arms and legs of our young men, let it chase our wounded from the hospitals, let it threaten us with death and the violation of our honor, let it destroy the institutions of religious learning, let it expel the doves of this Islamic sanctuary from their nests!<sup>55</sup>

He goes further, challenging the intentions and motives of the Pahlavi government. "I have repeatedly pointed out that the government has evil intentions. . . . the Ministry of Justice has

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<sup>54</sup> Wright, *In the Name of God*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> Imam Khomeini, 174.

made clear its opposition to the ordinances of Islam by. . . the abolition of the requirement that judges be Muslim and male; henceforth, Jews, Christians, and the enemies of Islam and the Muslims are to decide on affairs concerning the honor and person of the Muslims.”<sup>56</sup> He attempted to establish solidarity amongst others who feel oppressed due to the Shah’s reign and, indeed, to those proponents of Islam abroad, by advocating demonstrations to remember these victims at Qom. “If they are not prevented by the agents of the government, they should hold ceremonies of mourning and curse those responsible for these atrocities.”<sup>57</sup>

One of the Ayatollah’s most famous declarations in the pre-revolutionary period was actually delivered at the Faziya Madrasa on June 3, 1963 in which he dictated, in highly explicit language, his displeasure with the Shah’s regime. Referencing the murder of religious students, the sacking of the madrasa, and the subsequent destruction of the Qur’ans, Khomeini is lead to conclude “that this regime also has a more basic aim: they are fundamentally opposed to Islam itself and the existence of the religious class.”<sup>58</sup> This infamous sermon was most notable for its direct attack on the character of the Shah himself. He addressed the Shah’s courtship with the West, arguing that the material wealth gained from his reforms was highly superficial and purported that Washington was using the Shah for its own benefits. He invoked a historical precedence established by the Shah’s father, Reza Shah, reminding the public that the first Pahalvi was forced to abdicate the throne to his son by the Allied powers near the end of the second World War due to his amicable relationship with the Germans. Khomeini urged the Shah to recognize his father’s mistakes and to abandon his dependence on the West.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 177.

Shah, I don't wish the same to happen to you; I don't want you to become like your father. Listen to my advice, listen to the *'ulama* of Islam. . . . You miserable wretch, forty-five years of your life have passed; isn't it time for you to think and reflect a little, to ponder about where all this is leading you, to learn a lesson from the experience of your father. . . . Why do you speak without thinking? Are the religious scholars really some form of impure animal? If they are impure animals, why do the people kiss their hands? Why do they regard the very water they drink as blessed? Are we really impure animals? I hope to God that you did not have in mind the *'ulama* and the religious scholars when you said, 'The reactionaries are like an impure animal,' because if you did, it will be difficult for us to tolerate you much longer, and you will find yourself in a predicament. You won't be able to go on living; the nation will not allow you to continue this way. . . . I feel anxiety and sorrow at the state of Iran, at the state of our ruined country, at the state this cabinet, at the state of those running our government. I pray to God Almighty that He remedy our affairs.<sup>59</sup>

Until this declamation, no one dared to speak against the Shah's oppressive regime, especially with such bold denunciation of his character, for fear of violent retaliation. The Ayatollah capitalized on the growing repression felt by the *ulama*. He hoped to spur revolt amongst the religious class against the Shah's oppressive rule. The significance of the June 3 sermon is also demonstrated by its inherent foreshadowing. By the end of the 1970s, the Shah would come to find himself in a very serious "predicament" indeed. Khomeini's calls to the "commanders of the great Iranian army, its respectable officers, and its noble members" to join him for the "salvation of Islam and Iran" were unacceptable to the Shah; Khomeini and some of his key supporters were arrested on June 4, 1963.

After spending ten months in prison, Khomeini was sentenced to exile. His aggressive discourse and contrary viewpoints could not be allowed to circulate amongst the masses, considering the Shah's goals of Westernizing Iran and loosening the grip older traditions and the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 179-80.

*ulama* had on the nation. Khomeini's exile, first in Turkey, then Iraq, and ending in Paris, would last for over a decade until his triumphant return to Iran in February 1979. Wright offers an interesting opinion when she states that it was the Shah who, in a sense, "made" Khomeini. Throughout his life thus far, he had often been eclipsed by other religious and secular leaders of greater scholarship or with more numerous followers. "First, his initial arrest created public appeal and drew attention to his agenda. Second, the Shah simultaneously alienated even those clergy who disagreed with Khomeini by ignoring the traditional internal balance of power [by exiling him]."<sup>60</sup> By sentencing him to exile, the Shah inadvertently ascribed a certain celebrity status to Khomeini. The Shah's censorship worked against him, for Khomeini's exile established a degree of mystique around this unknown Ayatollah, making him a controversial and alluring figure.

While physically exiled from the country, Khomeini was never ideologically far from the emerging revolutionary scene in Iran. New technological inventions, like the tape recorder, allowed his messages and sermons to be smuggled from Iraq into Iran. His continued work while abroad allowed him to build his support base and sharpen the general discontent with the Shah into a detailed reproach of his policies. His capacity as a Shi'a jurist enabled him to develop a practical and accessible platform on which to appeal to the ordinary Iranians. In this endeavor, the intricacies of Shi'a doctrine proved particularly useful. Political scientist Fred Halliday argues that there were two notable ideological themes in popular Shiism which were exploited for political advantage. The first was the idea of martyrdom, as evidenced in the passion plays celebrated every year in Iran commemorating the death of Hussain in the seventh century.

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<sup>60</sup> Wright, *In the Name of God*, 51.

