

36 Years of Victory: Reflections on the Islamic Revolution in Iran

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“The success of the Islamic revolutionary ideology is the novel and teleologically distinct mark of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.”

— Said Amir Arjomand¹

As the lunatic fringe in Washington tightens its grip on the levers of power after gaining control of both houses of the U.S. Congress, the noble people of Iran are celebrating the 36th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, when they released themselves from the clutches of the American installed and supported despot, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

The Islamic Revolution, like any successful revolution, caused a major upheaval in the political structure of the country and ended with the ouster of the previous ruling regime. What stands out in the case of Iran is that, unlike the frenzied bloodbaths that accompanied revolutions in France, Russia and China, the amount of violence was relatively low. This phenomenon would appear to be a consequence of the almost universal consensus among Iranians that the only way to rid the country of the U.S.-supported tyrant was to unite behind the powerful unifying force of Islam.² This unifying force, *tawhid*, combines *din* (religion), *dunya* (worldly existence) and *dawla* (state) into an inseparable unity in a way that is neither accepted nor well understood in the west.³

By unifying the people through their historical connection to Islam, the revolution in Iran also stands apart from the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions in that it was a logical conclusion to a historical trend that began in the sixteenth century when Iranians overwhelmingly embraced the Shi’a Islamic school of theology. So while the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions were marked by a radical departure from their respective historical pasts, the Islamic Revolution in Iran was distinguished by a culmination of four centuries of inseparable affiliation between Iranians and Shi’a Islam. Western leaders have repeatedly failed to comprehend the depth of this historical tie,⁴ which one right wing pundit described dismissively as “a brilliant amalgamation of nationalism and religious fervor.”⁵

Those leaders in America with any semblance of sanity remaining would do well to reflect on the significance of the Islamic Revolution in Iran as the country celebrates the 36th anniversary, particularly at a time when the reactionary Republican regime seems obsessed with scuttling any possibility of a permanent agreement with Iran on its peaceful nuclear energy program. Anyone who attempts to derail a nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 group of countries—the U.S., France, Britain, Russia, China and Germany — “should be isolated by the international community, even if it is the U.S. Congress,” Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated emphatically.⁶ Nevertheless, the Republican reactionaries remain undaunted.

Among the loudest voices in Congress launching verbal volleys against Iran is the ranking Democrat on the U.S. senate foreign relations committee, Senator Robert Menendez from New Jersey. In a recent session, upon hearing from U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken who testified against imposing additional sanctions upon Iran, Menendez quipped, “The more I hear from the [Obama] Administration and its quotes, the more it sounds like talking points that

come straight out of Tehran.”⁷ Would that only be true, but regrettably, such prattle appears effective in putting the proponents of diplomacy with Iran on the defensive.

Considering that the U.S. engineered the CIA coup restoring dictator Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in 1953,⁸ has engaged in acts of war against Iran by economic sanctions since 1979,⁹ supported Saddam with weapons and intelligence in his murderous 8-year-long war that by the most conservative estimates killed 213,000 Iranians,¹⁰ and downed a civilian Iranian airliner killing all 290 passengers on board,¹¹ it is remarkable, and a credit to Iran’s principled leaders, that Tehran would even consent to negotiate with the Washington warmongers. Yet in spite of these historical incitements by the U.S., Menendez has accused Iran of inflammatory actions. “Iran is clearly taking steps that can only be interpreted as provocative,” he insisted, as his collaborator, house speaker John Boehner, has taken the incendiary step of inviting the Iranophobic Zionist leader Benjamin Netanyahu to address a joint session of the U.S. Congress on Iran.¹²

In an age of rampant Iranophobia, I suppose I could be called an Iranophile, for after visiting Iran with my wife several years ago I fell in love with the country and the people. However, most U.S. leaders, unlike me, have not even bothered to visit the country that they so vehemently vilify. One exception is former Kansas Congressman Jim Slattery, who, after a recent visit to Iran noted, “Very few American policy-makers have ever been to Iran and even fewer know key leaders in the Islamic Republic.” Indeed, Slattery is the first former U.S. Congressman to visit Iran since the victory of the Islamic Revolution. Confirming my own experiences in visiting the Islamic Republic, Slattery remarked, “I walked the streets of Tehran freely without fear. ... The Iranians I encountered were friendly and interested in the United States.”¹³

Iran’s successes in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution are numerous and can be seen in all social, political, military and technological areas. Iran leads the world in scientific output, which is now at a rate eleven times the global average.¹⁴ For the benefit of the society as a whole, Iran’s government has invested oil revenues in the construction of schools, hospitals, highways, railroads, airports, power plants and other needed facilities. In addition, governmental initiatives in the areas of healthcare, education and social welfare have not only caused a sizeable increase in the middle class, but also transformed the country into a strong regional power.¹⁵

