Religion and Conflict Case Study Series

Iran: Religious Elements of the 1979 Islamic Revolution

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Abstract
This case study investigates the social, economic, and political dynamics of 1970s Iran that led the Iranian people to accept, and then maintain, religion as the basis of a new political system after deposing Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979. The case study looks at the events in Iran through four questions: What are the historical origins of religion-influenced politics in Iran? How did religious factors inspire challenges to the Shah’s rule? How did domestic and international political factors intersect with religion? In what ways did religious factors inspire the ongoing revolution in the 1980s? Complementing the case study’s core text are a timeline of key events and a bibliography of select sources for further study of the Iranian Revolution.

About this Case Study
This case study was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

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With increasing malaise and discontent among most sections of the Iranian population, the 1970s were characterized by growing despotism and repression, signaling an impending shift within Iran. The monarchy under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi had failed to implement promised political and economic reforms, and faced growing economic difficulties in 1976 and 1977 despite huge income from oil exports, prompting massive mobilization against his regime. The subsequent overthrow of Iran’s monarchy and its replacement with an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a leader of the revolution, made Islam a political force throughout the Islamic world. By looking at the historical, domestic, international, and socio-economic factors related to the revolution, this case study examines the turbulent context of Iranian society in the 1970s and the crucial role that religion played in shaping modern Iran.
Iran has one of the world’s richest and most complex cultures, drawing on an ancient legacy that stretches as far back as the fourth millennium BCE. The Persian Empire, as ancient Iran came to be known, was ruled by the likes of Cyrus the Great (640-600 BCE), and its power eventually extended across a vast territory that reached across present-day South Asia, through the Middle East, to Africa and Europe. The cultural legacy of this period subsequently became intertwined with that of Seleucid Greeks, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, and others who ruled the Iranian plateau, all the while retaining a distinctive character.

Islam arrived in Iran in the seventh century CE with the armies of Caliph Umar, and over the subsequent centuries became deeply embedded in Iranian society and culture. Later, when Christian Europe was in the depths of the Dark Ages, Muslim Iran carried the torch of intellectual advancement, making crucial scientific contributions to mathematics, astronomy, engineering, and architecture, as well as philosophy, poetry, and the arts. Starting in the early sixteenth century, the Safavid Dynasty made Shi’a Islam the official religion of the state, gradually displacing the then-dominant Sunni tradition and ushering in a period of power and influence. Yet by the late 1700s, the country was in political decline, as the military and cultural significance of the country led to entanglement in the affairs of expanding European powers and extended periods of domestic strife.

Over the past hundred years, Iran has been plagued with social and political instability. In 1905 and 1906, a nationalist uprising transformed the aging Qajar dynasty into a limited constitutional monarchy. A few years later in 1908, the discovery of oil dramatically altered the dynamics of development and international involvement in Iran. The country was temporarily occupied by Britain and Russia during World War I but maintained its formal independence. In 1925, Reza Shah Pahlavi overthrew the last member of the Qajar dynasty, Ahmad Shah Qajar, and became the first monarch of the Pahlavi dynasty. Reza Shah developed Iran’s oil industry and implemented a variety of modernizing reforms. Politically, he concentrated power in the central government while at the same time advocating limits to the tenure of rulers. He initiated sweeping development projects related to the construction of national infrastructure and transportation, education, health, and women’s rights. Moreover, he engaged in religious outreach and became the first monarch in 1,400 years to pay respect to Jews in Iran by praying at a synagogue in Isfahan.

Reza Shah’s staunchly neutral stance during World War Two and his unwillingness to expel German nationals or allow the Allies to use the strategic Trans-Iranian Railway raised fears that he would align his oil-rich country with Nazi Germany. This drove Britain and the Soviet Union to invade Iran and force Reza Shah to abdicate power to his son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941. In the aftermath of this intervention and amidst increasingly competitive politics in the postwar era, voices in Iran began to call for the nationalization of the oil industry as a means of strengthening Iranian sovereignty.