The second more significant theme was the Shi'a belief that at some point in the future the Twelfth Imam would descend to the earth, creating a just society under which all would prosper. This prospect of a perfect society galvanized support amongst Iranians who hoped that the Islamic Revolution would indeed fulfill this prophecy. Yet Khomeini, ever the cunning politician, knew that he needed total support of the masses in order to bring the Shah's reign to an end; ambiguous goals would thus be necessary to ensure over-arching support. While advocating for a government run under the auspices of Islam, "he realized that his greatest asset was to have nothing to do with the Shah's regime, and he kept his intentions for the future regime as vague as possible in order to maximize political support."<sup>61</sup> Halliday has uncovered a critical component of Khomeini's character, going so far as praising him as the "epitome of a charismatic leader." By never promising specifics, he protected himself from future attacks after the implementation of the Islamic Republic. With the unintentional assistance of the Shah, Khomeini had begun to lay the groundwork for his ultimate takeover of Iran: he had emerged as the mouthpiece for the discontented, conservative mullahs. By the mid-1970s, however, the Shah had certainly created many more enemies for himself than this one segment of Iranian society. Each segment had its own leaders, representatives, and demands. How did Khomeini, who was in exile throughout the Shah's rapid decline, emerge as the unifying figure of the entire opposition movement?

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<sup>61</sup> Fred Halliday, "The Iranian Revolution: Uneven Development and Religious Pluralism," *Journal of International Affairs* 36, no. 2 (1 September 1982): 200, *Academic Search Premier*; EBSCOhost (accessed 17 August, 2011).

### **PART III - THE SPARK: 1977-1979**

#### **Savak Brutality**

Despite the growing dissent fueled by the exiled Khomeini in the late 1960s, public demonstrations against the Shah were limited. Political participation for the opposition was non-existent due in large part to the brutal repression of the Shah's secret police force, SAVAK. SAVAK's repression underscored the notion that, politically, those who opposed the Shah could do nothing to affect the regime. In an attempt to quell the emerging unrest in 1977 and to appease the vaunted human rights program of the new U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, the Shah allegedly changed SAVAK's policies to discontinue the use of torture. The ambiguity and arbitrary natures of the changes fooled no one: "every Iranian. . . from the lowest paid civil servant to the highest ranking parliamentarian. . . knew that the security services were not truly under the control of the government officials supervising them, but actually doing the Shah's bidding. . . . [they were] beyond the law."<sup>62</sup> Not all accusations of SAVAK treachery were valid; several instances were fabricated and used as anti-Shah propaganda. Still, SAVAK culpability was resurrected continuously throughout the Revolution, for the organization was guilty of several counts of human rights violations.

Amnesty International's 1974/1975 Annual Report provides insight on some of these political prisoners who suffered under SAVAK brutality. In April 1975, AI reported that nine political prisoners were shot while allegedly trying to escape: "The men were known to have been among 114 political prisoners who had been moved to Evin prison at the beginning of March 1975, and reports of their torture had reached AI from that time."<sup>63</sup> AI cites the total

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<sup>62</sup> Stempel, 102.

<sup>63</sup> "Amnesty International 1974/5 Annual Report," 128.

number of political prisoners reported throughout the year “to be anything from 25,000 to 100,000 but AI is not able to make any reliable estimate.”<sup>64</sup> In a Special Report printed in 1980 by *The Nation*, a weekly magazine in the United States, the abuses of SAVAK were brought to light in terrifying clarity. The unveiling of documents and photographs taken from SAVAK’s files after the Islamic takeover revealed the abuses of SAVAK and shook the United States’ support of their deposed ally. The reporter Reza Baraheni recounts his journeys to some of the hidden torture chambers that were built adjacent to the University of Tehran: “Some of the torture instruments were still there when I visited two of those stations on the second day of the revolution. A mysterious interrogation center right in the heart of the city had underground canals lit with dim electric lights leading to cells in which rotting pieces of human flesh were still clinging to the torture instruments.”<sup>65</sup>

Baraheni provides more insight into the deaths of the political prisoners in the Evin prison for, in the autopsy reports in possession of *The Nation*, there is an account of the death of fifty prominent political prisoners in April 1975, a much larger statistic than the nine that was conservatively estimated by Amnesty International five years prior. These reports “ascribe death to bullet wounds sustained while the victims were attempting to ‘escape.’ And most of these bullet wounds are found in the chest and forehead - which would lead an independent observer to conclude that these people were executed before a firing squad.”<sup>66</sup> Baraheni continues, addressing the Shah’s poor attempts to cover up SAVAK’s activities:

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>65</sup> Reza Baraheni, “The SAVAK Documents,” *The Nation*, February 23, 1980, 198, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed 23 October, 2011).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.,199.

In a recent TV interview with David Frost, the deposed Shah of Iran claimed that he had not been aware of the torture of political prisoners in his country during his long reign. Since he had no knowledge of torture, he plaintively asked, how could he be held culpable for what went on in his prisons? But the Shah immediately contradicted himself by saying that his henchmen stopped torturing people in 1976. By this admission, the Shah is responsible for more than thirty years of systematic torture.<sup>67</sup>

The Shah was unable to separate himself from the excesses of his security forces. As his grip on the nation spiraled out of control, his feeble attempts at conciliation with the opposition were seen as untrustworthy.

The Shah's abrupt change in policy can only be understood within the context of pervasive economic instability and the Shah's failure to address legitimate demands for greater political participation. After the OPEC embargo of 1973, the Iranian government increasingly lost control of the economy. Dizzying inflation and the subsequent job losses were felt particularly by the poor, though, on a smaller degree, by all sectors of Iranian society. "Rents were high for the middle-class engineers, managers, and professionals in Tehran, and those with a stake in new businesses felt the impact of deflation acutely."<sup>68</sup> Academic Mohsen Milani draws a parallel to the French Revolution, arguing that it was poor economic planning that precipitated the coming revolution. "The infusion of the petrodollar had enlarged the size of the entrepreneur class and the state bureaucracy to such an extent that effective control of them had become an impossible task."<sup>69</sup> Milani concludes that the Shah's remedies to control the economic crisis were more political in nature rather than based on sound economic reasoning.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>68</sup> Axworthy, 248.

<sup>69</sup> Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 166.

