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History

Man's Hand in God's Affairs: Shaping Modern Iran's Theocratic Polity

In the final years of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign in Iran, longstanding social inequities came to a head, prompting a public outcry to restore the traditional and righteous prestige and repudiate Western influence in the country. A conflation of social, economic, and religious issues led to a civil rights movement that would quickly become a platform for the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The deposition of the Western-backed Shah left a political vacuum in Iran that would ultimately be filled with an Islamic supreme leader. A modernization of Shi'a Islam, primarily executed with religious propaganda and recordings, was an integral step in forming the political sphere of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Reframing the tenets of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's specific brand of Islam would result in the inception of Iran's infamous morality police, or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Basij Organization of the Oppressed (IRGC BOO), a stringent dress code, and a morality-based legal policy. The IRGC BOO became both a formidable military force and the primary enforcers of redefined Islam in modern Iran. Reimagining the role of mullahs strengthened the connection between politics, the people, and religion. The application of Islamic justice in Iran has yielded domestic resistance movements and drastically affected foreign affairs. Examination of the manner in which Islam was transformed to support the modern polity of the IRI informs our understanding of the dynamic social and political conditions in contemporary Iran.

Religious authority in the Shiite world has long belonged to presiding ayatollahs in a given region. However, prior to modern publication, a lack of centralization greatly limited the

political power of these religious leaders, even in regimes with strong Islamic foundations.[1] The technological developments of the 19th century made the issuance of fatawa, legal advisories offered by religious authorities, accessible and enforceable, thus consolidating religious issues and authority. By the 1920s, religious leaders had, through the publication of their general announcements and fatawa, become significant influencers in the political sphere, with some notables openly supporting or criticizing the Reza Shah Pahlavi in his early reign.[2] Though the recently fallen Qajar dynasty had been a nominally Islamic regime, technological advances better allowed for religious leaders to strengthen politically in Reza Shah's rapidly secularizing Iran.

However, Reza Shah soon proved to be an oppressive tyrant. Well aware of the bolstered sway of religious leaders, and no longer needing their support, he established a secularist policy to legally inhibit support for the religious leaders and teachers in the country, while exiling those who protested his measures.[3] Reza Shah's methods of modernization often alienated the traditionalists, calling for unilateral adoption of the Western style of dress and an enforceable unveiling of Muslim women. Though clergy did not formally address these mandates in a major fatwa, resentment for secularization policies grew while the conservative perspective was increasingly isolated.[4] Likewise, the remaining ashraf of the Qajar regime had been relegated to the periphery of the Pahlavi Order. Reza Shah had replaced the old generation of administrative elites with a loyal band of technocrats and military leaders, thus crafting a visage of authoritarian control over Iran.[5]

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[1] Mohammad Samiei, "Najaf and Iranian Politics: Analysing the Way the Hawzah of Najaf Influenced Iranian Politics between Two Revolutions," in *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies,* Vol. V, No. 3 (ICAS Press, Summer 2012), pp. 277-294, 278
[2] Ibid, 283
[3] Ibid, 285
[4] Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, (Yale University Press, 2017), 491
[5] Ibid, 494

All domestic opposition aside, however, Reza Shah remained in power well into the Second World War, at which point his globally perceived Nationalist sentiment became an international concern. Though Iran was officially a neutral party, the Anglo-Soviet alliance feared Reza Shah's collusion with Germany due to their shared claim of Aryan-based nationhood.[6] In late August 1941, the allied army invaded Iran, and by September 3, forcibly abdicated Reza Shah, leaving his 22-year-old son, Mohammad Reza in power as the head of state.[7] However, Mohammad Reza Shah's reign was immediately met with many of the same concerns presented in his father's regime. The occupation of Iran had left the country in economic ruin, and the turmoil had empowered new parties, and emboldened the old. Amidst the tangible threats of tribal uprisings, the inception and rise of the communist Tudeh Party, Mohammad Reza also feared reprisal from the ashraf and clergy targeted by his father.[8]

