

A Singular Success: The Uniqueness of the Islamic Revolution in Iran

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“The historical oddity, if not uniqueness, of the Iranian revolution can be seen in its four salient features: its unforeseen rapid rise; its wide base of urban support; its vague ideological character; and, above all, its ultimate singular objective, to oust the shah.”

— Former Iranian Minister of Finance Jahangir Amuzegar¹

Over 35 years ago, Iran, leading the Middle East then as it does now, experienced the region’s first Islamic awakening. Ousting an entrenched monarchical dictator who enjoyed U.S. support, Iran’s citizenry managed to carry out a largely non-violent revolution, toppling the oppressive regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and establishing a unique Islamic republic. Today, Iran is a singular success in the Persian Gulf region, having established itself literally as the “island of stability” former U.S. President Jimmy Carter mistakenly spoke of on December 31, 1977.²

What made this seminal event of the 20th century so unique? “The Revolution was a backlash against a Western-backed autocrat whose policies deliberately undermined Iran’s culture and values and deprived them of their religious and cultural identity,” explained the Iranian Embassy in Copenhagen in a press release,³ but clearly the Islamic Revolution in Iran was not exceptional in this regard, being only one of a number of revolutions against western-backed dictators, two recent examples of which are the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Zein al-Abideen bin Ali in Tunisia. Certainly, that a 2500-year-old monarchy backed by the military might of the U.S. would fall after a mere day and a half of street fighting in Tehran⁴ is in itself striking, but perhaps the three attributes that in combination give the Iranian Revolution its uniqueness are its unanticipated occurrence, rapid development and unprecedented popular support.

Unanticipated Occurrence

The U.S. and its western allies were completely caught off guard by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, as was, apparently, the former Soviet Union and its KGB.⁵ In November of 1977 during a visit to the White House by the shah, U.S. Ambassador to Iran William Sullivan expressed surprise at seeing Iranian and American students protesting against the Pahlavi regime while holding posters of Ayatollah Khomeini. In his 1977 annual report, British ambassador to Iran Anthony Parsons advised that despite an awaking of political dissent in Iran, he concluded that this would be “no threat to basic stability.”⁶ Six months before the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the CIA reported that Iran was not in a revolutionary or even a “pre-revolutionary” situation.⁷ On October 28, 1978, almost two months after the Black Friday massacre on September 8 in what was then known as Zhaleh Square and is now called Martyrs’ Square in Tehran, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that the shah “is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years.”⁸

On November 30, U.S. President Carter confidently remarked, “We trust the shah to maintain stability in Iran, to continue the democratization process, and also to continue with the progressive change in the Iranian social and economic structure...” Even as late as December 12, 1978, barely a month before the shah fled Iran, Carter retained his confidence in the stability of

the Iranian monarchy. “I fully expect the shah to maintain power in Iran ... I think the predictions of doom and disaster that have come from sources have not been realized at all.”⁹ Carter’s reference to “sources” may have been directed towards U.S. ambassador to Iran William H. Sullivan, who almost lost his job when he suggested in November 1978 that some Iranians may be considering alternatives to the shah,¹⁰ in other words, that a revolution may be in progress.

Rapid Development

Before 1978, few expected a revolution to take place in Iran, including those individuals and organizations that were most active in protests.¹¹ Repression by the Pahlavi regime, which, as noted in a 1977 Red Cross report, had over 3,000 “security detainees” in 18 prisons, 124 of whom had died from torture,¹² had been simply too brutal for an opposition movement to gain momentum. For example, on November 22, 1977, a rally organized by supporters of the National Front for the purpose of establishing a new unified front against the shah was viciously broken up by the SAVAK.¹³ However, this situation changed quickly after news that Imam Khomeini’s son Mostafa, who was living in exile with his father in Najaf, Iraq, had died suddenly on October 23, 1977 under mysterious circumstances following a visit by two unidentified Iranians suspected to be agents of the Pahlavi regime. Upon hearing the news, seminary students in Qom immediately began pressing their teachers for permission to organize rallies and protests against the shah on the 40th day (*chelom* or *arba'in*) of mourning for Seyyed Mostafa Khomeini in December.

What appears to have happened next was a massive Islamic awakening among Iranians during the period from Mostafa’s untimely death to the 40th day of his mourning. In an address from Najaf on November 12, having learned of the massive outpouring of dissent by Iranians during the mourning rites for his son Mostafa, Imam Khomeini declared, “The nation—from clergy to academicians to the laborers and farmers, men and women—all are awakened.”¹⁴ This situation was inflamed by the shah himself when he gave his approval for publication of an editorial, which appeared in the newspaper *Ettela'at* on January 7, 1978. Highly insulting to Imam Khomeini, the editorial appears to have triggered the *Ulema* into action to organize the Iranian people for a popular revolt against the Pahlavi regime.

On January 8 and 9, students went on strike, bazaars closed and suddenly, thousands of Iranians took to the streets in protests that spread across Iran like wildfire. After reports that the shah’s security forces had shot and killed a number of student protestors in Qom, even more demonstrators poured into the streets across the country,¹⁵ while leaders called for protests on the 40th day of mourning for the Qom martyrs. At each successive demonstration, additional Iranians were martyred which triggered calls for more protests on each respective *chelom*, resulting in an escalating rate of public participation in what became a 40-day cycle of ever-increasing uprisings in 1978.¹⁶ The shah finally fled from Iran on January 16, 1979, a little over a year after the protests in Qom on January 8 and 9, 1978.