There was a three-fold effect of this “populist turn” of the government’s intervention in economic affairs: “to enlarge the regime’s popular base of support by granting concessions to the lower classes and distributing the oil wealth more equitably; to lower rampant inflation; and to exculpate the regime of any wrongdoing by identifying the merchants, the shopkeepers, and the industrialists as the principal cause of the economic chaos.”<sup>70</sup> Demonizing these shopkeepers and the *bazaar* turned out to be highly ineffective. Funded by the *bazaaris*, Khomeini and his network of mullahs disseminated copies of his sermons throughout the mosques in the *bazaars*. The discontented urban poor, with no means to politically advocate for their beliefs, were relegated to these mosques and further exposed to Khomeini’s revolutionary viewpoints. The Shah’s attempt to cast blame on these mosque-goers therefore seemed petty, a ploy by a desperate autocrat who was rapidly losing control of his country.

### **Qom & Tabriz: Catalyst to Revolution**

Stempel asserts that the riots in Qom and Tabriz in early 1978 signified the beginning of the Revolution. These riots represented a fusion of the various facets of the opposition movement into a unified entity directed by the *ulama*. A newspaper article published on January 5 by Etlela’at, Iran’s oldest newspaper which was under strict censorship by the Shah’s government, attacked Khomeini, suggesting that he was a homosexual and branding him as the instigator of the “anti-national” riots in Qom after his famous declaration in June, 1963. On January 7, 1978, enraged Shiite religious leaders instigated demonstrations against the government. After a strong anti-government sermon, “approximately 5,000 people left. . . the main mosque [in Qom]. . . to

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 167.

march towards Ayatollah Shariatmadari's home."<sup>71</sup> Shariatmadari was a moderate and often disagreed with Khomeini, yet his calls for restraint and caution when dealing with the Shah were increasingly ignored. When the police were called to break up the demonstration in Qom, the officer in charge "ordered his men to fire their weapons."<sup>72</sup> A significant aspect of the revolution, concerning the accuracy of casualty reports, manifested itself in this riot. While the opposition leaders claimed thirty killed and over 200 injured, the official Par News Agency account offered that six died, including one child. Whose accounts were to be accepted as accurate? "More importantly, two mullahs were among the dead and their blood-soaked turbans were posted above the entry gate to the main mosque."<sup>73</sup> Thus, the martyrdom of Shi'a doctrine was beginning to be realized. The death of the mullahs gave the religious members of the opposition a "rallying cry" for the masses.

As dictated by Shiite custom, mourning ceremonies are held forty days after a death occurs. In accordance with this custom, demonstrations for the "martyrs of Qom" (a title given by the opposition) were scheduled throughout Iran for February 18. Khomeini, still in exile in Najaf, Iraq, issued a declaration entitled *In Commemoration of the First Martyrs of the Revolution* to honor those victims. Khomeini attributed these deaths not to the police who fired on the martyrs, but to the Shah himself. "Do you think it is the police chief of Qom who does these things? Don't say it is the police who do these things; it is the Shah! The Shah personally gives the orders and tells them to kill. . . . It is the Shah who determines everything; he is the real

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<sup>71</sup> Stempel, 96.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

criminal.”<sup>74</sup> It is doubtful that the Shah specifically ordered the police to shoot down these protestors in Qom. Nevertheless, overwhelming anger and distrust of the Shah’s regime had begun to seriously manifest itself, and Khomeini’s explanations were well-received because the Shah’s policies were viewed as increasingly arbitrary and illogical. Khomeini continued, attacking the prevalence of outside forces in Iranian affairs.

Before it was the British that brought us misfortune; now it is the Soviets on the one hand, and the Americans on the other. All our miseries are caused by those imperialists; if they would stop protecting the Iranian government, the people would skin them alive. . . . That is our problem - everything in our treasury has to be emptied into the pockets of America, and if there is any slight remainder, it has to go to the Shah and his gang. They buy themselves villas abroad and stuff their bank accounts with the people’s money, while the nation subsists in poverty.<sup>75</sup>

Here, Khomeini called on the large number of disillusioned Iranians in order to build popular support for his plans for a new Iran. By blaming the nation’s problems on America and the Shah’s repressive and incompetent leadership, he ensured that his message would resonate throughout the country. Even Iranians who traditionally opposed or were otherwise apathetic towards the *ulama* soon became enthralled with their revolutionary ideas. The opposition had begun to mobilize, spurred on by the persuasive Ayatollah.

The very day that Khomeini offered this commemoration, another notable riot occurred. Tabriz, a city particularly affected by the recession, witnessed the next round of casualties on the road to revolution. The provincial government of the city shut down the mosques on the day of the protests marking the fortieth day commemoration of the Qom riots. This incited angry demonstrations outside the mosques in the *bazaar* where the protestors demanded entry. Again,

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<sup>74</sup> Imam Khomeini, 218.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-2.

details concerning the origins of the day's violence are unsubstantiated.<sup>76</sup> Regardless, when the rioting broke out, it took on a markedly new shape which foreshadowed the events to come.

This was the first conflagration to mobilize the masses of youth and urban poor for economic as well as religious reasons. . . . The pattern of violence - destruction of banks, restaurants, liquor stores, hairdressing establishments, and government buildings, all symbols of modern Iran - strongly suggests both efficient leadership and a very conservative religious orientation among the rioters.<sup>77</sup>

By rousing the urban poor into action, it is clear that, even in these initial stages of the revolutionary uprising, Khomeini's message had spread beyond a few radical *ulama*. The various social and economic classes that would come to participate in the revolution demonstrates the universal nature of the revolution; it was not simply a coup initiated by a few influential radicals. Another key component of these riots at Qom and Tabriz was the government's complete failure in handling the situation in a peaceful manner. The Shah's police forces were woefully unprepared for riot control. Their mismanagement of the riots only escalated the violence. The government claimed that "Islamic Marxists" and "foreign elements" were responsible for these riots; again, this weak attempt to appoint the blame only emboldened the opposition.