Islamic sentiment increased in Iran over the next decade, following Mohammad Mossadegh's election to Majles and subsequent appointment to Prime Minister. Mossadegh's platform focused on the continuation of secularized modernization in Iran, but with a strong emphasis on limiting, if not fully eliminating Western influence and dependence.[9] He was well regarded as an elected official for challenging the West with his oil nationalization plan, intended to remove British interference and establish a sustainable domestic market. The West responded with a CIA and MI6 led coup d'état in 1953 that reinforced Mohammad Reza's position as head of state.[10] The Shah and clergy alike supported this maneuver, as Mossadegh's authority had

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[6] Ibid, 495
[7] Ibid, 498
[8] Ibid, 508
[9] Warren S. Goldstein, "Secularization and the Iranian Revolution," in *Islamic Perspective,* No. 3 (Islamic Perspective Center for Sociological Studies, 2010), 54
[10] Ibid, 55

grown to undermine their own. However, it greatly contributed to growing unrest among the people.

Determined to discourage further challenges to his rule, Mohammad Reza cracked down on the public through a series of reforms and initiatives enforced by his secret police force, the Organization of Intelligence and National Security, or SAVAK. The SAVAK's primary mission was to suppress opposition to the shah via arrests, silencing the press, and closely monitoring Majles elections.[11] As the regime became more oppressive, the public gravitated toward Islam and clerical protection. Opposition to the shah was better able to organize through the financially independent mosque network, and embraced Islam as a pragmatic avenue for revolution.[12] While religious rhetoric did not necessarily support the popular resistance narrative, Shiite discourse came to represent revolutionary discourse, and afforded religious leaders new platforms. As a result, the leftist school of thought was ingrained in religious institutions, and Shiite religious tradition was integrated into the political sphere by 1960.[13]

In 1963, Mohammad Reza introduced his infamous economic reform initiative, the White Revolution. Intended to modernize and industrialize Iran, the White Revolution was centered on large-scale land reform. This program called for the redistribution of Shiite leaders' landholdings, which threatened their influence and wealth, and displaced the peasantry in the affected region.[14] Unsurprisingly, this policy bolstered religious opposition to the shah. Peasantry

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[11] Federal Research Division, *Iran: A Country Study*, ed. by Glenn E. Curtis and Eric Hooglund, (Library of Congress, 2008), 35
[12] Goldstein, "Secularization and the Iranian Revolution," 55
[13] Ibid, 56
[14] Rustin-Petru Ciasc, "From the White Revolution to the Islamic Revolution – The Social, Economic, Legal, and Religious Context that Led to the Fall of Monarchy in Iran," in *Cogito: Multidisciplinary Research Journal,* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Dimitre Cantemir Christian University, 2013), pp. 58-62, 58

joined the discontented middle class and national front in their subversive endeavors with the clergy.[15] The subsequent stages of the White Revolution focused on the social class, and better incorporating Western imports in this sector. This increased emphasis on Western goods strengthened foreign influence in Iran's economy and damaged the bazaar system that financed religious institutions through religious taxes.[16] While these strategies were not inherently anti-Islamic, they greatly diminished the central power of the faith, further alienating clergy and followers.

As civil and religious autonomy deteriorated, the Shi'i liberation school of thought concentrated on egalitarianism and condemnation of quietists arguing for clerical withdrawal from politics. A number of leftist Islamist intellectuals spoke out against Mohammad Reza's tyranny and marginalization of the lower classes, and the SAVAK began a series of attacks on religious centers, where they assaulted and arrested clergy.[17] In response, several politically minded religious leaders joined popular movements and violent protests. Among the most notable participants was Ruhollah Khomeini, who was arrested and exiled in June 1963.[18] While Iran became increasingly dangerous for Islamist thinkers, the religious center of Najaf became a hub for religious intellectualism and politics. Religious leaders in Najaf, being outside the Pahlavi regime's control, were able to use the Shi'a network to better take political action, coordinate, and distribute information on behalf of the revolutionaries in Iran.[19]

