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DEBACLE
The American
Failure in Iran



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To Kathleen and Barbara

would learn the virtues of moderation in a different environment. This was not always a successful operation. In fact, Khomeini's three closest associates during the revolutionary period all returned to Iran from foreign universities: Ibrahim Yazdi from Texas, Abol Hassan Bani Sadr from Paris, and Sadeq Ghotbzadeh from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Even college graduates—or drop-outs, as in the case of Ghotbzadeh—could retain the intense faith of the Shi'ites.*

Concentration of strength in the hands of the religious leaders:

While Khomeini had been exiled in the early 1960s (first to Turkey, then to the city of Najaf in Iraq), the shah never took decisive action against the mullahs, who bitterly resented his programs. Like Reza Shah, Mohammed Reza provided for civil judges (thus depriving the mullahs of financial and political opportunities) and greatly enhanced civil rights for the populace at large, particularly for women and minorities. These measures flew in the teeth of the Shi'ite leaders' convictions that women should be unseen and unheard outside the home, and that the governance of the country should remain in purely Shi'ite hands. Perhaps the most provocative of the shah's actions was to appoint several Baha'is (followers of a nineteenth-century religious movement considered heretical by Islamic leaders) to cabinet-level positions.

Beginning in 1976, there were large-scale demonstrations demanding greater adherence to fundamentalist Islamic practices. Rather than meeting the Shi'ite challenge head on, the shah alternated between harsh measures and attempts at appeasement (as, for example, his return to the use of the Arab calendar in the autumn of 1978). This was only understandable, for the struggle with the Shi'ites would have been enormously difficult even under the most favorable circumstances, and in the second half of the 1970s the shah found himself on the defensive in many areas. As one of the best analysts

*Shi'ism has its roots in the disputes that erupted after the death of the Prophet Mohammed as to who should wear his mantle as leader of the religious community (*Umma*). The Shi'ites are those who remained loyal to Ali in the line of succession. Widely distributed throughout Iraq and Iran, as well as the Persian Gulf and Pakistan, the Shi'ites proclaimed the legitimacy of the Caliphate within the family of Ali. In time, however, various schools of interpretation evolved, reducing the homogeneity of the Shi'ite religious community. The various schools include the Qarmats, the Ismailians, the Nusayris, and so on.

of the revolution has observed, "the clergy was the only group in Iran equipped to engage in oppositional activities. It possessed a functioning system of communication; local facilities in the form of mosques and related buildings . . . close daily contact with the masses and the possibility of including political themes in the Friday sermons. With all this, the high-ranking clergy enjoyed a certain degree of immunity from the shah's grip."¹⁵

While the shah challenged the mullahs indirectly—by enactment of the legislation that made up the White Revolution—he had no stomach for the kind of unholy war that would have been necessary to bring the Shi'ites to heel. His father had been far more forceful, and there were many around him who urged Mohammed Reza to emulate Reza Shah. Yet paradoxically, the greater the shah's authority (and authoritarianism) in secular matters, the less he seemed inclined to challenge the mullahs.

The hostility of the bazaaris: The bazaar merchants, who made up a traditional merchant class of considerable power, had long resented the shah's modernization program. His introduction of the Western banking system threatened the bazaaris' income from moneylending (at rates much higher than those permitted by the banks), and his plans for the creation of cooperatives also menaced their traditional activities. Worse yet, the shah proposed the construction of a new commercial and shopping area precisely on the site of the traditional bazaar, thus threatening the bazaaris with physical removal from their business places. Along with these hated steps, he periodically called for crackdowns on price-gouging. It was thus not surprising that many bazaaris supported the revolution, both for their own self-interest (often of a highly avaricious sort) and to a certain extent out of religious conviction. Lastly, there was an unpleasant "ethnic" component to the bazaaris' anti-shah activities: they hoped to remove their Jewish and Armenian competitors by supporting Khomeini—hopes that were to be fully realized after the revolution.

