

1979: Iran's Islamic Revolution

After the overthrow of the Shah, an American ally became one of its biggest adversaries.

By *Roger Cohen*

Tehran, Iran's capital, was in a state of revolt on Jan. 19, 1979. The Shah, Iran's ruler for nearly four decades, had fled the country. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shiite Muslim cleric who had worked for years to overthrow the Shah, was still in exile in Paris, but vowing to return and form an Islamic government. A million people took to the streets to cheer on Khomeini and denounce the Shah.

"A great river of humanity flowed down Tehran's main street today," wrote New York Times correspondent R.W. Apple. "Although Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left the country three days ago, probably forever, the demonstrators again sounded their familiar battle cry 'Marg bar Shah'—'Death to the Shah!' "

Within two weeks, Khomeini had returned, replacing Iran's secular government with a theocracy ruled by Islamic religious leaders called mullahs. By year's end, young supporters of Khomeini—angered by America's long support of the Shah—had stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking dozens of hostages. "Death to the Shah!" gave way to "Death to America!" and U.S. officials knew they had a powerful new foe on their hands in a radicalized Middle East.

Two of the rallying cries of Khomeini's 1979 revolution were azadi (liberty) and esteghlal (independence); that independence could only be from the U.S. and its Western allies, given America's history with Iran.

The U.S. & The Shah

A quarter century earlier, in 1953, the C.I.A. had secretly helped topple Iran's prime minister and restore the Shah to his throne after he had gone into exile during a power struggle with members of Iran's elected parliament.

Why were American leaders so determined to keep the Shah in power? It was the height of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and Iran was seen as a potential target for the spread of Soviet Communism. American presidents, from Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s to Jimmy Carter in the 1970s, gave the Shah, who was sympathetic to the West, their support.

At home, however, the Shah could be a ruthless leader. After he regained power in 1953, he abolished Iran's tenuous multiparty system and placed himself at the head of a one-party state controlled by his secret police. Dissent was violently suppressed.

Although a forward-thinking ruler in many respects—he created a modern economy almost from scratch, and with it a growing middle class, and extended suffrage and other basic rights to women—the Shah was seen by many Iranians as a puppet of the West.

At the same time, many of the Shah's reforms, especially those involving women, infuriated conservative Muslims, led by Khomeini, a Shiite scholar.

In 1978, the simmering opposition to the Shah—not only from Khomeini's followers, but also from a middle class that sought greater political freedom—boiled over and brought millions of people onto the streets. The Shah and his wife fled in January 1979, ushering in a brief period of confusion before Khomeini assumed control as Supreme Leader over what became the first Islamic theocratic regime in the modern Middle East.

Khomeini and the mullahs—and a roving army of "spiritual enforcers" known as the Revolutionary Guards—ended up substituting one autocratic regime for another. In doing so, they dashed the hopes of millions of Iranians who thought the revolution would bring more freedom, not less.

Women lost the social gains they had made under the Shah, and were forced to wear head coverings and full-body cloaks called chadors. Opponents were imprisoned and tortured as ruthlessly as under the Shah. A parliamentary democracy existed mostly on paper, with true authority residing with the mullahs.

With the Shah in exile, Khomeini identified the U.S. as "the Great Satan" and an "enemy of Islam." The slogans, eerily familiar today, had deep roots in injured Iranian and Islamic pride. But they also served a practical purpose: Revolutions, Islamic and otherwise, seldom deliver on all their promises, and a clear external enemy can serve as a useful diversion from internal problems.

The Hostage Crisis

Anger against the U.S. reached a fever pitch when the Shah, suffering from cancer, came to America for treatment in October 1979.

On November 4, thousands of young Iranians, many of them college students, swarmed the U.S. embassy's 27-acre compound in Tehran, seizing the 66 Americans inside. "They seemed to be kids about 20 years old . . . kids from small towns with rather strict upbringings," one hostage, John Limbert, recalled. "Many of them had never seen an American before."

The 14-month standoff that followed humbled President Carter, led to the deaths of eight American servicemen in a botched rescue operation, and created a measure of distrust and anger that has never dissipated.

In the U.S., vigils were held and yellow ribbons were worn to signify concern for the hostages. Americans grew increasingly frustrated as the crisis dragged on—a sentiment that helped Ronald Reagan in his successful 1980 presidential campaign against Carter.

The Shah died in July 1980, but the hostages, held for 444 days, were not released until the moment Reagan took the oath of office, on Jan. 20, 1981.

Khomeini's death in 1989 did nothing to ease the enmity between Iran and the U.S., at least on an official level. As Iranians—particularly the Westward-looking middle class—grew more frustrated with the oppressiveness of the revolution, they began to view America more favorably. Today, Iran may be the only Mideast nation with a government—now led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (hah-mehn-a-EE) and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (ah-ma-DIH-nee-jahd)—that is more anti-American than its people.

A Nuclear Iran?

This is the context in which the current confrontation between the West and Iran over the country's nuclear ambitions, and its support of militant Islamic groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, should be seen.

Iran wants a nuclear weapon for several reasons. Above all, the nuclear program, which Iran claims is for civilian energy purposes, represents an assertion of power at a time when surging oil revenues have emboldened Iran's leaders.

Iran stirs up trouble for America wherever it can, most recently through Hezbollah's attacks on Israel. (Ahmadinejad has said that "Israel must be wiped off the map" and that the Holocaust never happened). In Iraq, Iran now has a direct channel to the Shiites who came to power after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Will relations between Iran and the U.S. ever improve? Iran remains a repressive regime built around an anti-Western ideology. Enough pro-Western forces exist in Iran for a reconciliation with the U.S. to be possible sometime in the future. But decades after Iran's Islamic Revolution, anger predominates on both sides and makes such a possibility improbable.