In 1951, the Iranian Parliament elected Mohammad Mossadeq—the leader of the secular, progressive National Front party—as prime minister. An avid advocate of nationalization, Mossadeq promptly seized the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The nationalization of the AIOC both reflected the growing frustration of Iranians regarding foreign influence and shifted economic power away from international actors and toward Iran. Despite the acute fiscal crisis that followed, the move won Mossadeq a tremendous amount of prestige within Iran. However, it also provoked an international reaction as Britain and the United States became concerned that a hostile nationalist government might further compromise their interests in the region. Amid escalating tensions, Mohammad Reza Shah fled to Rome in 1953. With the support of the British, the shah,

### Historical Background

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- Islam arrived in Iran in the seventh century CE with the armies of Caliph Umar, and over the subsequent centuries became deeply embedded in Iranian society and culture. Later, when Christian Europe was in the depths of the Dark Ages, Muslim Iran carried the torch of intellectual advancement, making crucial scientific contributions to mathematics, astronomy, engineering, and architecture, as well as philosophy, poetry, and the arts.
- Starting in the early sixteenth century, the Safavid Dynasty made Shi’a Islam the official religion of the state, gradually displacing the then-dominant Sunni tradition and ushering in a period of power and influence. Yet by the late 1700s, the country was in political decline, as the military and cultural significance of the country led to entanglement in the affairs of expanding European powers and extended periods of domestic strife.
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and the United States, Mossadeq was ousted in a coup in August of the same year, when Iranian army forces loyal to the shah arrested Mossadeq and paved the way for the return of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.\(^7\)

Once in power, and with the support of the United States and President Kennedy, the shah continued his father’s work and aimed to modernize Iran through a series of economic, social, administrative, and military reforms. By 1961, the shah’s White Revolution had made significant advances toward reorienting Iran along Western models. Aimed in part at garnering support among the peasant class of Iran, the shah’s reform programs included abolishing the feudal land ownership system, promoting literacy programs, extending the right to vote to women, and forming a series of health, reconstruction, and development corps.\(^8\) As a result of impressive economic growth, and propelled by Iran’s massive petroleum reserves (at the time the third largest in the world), the White Revolution was considered a success by many.

Although Iran achieved impressive rates of economic growth and social progress, the shah’s autocratic methods and close relationship with the West, along with striking and persistent inequality, alienated large sections of the population. By 1978, domestic unrest had transformed into large-scale religious and political opposition to the shah. In this context, the shah increasingly depended on his government security and intelligence services, which in turn became notorious for violent repression and abuse. Unrest turned into massive demonstrations by a diverse set of nationalists, Islamists, Marxists, and student groups who united in opposition against the shah. By 1979, the shah had lost his grip on power and opposition groups led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini merged together, leading the shah to finally announce his intention to leave Iran.

On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile and quickly cemented his leadership by galvanizing a wide array of political groups under the banner of Islam, Iranian nationalism, and a rejection of foreign influence.\(^9\) The monarchy was dismantled and replaced with a theocratic republic guided by Islamic principles. Despite the drastic shift in political power, many of the human rights abuses and political unrest that occurred under the shah continued through the early days of the Islamic Republic. Domestic political turmoil spilled over into international relations when, on November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students took over the US embassy in Tehran, taking 52 American diplomats hostage for 444 days. The hostage crisis consolidated Khomeini’s power within Iran, unifying competing political and religious groups against the perceived threat of US interference in Iranian affairs.\(^10\)

Following the revolution and the hostage crisis, the apparent instability of Iran did not go unnoticed by other international actors. Eager to exploit an opportunity and regain access to the Shatt al-Arab waterway (lost in the 1975 Algiers Agreement with Iran), Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein ordered his military forces to invade Iran in September 1980. The quick war Saddam had envisioned was an extraordinary miscalculation; it lasted eight years, making the Iran-Iraq War the longest interstate conflict of the twentieth century—and one of the deadliest. Conservative estimates put the combined number of casualties at 367,000 dead (not including the more than 100,000 civilians killed in the conflict) and over 700,000 wounded, though the real numbers may be considerably higher.\(^11\)

By July 1988, after suffering crippling damage to its economic infrastructure, enduring an immense loss of human life, and fearing more direct intervention by American and international forces in favor of Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini agreed to a UN-sponsored ceasefire, effectively ending the war.\(^12\) The Iran-Iraq War galvanized the Iranian people, helped Khomeini consolidate power, and consequently shaped the construction of Iran in Islamic terms.\(^13\)