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[15] Ibid, 60
[16] Ibid, 61
[17] Samiei, "Najaf and Iranian Politics: Analysing the Way the Hawzah of Najaf Influenced Iranian Politics between Two Revolutions," 286
[18] Ibid, 287
[19] Ibid, 289

While in exile, Ruhollah Khomeini primarily lived in Najaf, honing his political and religious thought through writings and lectures that earned him repute among his peers and the disaffected Iranian citizens. During this period, he began work on his *Velayat-e Faqih,* a blueprint for an Islamic government, first published in 1970. His writings and seminars culminated on garnering popular consent and controlling public will on the pretense that Islamic guardianship was a necessity for civil, equitable governance.[20] His work during this period highlights the connection between civil and religious concerns in Iran. In his lectures, he repeatedly suggested that representatives of secular republics and monarchies abuse their constituents by enacting laws to their direct detriment.[21] His argument that a polity bound in Islamic law would better serve the people than the shah's regime resonated in Iran in the wake of the White Revolution and SAVAK attacks.

Throughout the 1970s, Khomeini's support base grew in the interconnected Islamic and Arab worlds. The mounting insurrection in Iran attracted international speculation on the stability of Mohammad Reza Shah's regime and role of prominent opposing figures. Intelligence agencies began focusing on these issues in order to assess the severity of the Iran situation. In a November 1978 Central Intelligence report, the National Foreign Assessment Center examined Khomeini's use of Islam and rhetoric and attempted to determine what implications the rise of a Shi'a government would carry. The report identifies major themes in Khomeini's 1963-1978 speeches and pamphlets as opposition to Mohammad Reza's economic and social policies, anti-Zionism, and denunciation of Western influence.[22] These themes underpin the unspoken basis of

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[20] Nura Hossainzadeh, "Ruhollah Khomeini's Political Thought: Elements of Guardianship, Consent, and Representative Government," in *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies,* Vol. 7, No. 2, (ICAS Press, 2014), pp. 129-150, 136

[21] Ibid, 138

[22] CIA, "Memorandum: The Politics of Ruhollah Khomeini," 20 November 1978, 8

Khomeini's conceptualization of Islamic pluralism: a fluid socioeconomic system able to support autocratic rule.

The document also addresses Khomeini's support base and his public appeal. Opposition to the Pahlavi Order was broad in affiliation and intent. The CIA recognized that Khomeini's envisioned Islamic government was deliberately left open to interpretation by the diverse field of dissidents comprised of clergy, peasantry, urbanites, and students in order to unify the otherwise unorganized groups.[23] Though religious institutions had long been centers for organized rebellion, the relationship between Shiite leaders and civil malcontents was born of necessity rather than shared ideological objectives, making the connection tenuous. A December 1978 CIA memorandum labels the primary unification tactics employed by Khomeini as student protests, random violence, and terrorism as directed by leaflets and tape recordings distributed through the mosque network.[24] Though not all of the opposition movement shared motives or direction, the Khomeini's vague doctrine of beliefs was nonthreatening when compared to the Shah's tyrannical rule, and his organizational capabilities enabled the movement to take more efficacious action.

The movement continued until realizing its aim of deposing Mohammad Reza Shah on 16 January 1979, ending the Pahlavi Order and exiling Iran's final monarch. Khomeini was immediately welcomed back to Tehran, at which point the royal regency was unseated, leaving no clear rule in the country. In a strategic gambit, Khomeini's discourse quickly adopted the leftist egalitarian platform as a fixed component in his plan for an Islamic state, arguing that the

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[23] Ibid, 10

[24] CIA, "Memorandum: Opposition Operations in Iran: Leadership, Organization, and Tactics," 21 December 1978, 7

revolution had been a war between the impoverished faithful and the capitalist infidels.[25] Now back in the political vacuum of Iran, Khomeini began to more clearly define his intentions and outline policies for his theocracy. The Islamic Republic was adopted in April of 1979, with Khomeini seated in the position of supreme leader.