Unprecedented Popular Support

Perhaps above all the other factors contributing to the uniqueness of the Islamic Revolution in Iran was the sheer magnitude of its popular support. Historically, it is extremely rare for more

than one percent of the population to support a revolution; perhaps the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917 may have engaged more than one percent of the population. Contrasting the exceptional case of Iran, scholar of revolutions Charles Kurzman wrote, “Yet in Iran, more than 10 percent of the country marched in anti-shah demonstrations on December 10, 1978.” At that time, then British Ambassador to Iran Anthony Parsons, who was astounded by the massive outpouring of public support, observed from his office window in Tehran, “The street is wide but it was filled from pavement to pavement and from top to bottom as far as the eye can see for a period of three or four hours.” Median estimates of public participation in protests in Tehran on December 10 and the following day range from under 1 million to over 2 million. Combined with reliable estimates of protests in Isfahan, Mashhad, Qom, Shiraz and other Iranian cities, it is quite likely that up to 9 million Iranians—nearly 25 percent of the population¹⁷—protested the despotic reign of the shah on those two days, making this the largest protest event in history.¹⁸

Explanations for Iran’s Islamic Revolution

How can we account for the singular success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran? According to Kurzman, all theories attempting to explain and, retroactively predict, the occurrence of a revolution fall into five categories: military; political; economic; organizational; and, cultural or religious. When applied to Iran, explanations in the first four categories fail to fully account for the unanticipated occurrence, rapid development and unprecedented popular support. Western scholars also reject the fifth category, but a closer look reveals rejection is due to the distorted western lens of scholarship which sees religion as a sui generis category.

Military - Explanations in this category claim that the revolution was triggered by the failure of the shah to suppress protests with sufficient force, disregarding the shah's crackdown on protest following his White House visit in November 1977.

Political - Explanations here hold that Carter's human rights campaign and the shah's liberalization programs led to the revolution, but fail to account for the increase in protests following the shah's November 1977 crackdown.

Economic - Economic arguments point to deprivation experienced by Iranians after the oil boom and subsequent bust in the 1970s, but fail to clarify why other oil-exporting countries with similar economic circumstances did not experience revolutions.

Organizational - These arguments attribute the revolution to clerical control of the “Mosque Network,” while overlooking the fact that many of the clerics most active in opposing the Pahlavi regime had been exiled or marginalized by the regime.

Cultural / Religious - Basing their denial on a claim that a majority of Iranians failed to respond to Imam Khomeini's November 1977 calls for protest until mid-1978, western scholars either reject religion (or culture as secularists would say) or attempt marginalize it in a rush to find a secular explanation for the singular success of the Islamic Revolution. So because of a six-month “time delay” in the response of some Iranians, the secularist scholars reject the only reasonable explanation consistent with the chronology of observed revolutionary events.¹⁹ We

recall that the Prophet of Islam (S) was given 23 years to accomplish his mission on earth, and yet some western scholars apparently feel that Imam Khomeini should have accomplished his mission in Iran in less than six months. This logic results from the refusal by western scholars to see religion as an integral part of life rather than a mere *sui generis* category.

There is a *hadith* in *Bihar al-Anwar* which quotes Imam Ali (AS) as saying, “A man from Qom will invite the people to the right path. A group of people will gather around him who are of iron will and determination. The heavy winds will not deter them nor will they tire of war, only relying on Allah (SWT) from Whom the righteous will attain salvation.”²⁰ Surely, Imam Ali (AS) was referring to Imam Khomeini and the people of Iran who helped him to achieve victory in 1979 and establish the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Endnotes

¹ Jahangir Amuzegar, *Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution: The Pahlavis' Triumph and Tragedy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 10.

² Jimmy Carter, “Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner,” *American Presidency Project*, December 31, 1977, accessed February 10, 2014, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7080>.

³ “Commemoration of the 32nd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution of Iran,” *Press Release*, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, February 10, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, <http://www.iran-embassy.dk/Islamic%20Revolution%20of%20Iran.pdf>.

⁴ Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 163.

⁵ Jahangir Amuzegar, *ibid.*, 12.

⁶ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 103.

⁷ Mark Gasiorowski, “Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) In Persia,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, December 15, 1991, updated October 10, 2011, accessed February 11, 2014, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/central-intelligence-agency-cia-in-persia>.

⁸ James Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 258.

⁹ James Bill, *ibid.*, 259.

¹⁰ Charles Kurzman, *ibid.*, 2.

¹¹ Charles Kurzman, *ibid.*, 30.

¹² Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 101.

¹³ Michael Axworthy, *ibid.*, 101.

¹⁴ Charles Kurzman, *ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵ Charles Kurzman, *ibid.*, 33-37.

¹⁶ Michael Axworthy, *ibid.*, 104, 105.

¹⁷ Jan Lahmeyer, “Iran: Historical Demographical Data of the Whole Country,” *Population Statistics*, October 30, 2006, accessed February 11, 2014, <http://www.populstat.info/Asia/iranc.htm>.

¹⁸ Charles Kurzman, *ibid.*, 121, 122. See also Axworthy, 121.

¹⁹ Charles Kurzman, *ibid.*, 163-166.

²⁰ *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 60, 216, as quoted in “The Holy City of Qum in Ahadith” *Imam Reza Network*, accessed February 11, 2014, <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=324>.