The Shah was forced to respond to the emerging discontent by attempting to appease these resistors through reforming military court procedures and releasing some political prisoners. Clearly, the Shah wanted to compromise with the moderate elements of the opposition in order to isolate the extremist segments. But these concessions were coming too late. Indeed,

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<sup>76</sup> Stempel, 98. "According to one story, the violence started when a police major shot a student in the chest during an argument. Some officials maintain that mourners had guns beneath their robes and deliberately provoked a demonstration."

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

these reforms backfired, for the concessions angered the base of the Shah's loyal supporters as well. They thought that opening politics to the opposition was both dangerous and an insult to their years of loyalty to the Pahlavi dynasty. Stempel documents the complaints of one of these pro-Shah government officials: "Are we, the technocrats who built modern Iran, now to be sacrificed to its critics? The government has proved incapable of restoring order - wouldn't the best policy be to tighten up the government? We know who these radicals are. They are Mossadeqists [referencing supporters of the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq overthrown by the CIA in 1953], religious fanatics, and leftists bent on destroying us. They should be destroyed, not appeased."<sup>78</sup> After Prime Minister Amouzegar's insistence on more political participation, the Shah eventually acquiesced. Amouzegar replaced the Resurgence Party's secretary general, Mohammad Baheri, and personally directed the party's policies beginning in December, 1977. This major upheaval confused the traditionally present, if weak, support of the Resurgence Party. Baheri's surrender to the government further demonized the Shah in the eyes of the Iranians. By accepting the power from the Shah, the Resurgence Party's credibility was destroyed. The loss of the Resurgence Party disenchanted even the most idealistic political participants who still believed that the Shah's government would legitimately acknowledge their concerns.<sup>79</sup>

Then, there was the tragedy of Abadan. On August 19, 1978, the Rex Cinema in Abadan was burned to the ground, killing 430 people. The nature of the blaze indicates that it was not accidental: "An official investigation showed the walls had been soaked with gasoline and the fire started with a battery-operated timing device. The one entry and exit door had been locked,

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 102.

and police and fire-fighting equipment were late in arriving. An overwhelming majority of the people inside the burning building died very quickly from suffocation, not from burns.”<sup>80</sup> The opposition claimed the blaze was started by SAVAK in order to kill Mujahidin (literally “people doing *jihad*”) who were watching the film, while the government claimed radical Islamists were to blame. Due to the escalating crisis in Iran, an official investigation was never fully conducted, yet the government’s explanations certainly seem dubious at best. Stempel reports that the police station, located a mere 300 yards from the Cinema, had taken “almost an hour to send anyone around to check. Two hours after the incident was first reported the city fire brigade arrived, and the more modern fire fighting equipment available through the nearby National Iranian Oil Company refinery was never even requested.”<sup>81</sup> These details, coupled with the existing depth of mistrust in the opposition, enabled many to connect this event to SAVAK.

### **Collapse: Black Friday**

Echoing his pattern of ineffectual decision-making, the Shah made a serious mistake when he underestimated the strength of the religious opposition. In early 1978, the Shah approved two newspaper articles that attacked Ayatollah Khomeini as “the symbol of black reaction, an agent of colonialism, and a traitor of non-Persian dissent.”<sup>82</sup> Demonstrations erupted in Qom in which police fired on students, killing several. Khomeini praised the strength, courage, and devotion of these martyrs from afar, encouraging the opposition to remain strong in their conviction and demonstrations against the Shah’s reign. The final tipping point, however,

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>82</sup> Milani, 191.

was yet to come. On September 8, now known as “Black Friday,” the police fired upon a largely peaceful gathering in Jaleh Square in the center of Tehran to protest the Shah’s imposition of martial law in late August. The moderate Ayatollah Shariatmadari counseled caution; he did not want direct confrontation with the Shah’s forces under the martial law situation in Tehran. These fears were echoed by National Front Leadership as well, for they did not want to lose their supporters to the Shah’s brutal repression tactics.<sup>83</sup> These fears did not sway the other opposition leaders, for the radical *ulama*, supported by Khomeini who was now in France, received the declaration from Khomeini himself to go forth and confront the government.

At 7:30 in the morning on Friday, September 8, the army commander present at Jaleh Square ordered the assembled protesters to disperse; they refused. “The army units at Jaleh Square let loose with several volleys, killing around 100 people in the initial fusillade...eyewitnesses confirmed that there was shooting from helicopter gunships.”<sup>84</sup> At the end of the day, several opposition leaders were taken into custody, including Mehdi Bazargan, the leader of the Liberation Movement which had ties to the National Front, and several Ayatollahs, only to be released two hours later.<sup>85</sup> These arbitrary arrests and immediate releases from prison further emphasize the inherent confusion in the Shah’s government. He simply did not know how to effectively confront the opposition in a way that would quell the rebellion. This was clearly evident in the weeks following the showdown at Jaleh square with the dissolution of the Resurgence Party on September 30. What little loyalists remained now had no formal political structure in order to mobilize support for the Shah. In the particularly volatile urban

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<sup>83</sup> Stempel, 121.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 122.

centers, the Liberation Movement, the Fedayeen (an early Islamic fundamentalist movement), and the Mujahidin soldiers were able to “propagandize striking workers and migrants from the hinterland...[while] the National Front concentrated on influencing members of the middle class to defect.”<sup>86</sup> The members of the blossoming Iranian middle class that was inducted by the Shah were now turning against him, joining the dissidents. Why? These educated dissidents could not politically engage the Shah and were, thus, unwillingly forced to join Khomeini’s supporters as the only alternative to bring change to Iran. As the opposition increased, both in numbers and diversity of opinion, a critical point must be established: while the entirety of opposition was unified in their resistance to the Shah for some reason or another, there were many facets of the opposition that were ambiguous in their attitudes towards Khomeini.