The physical presence of a foreign community: If any Iranian needed a physical symbol of the changes the shah had wrought upon the country, it was readily at hand in the large foreign ghettos in Tehran, and to some extent other cities as well. The most obvious of these groups was the American community, composed of business

(they had in fact urged that publication be postponed, or that it be printed in an unobtrusive corner of the paper), and they had to deal with the rage of the ayatollahs and mullahs. Even the most moderate of the ayatollahs, Kazem Shariatmadari, condemned the article for "besmirching the faith," and suggested that the publication of the attack had "shocked all Muslims in Iran." Under the circumstances, no one could defend the article in *Ettela'at*, and the alliance of convenience between religious and more secular religious leaders opposed to the shah became even stronger.

The publication came at a time when violence was once again erupting in the streets. New demonstrations took place in the holy city of Qum on January 7 and 9. Religious leaders claimed that the actions were in response to the *Ettela'at* article, while the government maintained that they were timed to coincide with two of the most important dates in the history of the westernization of Iran: January 7, when women had been formally emancipated in 1935; and January 9, when the shah's agrarian program had been formally launched in 1962. Whatever the actual explanation, the demonstrations were serious, with the second leading to violent clashes with police. At least six people were killed in the fighting.

The deaths in Qum marked the beginning of six months of periodic violence throughout the country. Once the mandatory sixty days of mourning had passed, demonstrations were launched anew, producing new clashes with government troops, fresh martyrs, and the beginning of another cycle of forty days. This relentless rhythm continued until June, when the pattern was broken and violence became almost nonstop.

The violence was not limited to religious centers, although it almost always had some religious ingredient. For the first time since 1963, there was an antigovernment protest in the Tehran bazaar, where the shopkeepers staged a strike in the face of official threats to revoke the licenses of all participants. And as always, there were periodic explosions on university campuses.

In June, the crisis took on a new dimension. Both the number of demonstrations and their clear religious content pointed to a guiding hand with single-minded resolve:

The dominant role of the religious leader in the events of 1978 was emphasized by the nature of the targets attacked by rioters, many of

which had religious significance or stood for secular influence or a Western life-style in the eyes of the demonstrators. Others were chosen because they were seen as symbols of capitalism and social inequality, or of the power of the regime. Many targets fell into more than one of these categories. Recurrent attacks were made on cinemas and theatres, liquor stores, television sale rooms, shops for luxury goods, expensive cars, banks, the headquarters of women's organizations, police stations, and the offices of the *Rastakhiz* party. A different religious element came to the fore in the attacks on businesses owned or headed by members of the Bahai sect. . . . Yet another indication was that riots usually started at centers of religious life. . . . Sermons and religious lectures were the principal means for spreading opposition propaganda. . . .¹

In addition to all these targets, the demonstrations increasingly centered upon the person of the shah himself, and upon his deviation from Islamic standards of behavior and belief. In particular, there was a growing demand that the shah abandon the Imperial calendar (dated from the accession of Cyrus the Great) and reinstate the Islamic one (starting with the hejira of Mohammed in 622).

In the face of this heightened violence against him, the shah reversed his tactics by attempting to appease his religious enemies. Military commanders were instructed to show maximum restraint in dealing with religious-led demonstrations, and it was not until an outburst of unusually destructive violence swept Isfahan in early August, shortly after the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, that martial law was temporarily declared in that city. The shah had once again gotten the worst of both worlds: having provoked the wrath of the mullahs, he then backed away from their challenge. The impression in the eyes of his enemies was of a man who was losing his grip on power, unsure of his strategy, and vulnerable to attack—an impression that had been heightened in June when the shah announced that the dreaded chief of SAVAK, General Nematollah Nassiri, had been relieved of his responsibilities. There are many versions of the reasons for Nassiri's removal, and it is impossible to select any one of them with confidence. Some experts, including at least one high-ranking official of the U.S. State Department, believed that the shah was responding to direct American suggestions that Nassiri should be removed. The general was the symbol of human rights violations to many in the American foreign policy establish-

Tripoli, providing logistical help, funds, and sanctuary for Iranian exiles and their friends; and a far-flung network of acolytes and supporters throughout the Arab world and the West, organizing similar movements for purposes of propaganda and exerting pressure on local governments to weaken the shah. Once in motion, the movement acquired such tremendous gravity that it attracted the weaker secular political groups that had long been considered the only true alternative to the Pahlavi dynasty by most observers; it also received support from the Soviet Union, although the full extent of this assistance can only be guessed at.