Both Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini used Islam to whip up nationalistic fervor and generate domestic support for their regimes. Yet Saddam was especially fearful of Khomeini’s capacity to frame Islam in a way that would threaten him by bolstering alliances between Iran’s majority Shi’a population and the Shi’a footsoldiers who formed the bulk of Iraq’s conscript army as well as the majority of Iraq’s total population.\(^14\) As a means of unifying Iranians and promoting Islam around the world, Khomeini’s active attempts to export the Iranian Revolution to other Muslim countries continued until his death on June 3, 1989. Just as Islam increasingly became the catalyst for the 1979 revolution, it also acted as a unifying force for Iranians throughout Khomeini’s tenure as supreme leader.
Domestic Factors

From 1953 to 1975, Iran underwent a dramatic transformation. Muhammad Reza Shah pursued an aggressive Western-oriented socioeconomic modernization program, known as the White Revolution (1963-1977), and an aggressive expansion of the state. During this time, the shah carried out much of the work that his father—Reza Shah Pahlavi—had abandoned when he was forced to leave power in 1941, including an intense push to expand three crucial sectors of the state: the military, the bureaucracy, and the court patronage system. In many ways, Muhammad Reza Shah set up an even more centralized state than his father had by taking major steps to advance the country’s military, infrastructure, industry, and external trade, while advocating for land reforms and state-sponsored scholarships to Iranian students.

The shah alienated many people with these reforms. Landlords lost substantial power and influence due to land reforms, while peasants did not necessarily benefit from the increasing oil revenues and institutional reforms. Likewise, the Bazaaris (merchants of the central market in Tehran) were put off by national-level industrialization, which often developed at their expense. Moreover, the shah demonized the clergy and instituted liberal dress codes and social norms, resulting in a widespread gulf between his secularized supporters and the more conservative elements of society.

Although the shah had initially enjoyed the support of the ulama (the educated class of Muslim legal scholars), friction grew as he extended state influence over policy areas previously dominated by the ulama, including education, law, religious endowments, and land administration. In response to the shah’s overreach, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini began to argue against the shah, absolutism, and foreign interference in Iranian affairs. In 1963, Khomeini’s uncompromising position fueled a series of ulama-led popular demonstrations and disturbances in Qum and other major cities, which were brutally suppressed by the shah.

Following the uprising in Qum, Khomeini was exiled from Iran in 1964 for his criticism of the shah. While in exile, Khomeini traveled from Turkey to Iraq, and ultimately to Paris where he persisted in preaching his religious message aimed at weakening the shah’s hold on power. Khomeini’s exile afforded him the opportunity to refine his attacks against the shah, and he was able to gain stature within Iran despite living abroad. Thus, by the 1970s, he had emerged as Mohammad Reza Shah’s most potent enemy.

Khomeini and a rising, vocal minority of ulama openly opposed the shah’s modernization policies, most notably land reform and women’s suffrage. In addition, Khomeini despised Iran’s close relationship with the United States, Israel, and multinational companies, which he viewed as a threat to national independence, Muslim life, and Islam. From his pulpit, first in Qum and later from abroad, Khomeini incited and galvanized people against foreign influence. He condemned the United States as “an enemy of Islam in all its policies, this hostility being particularly apparent in its support for Israel and the nature of its influence in Iran.” Yet despite these clear and longstanding commitments to the transformation of the political and social order, the Iranian revolution unfolded in stages.

During the mid-1970s, the shah’s regime believed that the
system was working and that their reforms and decadent habits could continue unabated. Critics had by and large been marginalized or co-opted, and economic progress, while at times unreliable, seemed to provide a degree of justification for continued Pahlavi rule. By the end of 1977, although the Pahlavi state appeared stable and well entrenched under the shah, growing anger and discontent pervaded most sections of Iranian society.²¹

Despite massive oil income, long-promised projects for political and economic decentralization stalled while economic stagnation increased in 1976 and 1977.²² In response, open opposition to the shah broke out among the middle-class and the remnants of the National Front, students both inside and outside of Iran, workers, and guerillas. These groups increasingly voiced their discontent in Islamic terms, which in turn led to their identification as a religious opposition.

Broad religious opposition was itself stoked by the trained ulama, who resented the Pahlavi regime for continually eroding their power while tolerating the growing influence of Western nations. Among the policies considered hostile toward the ulama, Reza Shah implemented qualifying examinations to wear a turban and therefore be recognized as one of the ulama. The shah also secularized legal and educational systems, thus stripping the ulama of jobs. Furthermore, the shah unveiled women, opened universities to coeducation, established schools of theology in state universities, including the University of Tehran, put new restrictions on pilgrimages abroad, and created a religion corps to go along with the literacy corps for villages, thereby ensuring the teaching of an officially-sanctioned version of religion.²³ Through these policies, the shah targeted the power of the ulama and aggressively inserted himself into their previously reserved religious domain.