The opposition was now effectively unified under the direction of the *ulama*. Khomeini issued another condemnation of the military crackdown on the fortieth day anniversary of Black Friday, October 11, 1978. “Now that the sinister specter of military government has added its dark shadow to the darkness of monarchy and inflicted further misery on our deprived people...our country sits mourning without any protector.”<sup>87</sup> Axworthy comments on this tradition of a forty day mourning period between government atrocities, which would cyclically erupt in new protests as each period reached its end. “Like a great revolutionary lung,” he writes, “the demonstrations grew larger and more violent, with slogans like ‘death to the Shah.’”<sup>88</sup> Military leaders, several of them in senior ranking positions, began to desert. Indeed, several officers directed their forces not to interfere further with the demonstrations. Such degradation in

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>87</sup> Imam Khomeini, 239.

<sup>88</sup> Axworthy, 256.

the military forced Prime Minister Jafar Sharif-Emami to resign from his post. He was replaced by Gholam Reza Azhari, who served for the tumultuous last fourteen months of the Shah's reign.

On November 6, the Shah recognized the legitimacy of the uprising in a nationally televised speech in which he seemingly sympathized with the revolutionary forces. "Once again before the Iranian people I swear that I will not repeat the past mistakes and I assure you that previous mistakes, lawlessness, oppression, and corruption will not happen again. . . . I, too, have heard the voice of your Revolution."<sup>89</sup> His calls to prosecute the corrupt were acted upon by the Azhari government: "two days later, former Prime Minister (for 14 years) Hoveyda and 14 other major figures were arrested. . . includ[ing] the former chief of SAVAK, Nematollah Nassiri, [and] two former provincial governors."<sup>90</sup> He had hoped that these arrests would appease the masses and demonstrate his desire to purge corruption from his government. The arrests, in fact, had an opposite effect. Other loyal Pahlavi supporters were outraged with the Shah's decisions, leading many of his few remaining allies to abandon the Shah in disgust.

The demonstrations in late December 1978 showed a degree of unity and determination that shocked the Shah and his few remaining supporters: "In the crowd were men and women from all walks of life, young and old, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, students, teachers, professionals, the *bazaaris*, workers, government employees, and many more - a testimony to the multi-class essence of the revolutionary movement."<sup>91</sup> The Shah realized that fleeing the country was his only option and left on January 16, 1979. On February 1, Khomeini returned to Iran for

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<sup>89</sup> Milani, 212.

<sup>90</sup> Stempel, 138.

<sup>91</sup> Milani, 216.

the first time in more than fifteen years, welcomed by a sea of supporters at the Mehrabad Airport in Tehran. He gave thanks to the multiple classes that enabled this victory over the Shah:

You have accomplished the first step toward a complete victory by removing Muhammad Riza, the chief traitor, from the scene. . . . Our triumph will come when all forms of foreign control have been brought to an end and all roots of the monarchy have been plucked out of the soil of our land. . . . Victory has been attained by the unity of purpose not only of the Muslims, but also of the religious minorities, and by the unity of the religious leaders and the politicians. Unity of purpose is the secret of victory. Let us not lose this secret by permitting demons in human form to create dissension in our ranks.<sup>92</sup>

Khomeini understood that victory was still not complete so long as the few Shah supporters remained. Upon his return to Iran, Khomeini met with Mehdi Bazargan, a leading member of the National Front, to draft the Revolutionary Council which would eventually supplant the remaining vestiges of the Shah's monarchical government. Bazargan was eventually appointed as the first Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic.

During this planning stage, Khomeini acted as a cunning politician. He kept his promises for the new Islamic Republic purposefully vague, therefore guaranteeing support from the various factions of dissent. In many ways, the Iranian Revolution was a revolution *against* the Shah, not *for* Khomeini. "Among the secular and middle-class forces many hoped that once the Shah had gone they could deflect the movement away from its clerical patrons. This enabled such people to support the movement with appropriate optimism, but it represented an underestimation of the strength of the religious forces."<sup>93</sup> The *bazaaris*, for example, were a prime representation of the secular forces that became apprehensive bedfellows with the *ulama*.

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<sup>92</sup> Imam Khomeini, 252-3.

<sup>93</sup> Halliday, 197.

The explosive triangular relationship between the urban poor and the *bazaaris*, facilitated through the *ulama*, enabled an effective revolutionary association. The *ulama* were thus able to reach the growing urban poor through their *bazari* contacts in a way to address the secular concerns, leading Halliday to conclude that “the Iranian Revolution has more in common with other societies than the specifically religious dimension will permit.”<sup>94</sup> The undefined nature of Khomeini’s intentions, when revealed, would alienate many who enabled his rise to power.

#### **PART IV - ISLAMIC REPUBLIC REALIZED: 1979**

There was still much to be done before the Islamic Republic could be realized due in large part to the remnants of the Shah’s government. Previous National Front Leader, and prisoner under the Shah’s reign, Shapur Bakhtiar was announced Prime Minister by the Shah just days before his final exile from the country. Bakhtiar’s government was deemed illegal by Khomeini on his return from exile. Khomeini urged civil servants and soldiers in the military to abandon Bakhtiar and work solely for Khomeini and his appointees to the various ministerships. A small segment of the Imperial Guard, 800 of 8,000 soldiers, stood loyal to Bakhtiar when Khomeini’s forces took over two large military installations in Tehran on February 9. The following day, this military leadership surrendered, which caused an abrupt collapse of the armed forces. Bakhtiar disappeared, and Khomeini officially took over on February 12.<sup>95</sup>

On February 5, when Khomeini was confident that Bakhtiar would be overthrown, he appointed Mehdi Bazargan Prime Minister of the new Islamic Republic. With the help of Bazargan, Khomeini established Revolutionary Committees, or Komitehs, across Iran to

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>95</sup> Stempel, 173.

cooperate with military deserters, Tudeh party officials, and other opposition forces to attack the remaining vestiges of the Shah's government. In the initial stages of Khomeini's reign, it appeared that a balance might be struck between the more secular elements of the opposition forces and the *ulama*. This proved to be false. These Komitehs rounded up remaining Pahlavi supporters and SAVAK leaders, executing them without trial.