Iran has also achieved impressive economic gains since the victory of the Islamic Revolution despite the eight-year imposed war, economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation by the west, even managing to pay off loans from U.S. banks within the first two years of its existence. The increasingly severe U.S.-imposed regimen of economic sanctions forced the fledgling Islamic Republic to pursue economic policies of self-sufficiency and practice pragmatic diplomacy. This confluence of social, economic and political forces over time have forged Iran into a powerful nation and a key regional player that cannot be ignored diplomatically or militarily.¹⁶

Iran has advanced dramatically in the area of healthcare since the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and, as a result, not only has life expectancy risen from 55 to over 71, but also infant mortality has fallen over 70 percent.¹⁷ Iran’s health care system, known as Integrated Primary Health Care (IPHC), has been so successful, that doctors in the American state of Mississippi, the state with the highest poverty rates and poorest healthcare outcomes in the U.S., looked to Iran for help in designing a cost-effective healthcare system.¹⁸

Iran has also done a better job of expanding the non-oil sector than neighboring petroleum exporting countries. In the face of the U.S.-imposed economic sanctions, Iran has managed to become self-sufficient, or nearly so, in a number of critical industries such as steel, copper, paper and cement. Iran also produces a wide range of industrial equipment, including pumps, compressors, piping and related components for its petrochemical industries, as well as electronic equipment, pharmaceuticals and telecommunications devices. With the largest stocks of industrial robots in the region, Iran has also become an exporter of automobiles.¹⁹

Most important, and perhaps most impressive, is the striking reduction in poverty that the government of Iran has achieved by holding fast to the principles of the Islamic Revolution. According to data from the World Bank, less than 2 percent of Iranians are living in poverty, a lower percentage than most other large-population middle income countries, including Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey and Venezuela.²⁰

Finally, there is the fact that Iranian women are far ahead of their counterparts in other Persian Gulf nations socially, politically, educationally and health-wise. Governmental policies, again stemming from the principles of the Islamic Revolution, support women by granting them six months paid maternity leave plus an extra hour of paid leave per day for eighteen months, maternity benefits that exceed International Labor Organization standards not to mention those in the U.S. and other western countries. As a footnote of pride, the first two Muslim women to climb Mount Everest are from Iran.²¹ And, of course, the brilliant Iranian mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani is the first woman to win the prestigious Fields Medal in 2014.²²

These positive gains in economic and social development in Iran after the victory of the Islamic Revolution stemmed from maintaining *tawhid*, the strong unification of religion, daily life and government, and rigorously shunning the secular concepts of the west. Iran's Islamic government has done much more in alleviating poverty, expanding education and providing access to healthcare than the deposed shah's regime ever did, despite full U.S. backing.²³ These accomplishments fly in the face of the perpetual U.S.-promulgated propaganda that continually characterizes Iran as a country poised on the precipice of another revolution.²⁴

With the Islamic Revolution now entering its 37th year of victory, many in the west have spent their careers analyzing the shah's downfall. "A privately hated regime may enjoy widespread public support because of people's reluctance to take the lead in publicizing their opposition. The regime may, therefore, seem unshakeable, even if its support would crumble at the most minor shock," explained economist Timur Kuran with simple clarity.²⁵ The same words could apply to the United States, which at present also seems unshakeable. The fatal minor shock in Washington's case could be a failure to conclude successfully the negotiations with Iran.

Ellie Geranmayeh, a policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, has warned, "[T]he United States must not allow a myopic and obstructionist Congress to derail a deal that is in Washington's long-term interest and strengthens global security."²⁶ Washington would be well advised to consider that unless it changes its obstructionist approach to Iran, it may suffer the same fate as the shah it once so staunchly supported.

Endnotes

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- ⁴ Hamid Algar, *The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Qom: Ansariyan, 2006), 6, 7.
- ⁵ Suzanne Maloney, "After Thirty-Five Years, Iran's Revolution Finds a Fragile Equilibrium," Middle East Politics and Policy Blog, *Brookings Institute*, February 14, 2014, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/02/10-iran-revolution-anniversary-turning-point>.
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- ⁹ Michael Axworthy, *ibid.*, 176.
- ¹⁰ Michael Axworthy, *ibid.*, 293.
- ¹¹ Michael Axworthy, *ibid.*, 275-277.
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- ¹⁶ Daniel Brumberg, "Iran's Successes and Failures - 34 Years Later," *Iran Primer*, February 9, 2013, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/feb/09/iran%E2%80%99s-successes-and-failures-34-years-later>.
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- ²⁰ Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, *ibid.*, 190-191.
- ²¹ Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, *ibid.*, 193.
- ²² Bjorn Carey, "Stanford's Maryam Mirzakhani wins Fields Medal," *Stanford University News*, August 12, 2014, accessed January 29, 2015, <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/august/fields-medal-mirzakhani-081214.html>.
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- ²⁴ Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, *ibid.*, 194.
- ²⁵ Timur Kuran, "Sparks and Prairie Fires: A Theory of Unanticipated Political Revolution," *Public Choice* 61-1 (1989), 42, accessed 24 January 2015, <http://econ.duke.edu/uploads/assets/People/Kuran/Sparks%20and%20prairie%20fires.pdf>.
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