

**Short Essay III - The History Behind the Iranian Revolution**

Minerva University

Prof. Kukis

IL120.01 - Modern Middle East

March 30, 2024

### **Short Essay III - The History Behind the Iranian Revolution**

It is within the context of Cleveland & Bunton's (2009 pg. 369-372) six main political trends in the Middle East in the 1970s and 80s - namely, the United States' increasing power and growth in the aftermath of the Cold War; the growing centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict; the revolution in petroleum prices with the expansion of petroleum giants such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; the constancy of authoritarian regimes; the emergence of Islamic-based political activity and protest; the growing tension among Arab states; and the presence of internal violence - that resulted in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This "cataclysmic event" overthrew the shah, established a republic, and replaced secular laws with Islamic rules in the fashion of classic revolutions (i.e., the French Revolution), to which Gettleman & Schaar (ch.28C) characterizes it as a "landmark of contemporary politics" due to it happening in one of the most important states in the Middle East. It also raised questions about modernization in general and revolutions in particular. This successful revolution can be explained mainly by foreign intervention during and after British imperialism, especially the United States', Mossadeq's nationalization of oil, and the presence of significant figures, such as Khomeini, that inflamed religious discourse.

Nearly 15 years before the Revolution, the exiled Shiite leader Ayatollah Khomeini started voicing out his opinions about one of the Middle East's main historical grievances - the capitulations, or agreements that conferred foreigners the privilege of being judged in another country by laws of their own countries (Gettleman & Schaar, ch 28). Khomeini then associated the Shah's willingness to extend this "privilege" to American military advisors to the earlier oppression of British imperialists. In other words, the Americans were as imperialistic as the British, and the weak parliament and the country's ruling circles humiliated Iran by implying that Iranian laws did not apply to foreigners (Gettleman & Schaar, ch 28). By emphasizing this,

Khomeini directly targeted the Shah and the monarchy and became the most critical clerical leader after the revolution.

The US's influence and power in the region dates back decades before the Revolution, starting with, for example, the British influence over Iranian oil in the 1950s, owning more than half of the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) (Gettleman & Schaar, ch 28). Muhammed Mossadeq, head of the Iranian Parliament's Oil Committee, favored the nationalization of the AIOC, and the British, rightfully aware of the British diminishing dominance over the Middle Eastern oil industry, responded to the nationalization of the AIOC with a boycott together with the other members of the Seven Sisters oil cartel to cause financial havoc in Iran. With a weak Mossadeq, the CIA and the MI6 engineered a coup d'état, resulting in the exiled Shah's return to a resentful country and later in the end of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979.

In parallel to these factors, the Shah's government in 1975 took drastically unpopular measures to secure its position, including abandoning the existing two-party system for the Resurgence Party and forcing the Iranian people to reduce (and hopefully abandon) the role of Islam in their life (ex: adopting a royal calendar instead of the Islamic calendar) (Cleveland & Bunton's, 2009 pg. 424). Although strong at first, these measures had many cracks, especially with the inflation from the government's wasteful spending after the dramatic rise in oil prices in 1973 and 1974. Another crack was the Shah's reliance on foreign experts, exacerbating "Western imperialism" (pg. 425). The US's influence was also relevant given that, after President Carter's inauguration in 1977, the Shah relaxed police controls and introduced reforms to not go against Washington (pg. 425). Regarding religion, multiple figures played an important role, notably Bazargan (and his Freedom Movement from the 1960s), Ali Shari'ati, and Khomeini (as mentioned above) (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009 pg. 425-428). The fuse that reshaped a protest into a revolution

happened in January of 1978, when an official government newspaper published a scandalous attack on Khomeini, prompting students and merchants to mount a demonstration against the Shah's regime (pg. 428). Known as the Qum incident, a snowball of protests and memorials followed every forty days per Islam culture after forces killed demonstrators, generating a cycle of brutality and revolt mixed with a failed economic policy and indecisive actions from the shah (pg.428-430). During the ten days of Muharram, thousands of people defied the regime, and on January 16, 1979, Muhammad Reza Shah left Iran forever (pg. 430). Iran became a theocracy.

**Word count:** 744

## References

Cleveland, W. L., & Bunton, M. (2009). A History of the Modern Middle East (4th ed.). Westview Press.

Gettleman, M., & Schaar, S. (Eds.). (1997). The Middle East and Islamic World Reader. Grove Press.

## **Appendix A - LO Appendix**

**#il12001-historicalforces:** Although the historical reasons that culminated in the Iranian revolution are many, I focused on these main ones: the US's influence and how it connoted to British Imperialism, oil and economic decisions, and religious elements that shaped political decisions. I provide an overview of these economic, political, and cultural factors, starting in the 1950s with AIOC and then expanding on the consequences of these actions to explain how they resulted in the Revolution. Thus, I explain the causes and consequences of events before the revolution.

**AI statement:** I only used Grammarly to correct grammar mistakes.