Khomeini orchestrated a bureaucracy that was thoroughly Islamic, which was especially clear in the creation of the twelve-member Council of the Guardians. Six theologians were appointed by Khomeini, and six by the Parliament, although this body had total veto power over the Parliament. This body was further superseded, for the real leadership was transferred to the *faqih*, or Supreme Jurisprudent, which consisted of three to five ayatollahs. The *faqih* was "all powerful. . . [it had] appointment powers...over the judiciary, the military and the Council of Guardians. . . [and] de facto veto power over candidates running for virtually any office and the right to dismiss the president."<sup>96</sup> Further, by monopolizing the judicial branch, Khomeini was able to reintroduce Shari'a Law as the fundamental legal system for the new Republic. Khomeini's autocratic wielding of power as the undisputed ruler of the opposition dashed the hopes of the secular and moderate facets of the opposition.

Milani states that there were five broad political groups in Iran vying for power after the ousting of the Shah: the secular/liberal nationalists, represented by the National Front; Islamic/liberal nationalists, represented by the Freedom Movement; the Islamic socialists, represented by the Mujahidin; the Shi'a Fundamentalists, represented by Khomeini and his advisors whom orchestrated the Islamic Republic; and the secular left, represented by the Marxists. Milani holds

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<sup>96</sup> Wright, *In the Name of God*, 73-4.

that Khomeini was “the personification of the Revolution, a mystical sage, a national hero, the savior of Iran and Islam. He was revered and idolized, at least in public, by fundamentalists, moderates, and leftists.”<sup>97</sup> The Ayatollah was therefore able to directly influence Bazargan. By wedding Bazargan (an ex-leader of the National Front) to the Islamic cause, Khomeini was able to essentially neutralize the secular/liberal nationalists. If Bazargan’s government attempted something against Khomeini’s blessing, he could easily have him removed just as he had Bakhitar removed before him.<sup>98</sup>

The Ayatollah dominated the opposition groups, allowing the radical outlook of his close allies to establish the new Republic and to control the drafting of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic in December 1979. The Constitution dealt primarily with what the *ulama* believed were the economic injustices perpetrated by the Shah’s modernization policies. They desired to remove the vestiges of capitalism from Iran, and to denounce those Shi’ia jurists who attempted to justify the wealth that was accumulated during the reign of the Shah. Karbassian writes about the short-sightedness of these policies. “The left-leaning Islamists, however, sought to destroy what they considered to be remnants of trade capitalism...[instead] aspiring to establish a classless socialist Islamic state.”<sup>99</sup> The Constitution determined that “all property that had been acquired by ‘un-Islamic’ means was declared illegal and made eligible for confiscation by the cleric-dominated state.”<sup>100</sup> Karbassain holds that the near destruction of the private sector due to the nationalization of virtually every aspect of the economic activity crippled the economic well-

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<sup>97</sup> Milani, 241-8.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>99</sup> Karbassian, 623.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

being of Iran. A direct result of the seizure of properties was the mass emigration from the country. Those educated, Westernized businessmen who had prospered under the White Revolution were targeted by the new regime, so it was these entrepreneurs and professional managers, those with the proper skills and experience in running businesses, who fled the country. Karbassian offers a scathing criticism of the Islamic Republic's removal of the infant private sector that managed to develop in the 1970s under the Shah's guidance. "The confiscated enterprises fell into the hands of inexperienced, lower-level - but ideologically correct - state employees who possessed no management skills."<sup>101</sup> The ensuing mismanagement crippled many businesses which only added to the chaotic state of the economy.

### **Global Impact of the Iranian Revolution**

Though Khomeini was now effectively in charge of Iranian affairs, fear of the Shah's return persisted in the new government throughout much of the remainder of 1979. The Iranian fear of foreign interference was palpable: "Wild rumors circulated about coups, hidden armies, and SAVAK agents-at-large. . . . stories abounded about Shah loyalists and SAVAK officials hiding in the American embassy compound."<sup>102</sup> This paranoia increased anti-American attitudes, ultimately resulting in the takeover of the American embassy on November 4, 1979, by a group of 500 militants claiming they were 'students' and 'Followers of the Imam's Line.'<sup>103</sup> Sixty-three Americans, including military personal and government employees, were taken captive by these militants. Just two weeks prior, the Shah had been admitted to the United States for critical

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 631-2.

<sup>102</sup> Stempel, 191.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 230.

medical treatment. This enraged the more radical Mujahidin warriors who saw his admittance into the United States as a telling sign of old treachery; they believed the Shah was returning to Washington to plot a coup that would enable him to return to power.<sup>104</sup> Government buildings and signs of Americanism in Iran were the constant target of attacks during 1979.

Prime Minister Bazargan stated that international law would be respected and the hostages released, but his authority as Prime Minister was crumbling quickly. Supported by Khomeini and the mullahs, the militants made it clear that they would not give Barzagan the authority to hand over the hostages.<sup>105</sup> International pressures and the question of political supremacy in the Islamic Republic turned the hostage crisis into a media frenzy. This crisis was compounded by the Shah's movements throughout the world as he searched for a new country in which to reside. Almost universal reluctance of all nations to admit the Shah displayed the potency of this hostage situation: no nation wanted to be put in the middle of the Revolutionary Council and the Shah, for the Revolutionary government demanded that their former leader be returned to Iran to answer for his alleged crimes. After much political and diplomatic debate, the hostages were released in 1981, just minutes after Ronald Reagan was sworn into office as the next President of the United States.