The shah had a number of reasons for attempting to marginalize the ulama. First, they were becoming a rival cen-
ter of power. The *ulama* wanted to maintain their status, and the mullahs, although not necessarily politically oriented, had a social agenda rooted in justice, which the shah was unable to co-opt as he had with other political groups. Second, the shah believed that Western-oriented reforms would encourage people to start thinking in secular terms, and that new ideas would inherently challenge the traditional *ulama*. The shah failed to foresee that Western ideas could cut both ways and be wielded against autocrats as well. Yet in this turbulent environment the differences between the shah and the *ulama* were too great to be bridged and the shah felt compelled to take direct action against them.

The growing conflict between the shah and the *ulama* had a significant impact on pre-revolutionary Iran and the kinds of Islamists that emerged. The shah spent vast sums on education and scholarships abroad for Iranian students. This meant that a greater number of poor, rural students had the opportunity to study outside of Iran. Although these opportunities often resulted in better economic prospects upon returning to Iran, many of these students remained conservative in their Islamic outlook. Thus, the shah’s policies, along with expanding *ulama* resistance, meant that three types of Islamists developed: Marxists (those of the far left), centrists (those open to a mix of conservative and liberal ideas), and conservatives (e.g. Khomeini). Looking back, the shah’s conflict with the *ulama* thus produced a diverse array of Islamist forces, which Khomeini was eventually able to connect with and direct. For Khomeini and a growing number of Islamists, radicalism was increasingly the best option for resisting the shah’s expansionist and pro-Western policies.

Similar to religious radicalism, political radicalism was spurred by pervasive social tension. This radicalism affected the intelligentsia, the modern middle class, the *ulama*, and the more conservative, traditional middle class. Leading this movement were two prominent figures: Ali Shariati and Khomeini. Shariati, who died in 1977, was considered by many to be the true ideologue of the Islamic Revolution. As a French-educated social scientist, Shariati was highly influential among college and high school students. Khomeini, in turn, grew in stature upon his exile in 1963 and became the leader of the revolution. In addition, Khomeini was the *faqih* (Islamic jurist) who created the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* (rule by Islamic jurists/clerics), which would underpin the future Islamic republic.

How was Khomeini able to galvanize a diverse set of social, political, and religious groups and what was Khomeini’s own ideological perspective? From the beginning, Khomeini desired universal justice and felt that only an Islamic world order could achieve such a goal. In other words, the export of the revolution to the wider Islamic world was central to the revolution’s success within Iran. Moreover, only a *faqih*-directed Islamic republic like Iran could create sufficient space for the construction of an Islamic world order. Khomeini was thus dedicated to the ideal of bringing about justice to the whole world, not simply to Iran and the Islamic world.

Khomeini’s innovative political thought—the concept of the *velayat-e faqih*—is central to his goals of remaking Iranian society and exporting the Islamic revolution to the larger world. Traditionally, the hierarchy of power within the Shi’a community belongs to God, the Prophet Muhammad, and to the infallible imams (*ma’sum*). However, Khomeini redefined the power structure by arguing that leadership could be extended to the *faqih*. This alteration meant that in order to establish a just world order, the *faqih* would have temporal and spiritual authority in the absence of the Hidden Imam who will appear “at the end of time” (*akhar-e zaman*).

In many ways, the fact that Khomeini was largely able to successfully lead the Iranian Revolution and implement his social and political reforms depended not simply on the domestic factors at work. Rather, a crucial set of international developments afforded Khomeini the opportunity to implement a vision that continues to shape modern Iran.
Near the end of the 1960s, there were a number of shifts underway throughout the international landscape: the Cold War was the recognized reality of global politics, the long process of decolonization was still forging ahead, and the United States was caught in a quagmire in Vietnam. Repressive and authoritarian dictators controlled much of Latin America, the Middle East was still gripped by the drama of the Six-Day War, and an Islamic revival was beginning to take root in the Muslim world. In Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was at the apex of his power.

A decade later, the 1979 Revolution and the removal of the pro-US shah from power marked the start of three decades of tension between the United States and Iran. Regional tensions were also substantial. The Cold War was entering its final phase, while Soviet expansionism and war in Afghanistan became the central front of the conflict between the two superpowers. Pakistan was then portrayed as the last line of defense against Soviet expansion, but after its elected prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was removed from power and executed, the government of dictator Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq ushered in a long period of military rule, which engaged in a policy of Islamization.