Khomeini's brand of Islam soon became apparent as he initiated his reforms. National and student publications covered Khomeini's initiatives with varied levels of support. Kayhan, a conservative newspaper established in 1946 became the chief representation for the Supreme Leader. The front page of an early1979 issue reads in part, "In an Islamic government, there is no dictatorship," while simultaneously threatening an armed response to conflict against the Islamic Republic.[26] This was not an empty threat. On 5 May 1979, Khomeini founded the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to consolidate his supporters, replace the regular armed forces of the fallen monarchy, and defend his subsequent policies. The IRGC was also awarded the heraldry slogan, "Prepare against them what force you can," in reference to the Quranic verse 8:60, which discusses defense against the enemies of Allah.

In October of 1979, the New York Times published an interview with Khomeini in which he defends his Islamic Republic and reforms. When asked what shape his republic would take, Khomeini said, "To begin with, the word Islam does not need adjectives such as democratic… We cannot afford to have such an ambiguous concept placed in our Constitution."[27] Khomeini was asserting that his republic of the people under Islam was intended to support religious rule, and not civil freedoms. As the interview continued, he addressed the martial law and attacks and

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[25] Siavash Saffari, "Two Pro-Mostazafin Discourses in the 1979 Iranian Revolution," in *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Springer Verlag, 2017), pp. 287-301, 294
[26] "Imam Khomeini's Interview with Kayhan," in *Kayhan*, (Kayhan Institute 23 January 1979), 1
[27] Oriana Fallaci, "An Interview with Khomeini," in *The New York Times* (7 October 1979), 8

arrests on citizens found guilty of morality crimes, such as adultery and homosexuality. He stated, "In Islam we want to implement a policy to purify society, and in order to achieve this aim we must punish those who bring evil to our youth."[28] His vague staging of the regime had allowed him a status in which he, as Supreme Leader, and other clergy, as students and teachers of Islam, could interpret the laws of Islam and deliver rulings with impunity.

At the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, the IRI was still weak and the IRGC was inexperienced in formal combat, and did not have sufficient manpower. Khomeini relied on the unwavering loyalty of his nascent military, and was concerned that full-scale mobilization or mass conscription could risk this relationship.[29] At this point, the Basij had a role most similar to Mohammad Reza Shah's SAVAK, and were not adequately prepared for participation in a war. The Basij had 2.5 million members in 1983, but less than 20% had received military training, and they were instead used primarily as domestic security forces, aimed at suppressing opposition to the IRI and arresting citizens for morality crimes.[30] As the situation with Iraq worsened, more emphasis was placed on training and recruiting Basij. IRGC and Basij forces had a more stringent screening process than regular conscripted military, and were recruited through mosques with written recommendations from clergy based on their ideological beliefs.[31]

By 1987, hardened by nearly a decade of war, the Basij had become an elite fighting force. Clerical indoctrination, improved training centers, and weapons acquisition convinced the United States that Basij were prepared and likely to carry on Khomeini's ideology after his death.[32] Beneath the Basij, other official organizations were put in place to police the public.

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[28] Ibid
[29] CIA, " Iran: Military Manpower Problems Limit War Options," October 1983, iv
[30] Ibid, 2
[31] Ibid, 7
[32] CIA, "Iran's Revolutionary Guard: Armed Pillar of the Islamic Republic," January 1987, 11

Komitehs, representative of the autonomous mosque network, and Qazi, judicial police, now had established patrols in the public sphere to ensure conformity and adherence to religious law.[33] This strengthened the role of mullahs, low-level clergy, who had now been given judiciary and political roles in their communities.

The Islamic Republic emerged from the war with a strong, but malleable framework and defensible constitution. Khomeini devised a government that served his purposes, to depose the shah and grant religious leader's tangible political power. His Islamic Guard and clerical support helped to enforce this vision, but perhaps more importantly, they were left in power of a fluid, interpretative system after Khomeini's death. However, the people, particularly religious or leftist minorities, were in a familiar situation marked by suppression with limited civil and democratic liberties. Khomeini's use of Islam as an intellectual crafted a polity suited to dictatorial rule, better defended than that of the Pahlavi Order through the extensive mosque network, heavily Islamic Majles, and IRGC.

[33] Ibid, 17

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