Another consideration concerning the global effects of Revolution can be seen when analyzing the Soviet response, for the creation of the Islamic Republic did not solely affect the Western world. The Soviet Union, too, was directly threatened by Khomeini's new regime. His calls to spread the Islamic Revolution across the globe was troubling for the Soviet government because the Soviet Union bordered several Muslim provinces, like Uzbek SSR and Turkmen

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

SSR, and included millions of Muslims.<sup>106</sup> This threat of Islamic expansion and revolution compelled the Soviets to invade the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in December 1979 in an attempt to contain the spread of the Islamic Revolution. This conflict would span eight years. During this war, a charismatic young fighter named Osama Bin Laden emerged to assist the Mujahiden warriors against the Soviet invasion. His fierce engagement of the Soviet invaders established Bin Laden as an idol of many Arab revolutionaries. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan added to the intensity of the violence and the overall growing instability in the Middle East in the twentieth century.

A third, significant consideration in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution was the Iran-Iraq war. Lasting between 1980-8, this war drastically depleted the Iranian economy, making life for the average Iranian even more dire than before Khomeini came to power. Similar to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein felt equally threatened by Khomeini's calls for a worldwide Islamic Revolution given Iraq's shared border with Iran and the fact that Iraq, like Iran, has a predominantly Shi'a population. Saddam, a member of the Sunni Muslim Ba'ath Party, had recently ascended to the Iraqi Presidency on July 16, 1979, about five months after the Ayatollah established himself as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. Saddam used brutal repression against the Kurds and Shi'a Muslims in Iraq to ensure subordination to his rule, for the Sunni Ba'ath Party minority ruled over a Shi'a majority in Iraq. Fearing that Khomeini's Shi'a fundamentalist regime in Iran would spread across the border causing a potential revolt in the beginning years of his reign as President, Saddam launched a preemptive invasion of Iran. By attempting to subdue the influence of the Islamic Republic,

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<sup>106</sup> Axworthy, 270.

Saddam was supported by the United States with weapons and mustard gas to use against the Iranian forces and against the Iraqi Kurds.<sup>107</sup> While Saddam was initially successful in his invasion attempts, his fortunes changed rapidly. Khomeini was able to repel his forces and start a counter-strike along the Iranian border and with the Kurdish separatists in northern Iraq.

The conflict evolved into a bloody war of attrition. The Iran-Iraq war is often compared to the first World War due to the nature of trench warfare and the use of human wave attacks. Yet, at the end of the eight years of fighting, no significant border changes occurred and religious tensions only increased. Though Saddam was supported with billions of dollars in arms from the United States and other Western powers, he was still not able to defeat Khomeini. This failure emboldened the divine right belief of the Shi'a fundamentalists, creating sharper divisions in the contrasts between the Sunni minority leadership and the suppressed Shi'a majority in Iraq. The stability of the region and world market prices in oil was directly threatened by this conflict. The failed war with Iraq further disillusioned the tacit supporters of the Revolution, for Khomeini's promises for prosperity were not realized. The faltering economic conditions inherent under the Shah's rule were perpetuated by the Iran-Iraq war. Similar to the Shah before him, Khomeini was equally unwilling to compromise with the Iranian masses or to engage dissenting parties politically. When such disenchanting Iranians attempted to protest or organize dissent, they were met with a familiar policy: demonstrations against Khomeini's reign were silenced and opposition forces, largely lead by the leftist Mujahiden warriors, were executed.<sup>108</sup> While the Islamic Republic had been realized, the average Iranian was just as economically disadvantaged, if not more so, as he was during the Shah's reign. The Revolution had simply replaced the

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<sup>107</sup> Stempel, 271.

<sup>108</sup> Axworthy, 272.

modernizing, Western influenced monarch with a new Shi'a fundamentalist autocrat in power.

Mansour Farhang, former Iranian ambassador to the United Nations reporting for *The Nation*, was highly critical of Khomeini's rule, calling it a "reign of terror." "Before the revolutionary victory of February 1979, Iranians suffered under the political and economic oppression of the Shah. In the present struggle, we are opposing not only political and economic oppression but also cultural and religious totalitarianism."<sup>109</sup> He explains how Khomeini and his thugs, known as the Revolutionary Guard, mandated all aspects of life in the Islamic Republic, for example, through the prohibition of joyous or sensuous art and entertainment from public places.<sup>110</sup> While originally moderate in their interpretation of Islamic laws and judicial practices in the years leading up to the Shah's removal from power, Khomeini and his supporters instead became even more brutal and authoritative than the Shah himself once they achieved power.

Torture is routine in the Islamic Republic. Amnesty International puts the number of political executions in Iran since the fall of the Shah at 6,108 but estimates that there have been thousands more. The fundamentalists have successfully built a theocratic state, but in the process they have become the engineers of the most joyless revolutionary transformation in the modern world. They seem to be possessed by morbidity; they represent the victory of ignorance over injustice.<sup>111</sup>

The arbitrariness of law enforcement in order to enforce Islamic law in all aspects of life, the systematic silencing of political opponents, either through torture or murder, and the repression of the middle class intelligentsia was the unfortunate reality for those living in the Islamic

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<sup>109</sup> Mansour Farhang, "The Joyless Revolution: Khomeini's New Order in Iran," *The Nation* (New York) March 1, 1986, 242, *Academic Search Premier*; EBSCOhost (accessed 23 October, 2011).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 244.

Republic. Clearly, Farhang's outlook on post-revolutionary Iran is bleak. Though the Revolution had come, had any true change developed for the average Iranian with the removal of the Shah?

## **PART V - "MEET THE NEW BOSS, SAME AS THE OLD BOSS" - A DISHEARTENING REALITY PERSISTS**

The Shah died of complications from lymphoma in Egypt in 1980. His wife, Farah Pahlavi, was interviewed on March 10, 2004, by Haleh Esfandiari, the Director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, to promote the release of her upcoming book titled *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah, A Memoir*. They discussed her difficulties in the years after the Revolution as those close to the family, still living in Iran, were executed by Khomeini's forces. Despite the atrocities committed by SAVAK under the Shah's watch, Empress Farah Pahlavi remains supportive of her husband's reign while simultaneously acknowledging his failures to enable political participation during the White Revolution

But maybe with hindsight, if more political participation had happened before - and this is what my husband wanted for us - he said he wanted his country, which was almost in the Middle Ages from the beginning of the 20th century, to be progressive, to develop, to go to modernity and also to solve the problem of literacy and slowly open up to more political participation, because in our countries, we cannot become democracies overnight. It takes, it took, decades for other countries. And he really wanted to open up slowly; but unfortunately, the moment this opening happened was the worst moment and it ended up the way we saw it.<sup>112</sup>

Farah's vain attempt to posthumously improve the reputation of her husband is inadequate.