In this context, Khomeini called on the Muslim world to follow the example of Iran. The transnational drive of the revolution was supported by the notion that Iran represented a “third way” and an alternative socioeconomic structure to the two models of capitalism and communism. In Khomeini’s view, the social problems that paralyzed much of the world were rooted in oppressed and dominated nations that were chained to more powerful nations. Regimes that failed to follow the Iranian course were denounced as puppets of West and East, and their populations were encouraged to rise and revolt against “Westoxification.” While Khomeini’s anti-imperialist rhetoric had a significant influence on the domestic balance of power between competing political groups, it also had a profound impact on the international relations, foreign orientation, and policies of Iran.

Still, the Islamic revival was not entirely driven by Khomeini. Intellectuals throughout the Islamic world were thinking of a new political system and religion became an emerging focal point in terms of national organization. Moreover, religion became a symbol of a search for ideals of justice and egalitarianism. There was a simmering debate about how Islam could combine with a political system and thus allow it to advance moral values. Khomeini was not only the leading cleric and critic of the shah, but also the leading critic of any political system that represented American or Western democracy. Of course, the shah was particularly vulnerable to this religio-political critique, and Khomeini seized upon a deteriorating domestic situation by tapping into ideological currents as varied as nationalism, class-consciousness, religiosity, and constitutionalism.

The sense of enthusiasm and national pride generated by the revolution caused large portions of the Iranian population to advocate the export of Iranian ideas. In this respect, Khomeini was clever not to align with any one political or religious faction. Rather, he would talk about the export of Islam in general terms. Khomeini wanted people in the Middle East and Arab countries to look at Iran as a viable example of Islamic statehood. Concerning specific targets, Khomeini primarily sought to “export” the values of the revolution to surrounding geographic areas, including the Persian Gulf, the Soviet

International Factors
Caucasus and Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.\textsuperscript{30}

Saudi Arabia played a central role in combating Iran’s international influence. The Islamic Revolution in Iran rattled the Saudi monarchy more than other regional governments, as the Saudis legitimized their rule through religion and had a substantial Shi’a minority. Relying on its vast resources, Saudi Arabia thus moved to shore up support with friendly governments. For example, in Pakistan—a country possessing its own large Shi’a minority—the military dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq was directly exposed to conservative influence from Saudi Arabia, which financed the proliferation of Sunni religious schools and collaborated with Zia’s government to provide support for the Afghan jihad against the Soviets. The combination of religious schooling and the conflict in Afghanistan radicalized many Pakistani Sunni students.\textsuperscript{31} These radicalized groups soon took a militant form under the patronage of the CIA and Pakistan’s umbrella intelligence agency, the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (more commonly known as Inter-Services Intelligence, or simply ISI).\textsuperscript{32} Saudi Arabia’s funding of anti-Shi’\textasciitilde’a Sunni groups was a tactic to de-legitimize Shi’a Islam and the Iranian Revolution in order to lessen its appeal in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis largely succeeded, but as a consequence there was a vast proliferation of extremist groups.\textsuperscript{33}

Beyond Saudi Arabia, regional fears of expanding Iranian influence seemed to be confirmed by communal riots and civil disturbances, terrorist acts, and hijackings in Kuwait. These events were also linked to instability in Bahrain, where several coup attempts were directly traced back to Iran through the Hojjat al-Islam Hadi Mudarrisi, a network of support for Khomeini that had been created while he was still in exile.\textsuperscript{34}

November 4, 1979 was a decisive moment in Iran’s relationship with the international community. On that day, Iranian students, political activists, and religious actors stormed and took over the US embassy. This dramatic show of force reflected widespread fears of a repeat of the 1953 CIA-engineered coup against Mossadeq. The takeover of the US embassy in Tehran had two aims: to limit the capacity of Americans to intervene in Iran, and to arouse anti-Americanism and stoke a sense of Iranian nationalism. In addition to these objectives, which were largely successful, the hostage-takers were also able to target, label, and marginalize political opponents as pro-American. Indeed, the hostage-takers hailed their capture of the US embassy as the Second Islamic Revolution.\textsuperscript{35}

Khomeini’s harsh anti-Western rhetoric and the takeover of the US embassy marked a turning point in post-revolutionary Iran’s relationship with the international community. The extreme tension with the United States and the increasing need for international support and allies meant that external issues directly impacted Khomeini’s hold on power. Khomeini’s potent language and support of those in control of the embassy allowed him to assume the leadership of the revolutionary movement while working within the powerful current of nationalism and anti-imperialism.\textsuperscript{36}

Few states other than Saudi Arabia were as fearful of the Iranian Revolution as Iraq. However, Saddam Hussein was also confident of Iran’s temporary weakness, and thus invaded Iran in September 1980. In doing so, he expected to regain territory signed away in 1975 and hoped to put an end to the appeal of Khomeini. In this sense, the Iran-Iraq War was, in part, an attempt at counter-revolution.