The world view of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is contained in two volumes: *Islamic Government*, a collection of his lectures in Najaf published in Arabic in 1970; and *Khomeini and His Movement*, a collection of his speeches and harangues published in Farsi in 1975. The central theme is the same in both volumes—the shah must fall, for he is an enemy of Islam. In the 1975 book, Khomeini put it in unmistakable terms: “The rationale of [the shah’s] government and some of its members is the abolition of the laws of Islam.” What precisely were the shah’s sins? First and foremost was the effort to westernize Iran, thus depriving the country of its moral base and the mullahs of their rightful place in society. Khomeini condemns the hiring of women in boys’ high schools, and of men in girls’ high schools, “the moral wrongness of which is clear to all.” Moreover, it is wrong to have women in high places, which the shah had permitted.

But some of the harshest language is reserved for the practice of appointing lay persons to high positions in the national courts: “In order to accomplish its own designs and to abolish manliness and adherence to Islam as qualities for judges, the government’s Ministry of Justice has shown its opposition to the established law of Islam. From this point on, Jews, Christians, and enemies of Islam and of the Muslims must interfere in the affairs of Muslims. . . .” The words “enemies of Islam” are a code-phrase for the Baha’is, who were targeted by the Khomeini movement as early as the demonstrations in 1977–78, and later singled out for violent treatment once the revolution succeeded.

The shah was criticized not only for his attempts at modernization, but also for his leniency toward sinners: “We want,” said Khomeini in the earlier volume, “a ruler who would cut off the hand

of his own son if he steals, and would flog and stone his near relative if he fornicates.” Prior to the revolution, Khomeini’s many apologists in the West suggested that one should not take such words literally, but the course of events has shown that a literal interpretation was closer to the truth. The same volume contains a preview of the actions of some of the leaders of the Khomeini period:

If a just mullah is placed in charge of the enforcement of canonical punishments . . . would he enforce them otherwise than how they were enforced in the days of the Prophet? . . . Would the Prophet have imposed more than a hundred lashes on the fornicator not previously chaste? Can the mullah reduce the amount of this punishment, thereby creating a divergence between his practice and that of the Prophet? Certainly not! The ruler . . . is no more than the executor of God’s command and decree.¹

Furthermore, Khomeini attacked the shah for his close working relationship with two foreign powers: the United States and Israel. The latter is singled out for intense hatred, and the former is linked to Israeli schemes for the destruction of Islam. Israel, “through its evil agents . . . has dealt a blow to us. It strikes at you, the nation; it wishes to seize your economy; it wishes to carry off your commerce and agriculture; it wishes to make itself the owner of wealth . . . the Koran bars its way—it must be removed. . . . The Iranian government [of the shah] in pursuance to the purposes and schemes of Israel has humiliated us and continues to do so.” Those not familiar with the relationship between Israel and Iran might well wonder at the intensity of Khomeini’s rage in 1975. It is not widely known that every Israeli prime minister from David Ben-Gurion to Menachem Begin visited Tehran during this period, as did other leading Israeli personages. Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin, for example, went secretly to Iran to discuss matters of joint interest with their Iranian counterparts. And there was considerable cooperation between the two countries. Iran was Israel’s most reliable oil supplier; Israel responded by assisting Iran on military preparedness, a certain degree of intelligence sharing, and even technical assistance. There was no Israeli embassy in Tehran, but the head of the Israeli mission during the last days, Uri Lubrani, was as much an ambassador as any diplomat bearing the official title. It is doubtful that Khomeini knew the full extent of bilateral relations, but he was not imagining the

Notes

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3. U.S. Department of State, *Bulletin*, November 9, 1977.

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3. Cf. Michael Ledeen, "Khomeini's Theocratic Vision," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 1979. For an example of the reaction from Khomeini's supporters in the United States, see the letter to the *Wall Street Journal* from Mahmoud Rashdan, the Secretary General of the Muslim Students Association of the U.S. and Canada, January 22, 1979.
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