While it could be argued that the Shah's desire to increase the economic vitality of Iran was

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<sup>112</sup> Farah Pahlavi, interview by Haleh Esfandiari, Washington, DC, March 10, 2004, <http://www.farahpahlavi.org> (accessed December 6, 2011).

noble, the brutal repression of political dissent through imprisonment, torture, and murder is inexcusable. Clearly, these policies do not represent a desire to, in Farah's words, "slowly open up to more political participation." Many Iranians genuinely believed in the late 1970s and in the early months of the Islamic Republic that, with Khomeini's emergence as the Twelfth Imam, Iran would begin to politically develop more equitably as a nation. The Islamic Republic, however, disillusioned the masses, for they were presented with essentially the same tactics of repressing political dissent and a comparably unstable economy that had existed under the Shah.

Fred Halliday offers a unique perspective on the events that led to the Iranian Revolution. He argues, "the originality of the Iranian Revolution resides neither in its 'traditional,' nor in its 'modern' character but in the interaction of the two."<sup>113</sup> The establishment of a theocracy led by a Supreme Leader was inherently revolutionary in nature. Further, he asserts that the relative suddenness of the revolution was also notable, explaining that "few people, whether observers or participants, were conscious even six months before the Shah fell that the regime was in serious trouble."<sup>114</sup> A final deviation of the Iranian Revolution when compared to the other great revolutions was the lack of a war or international struggle in the years preceding the revolution; Iran was not weakened by such a foreign entanglement. The Iranian Revolution was largely a populist movement. "The populists, unrivaled in their ability to communicate with the masses in an easy language, championed the radical programs and ideas advocated by the left, like nationalization of industry and anti-imperialism. They adroitly clothed them in Shi'i garb and made them attractive to the masses."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Halliday, 191.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>115</sup> Milani, 251.

Halliday outlines a five-point explanation of the causes of the revolution, with the economic instability caused by rampant inflation reigning as chiefly important. But these economic woes proved politically potent as well, for the Shah did not enable political participation within his steps towards modernization. Halliday is correct in stating that one of the Shah's "fatal weaknesses" was his failure to sway the new middle class, the people that *benefitted* from his reign, and who certainly could not have been as financially successful without him, to actively support his rule.<sup>116</sup> Consequently, the opposition was able to draw from both the beneficiaries and the victims of the Shah's reign in order to ultimately remove him from power.

A significant element of the Iranian Revolution was the role of Khomeini himself, as a religious authority, in organizing a massive governmental overthrow. However, it would be incorrect to conclude that the opposition led by Khomeini was unified in its desires to instill an Islamic Republic established to follow the guidelines of the Shari'a Law. There are two primary explanations for why the Revolution succeeded. The first is the Shah's autocratic rule which prevented any legitimate form of political opportunities for the dissent. This failure, coupled with the brutality of SAVAK repression tactics, pushed the otherwise moderate factions of the opposition into increasingly desperate measures. As the riots of 1978 increased in brutality, it appeared that rallying around the mysterious Ayatollah was the only way to defeat the Shah's oppressive reign. Yet, upon seizing power, Khomeini alienated the moderate elements of the opposition that enabled his rise to prominence. He did not allow for political participation and continued to imprison, torture, and murder political opponents. A second cause of the Iranian

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<sup>116</sup> Halliday, 195.

Revolution can be found in the Shah's failed economic policies. In the initial years of the White Revolution, his program appeared promising. GDP was on the rise, new industries were introduced to Iran, and the improvements in infrastructure enabled more mobility. Yet with the economic recession of 1973, coupled with the OPEC embargo, a growing number of Iranians became again disenfranchised with the Shah's regime. After being uprooted from their traditional agricultural jobs, thousands of Iranians were forced to flee to the growing cities in an often futile search for jobs. The *ulama* was successful in its attempt to capitalize on this disenfranchisement.

Again, it must be remembered that this Revolution was a revolt *against* the Shah, not *for* Khomeini. While strict Shi'a religious adherence certainly played a crucial role in bringing about the Iranian Revolution, the failures of the Shah must also be taken into account. In hindsight, the Iranian Revolution appears as an inevitable outgrowth of the Shah's policies. The Iranian Revolution was not just an overthrow grounded in a radical religious movement; indeed, many members of the opposition forces did not wish for the imposition of the Islamic Republic. As the Shah's regime tightened, it became increasingly clear to the more moderate elements of the opposition that joining Khomeini provided the only way to overthrow the Shah. Weighing their chances, these moderate opposition members rationalized that anything would be better than living under the current oppression perpetrated by the Shah.

The Iranian Revolution provides a context for understanding contemporary developments such as those currently in Syria, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. As the revolutionary forces attempt to establish more political representation, government accountability, and protection of human rights, they are slaughtered by their own rulers. To avoid the repressive horrors of post-Revolutionary Iran, a clear vision with specific policies must be established by the revolutionary

forces to genuinely enhance the well-being of Middle Eastern peoples. The failures of the Iranian Revolution to improve the well-being of the average Iranian citizen offers a cautionary tale for today's revolutionary fighters. Hopefully, the lessons from the Iranian Revolution will demonstrate the need for legitimate political change in the Middle East. The multi-faceted nature of the Iranian Revolution is significant and unique, and remains to this day the most influential event in Middle Eastern politics in the modern era.

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