Instead, the Iran-Iraq war unified and mobilized the Iranian masses under Khomeini’s leadership. Islam became a central factor in the war effort, especially Shi’a Islam and the tradition of martyrdom. Both the Iranian nation and religion were perceived to be under attack, creating a powerful common purpose for the Iranian people. After anti-Americanism, war became Khomeini’s rationale for eliminating the remaining political opposition. The Iran-Iraq War afforded Khomeini the necessary latitude to implement his vision for Iran.\textsuperscript{37} Khomeini used it to clamp down on opposition and to consolidate power for Islamists by showing that his version of Islam was associated with the defense of the true Islam. By 1988, the regime had consolidated its position. The military had held up and there was less need to export the revolution. Moreover, as a result of Saddam’s clear aggression, Iran was more accepted within the international community and Khomeini was no longer under direct threat; the Islamic Revolution had been firmly established.
**Religion and Socioeconomic Factors**

In the run-up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Khomeini’s popularity and influence grew. In particular, Khomeini struck a chord with the urban poor and his words provided a channel into which to funnel the revolutionary anger, enthusiasm, and uncertainty sweeping the nation. Khomeini’s refusal to compromise with the monarchy and his disdain for Western governments gave weight to his claim that Iran’s problems could be resolved by a return to Islamic ways, an idea that was increasingly gaining traction among the Muslim masses.

By the fall of 1978, there was a decisive entry of the industrial and salaried working classes, including influential oil workers, into the mass protest movement. The middle class, generally associated with the National Front, was swept up in the revolutionary current and increasingly had little choice but to join forces with Khomeini. As people became emboldened and enthusiastic, even in the face of deaths during demonstrations, the crucial stage of the revolution began with massive politico-economic strikes against the shah starting in late summer. The economy was virtually paralyzed, contributing to a groundswell of support for Khomeini’s uncompromising stance.

The voice of the people had proved powerful enough to destroy the Pahlavi monarchy, but the immediate challenge after the revolution was to channel that voice and draft a new constitution to replace the 1906 fundamental laws. Religion was at the heart of Khomeini’s objective to enshrine Islam at the center of Iran’s new constitution. Indeed, as the revolution sought to define itself in constitutional terms, Khomeini demonstrated a pragmatic ability to handle challenges from major social and political groups and the restructuring of the Iranian state.

The process of crafting a new constitution produced an uneven struggle between Khomeini and his disciples on the one hand and Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and his liberal Muslim allies on the other. Bazargan and Khomeini clashed over whether or not to institute an Islamic republic. Bazargan advocated a third option in the form of a democratic Islamic republic. Khomeini responded by arguing that “Islam does not need adjectives such as democratic. Precisely because Islam is everything, it means everything. It is sad for us to add another word near the word Islam, which is perfect.”

On April 1, 1979, Khomeini won the debate decisively with 99 percent of electorate voting yes on a referendum to institute the Islamic republic. Out of a total of 21 million people, 20 million participated. The vote established the framework for the elections of a 73-man constituent body called the Majles-e Khebregan (Assembly of Experts)—a term with strong religious overtones. When the elections took place in August, the Central Komiteh, the Central Mosque Office, and the newly structured Society for the Militant Clergy of Tehran (Jam‘eh-e Rouhaniyan-e Mobarez-e Tehran) closely scrutinized all candidates. In predictable fashion, the elections resulted in a lopsided victory for Khomeini’s allies, and the Assembly of Experts began drafting the Islamic Constitution. The referendum was voted upon before any of the
details of the constitution had been worked out; thus, the referendum was more a vote against the monarchy than in favor of any specific governmental system.44

Despite the quickly-executed referendum, the final constitution was an uneven hybrid, favoring Khomeini’s velayet-e faqeh but nevertheless incorporating elements of Bazargan’s calls for democratic components to the state structure. From an ideological standpoint, the document was to guide the state until the return of the Mahdi, affirming “faith in God, Divine Justice, the Koran, Judgment Day, the Prophet Muhammad, the Twelve Imams, the return of the Hidden Mahdi,” and most importantly, the concept of velayat-e faqeh.45 In addition, the constitution rejected all forms of colonialism, authoritarianism, and imperialism.

From a political standpoint, the constitution granted the supreme leader far-reaching authority, including the ability to define the interests of Islam, establish general guidelines for the Islamic Republic, mediate between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, administer policy implementation, and declare war and peace. Beyond the traditional realm of government, the supreme leader could appoint powerful officials outside the formal state structure, including the director of television and radio networks, editors of newspapers, leaders of clerical institutions, chief justices, lower court justices, and, in a later addition, vet candidates running for public office.

The newly-formed constitution had a direct impact on socioeconomic factors in post-revolutionary Iran. During the last 25 years of the Pahlavi dynasty, social and economic developments resulted in growing popular political awareness. Thus, by the time Khomeini came into power, key sectors of society such as the landowners, ulama, bazaar merchants, students, and the middle class were the target of recruitment campaigns by various political groups, which all had a stake in continued economic advancement.

It was within this competitive environment that Khomeini worked to consolidate the power of Islamist factions. At the time, while many political groups operated under the wide intellectual umbrella of the nationalists (both secular and religious), ambiguity gradually gave way to polarization as nationalism stopped functioning as a distinct political category. Through this turbulence, the leftist and Islamist groups, in their various forms, quickly emerged and controlled the political theater of revolutionary Iran.46 However, in the space of less than two years following the revolution, Khomeini and his supporters purged the leftists from government and instigated a long-term, comprehensive “perpetual revolution” to fundamentally alter all aspects of Iranian society. The “perpetual revolution” dominated and transformed Iranian and regional geopolitics for the subsequent thirty years.
Conclusion

The Iranian Revolution was not simply a short-term takeover of Tehran’s political machinery; it was the fundamental remaking of Iranian politics and society by religious elites. Islamist ideas permeated Iran’s approach to its neighbors, from support for Hezbollah and other Shi’a movements to martyr operations in the Iran-Iraq War. The people of Iran had long been observant Shi’a Muslims but the Iranian Revolution—like other Islamist movements in Afghanistan, Egypt, and elsewhere—was a revitalization of religious identity in opposition to secular pan-Arabism, the decadent “Persian” shah, atheistic communism, and godless capitalism. The initial revolution, including the shah’s overthrow, was led by religious clerics in association with other political actors using Islamic symbols, sermons as political messages, and mosques as safe havens for political activity. Ayatollah Khomeini quickly neutralized his secular allies, installing a theocracy under the leadership of Islamist jurists (velayat-e faqeh) and used Islamic themes to define citizenship, national service (including martyrdom), and obedience to the state, all of which have remained vital for more than thirty years.

Jameh mosque, Isfahan
Key Events

1906 Constitutional monarchy created
1908 Oil discovered
1926 Coronation of Reza Shah
1934 Official name change of Persia to Iran
1941 Anglo-Soviet invasion
1951 Oil nationalization
1953 CIA-aided coup
1963 White Revolution begins
1964 Khomeini exiled
February 1979 Islamic Revolution
November 1979 Students take US embassy
December 1979 Referendum on the Islamic Constitution
January 1980 Bani-Sadr elected president
1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War
June 1981 Mojahedin uprising; Bani-Sadr dismissed; Khamenei elected president
1989 Khomeini dies; Khamenei elected supreme leader; Rafsanjani elected president
1997 Khatami elected president
2005 Ahmadinejad elected president
2013 Rouhani elected president

Banknote showing Khomeini

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad


Discussion Questions

1. What are the historical origins of religion-influenced politics in Iran?

2. How did religious factors inspire challenges to the Shah’s rule?

3. How did domestic and international political factors intersect with religion?

4. In what ways did religious factors inspire the ongoing Revolution in the 1980s?

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13 Abrahamian, pp. 169-179.
14 Tripp, p. 238.
17 Esposito, p. 21.
18 Kinzer, pp. 196-97.
21 Keddie and Richard, p. 214.
22 Ibid.
23 Keddie and Richard, pp. 222-23.
24 Abrahamian, p. 143.
25 Ibid.
29 Panah, p. 65.
30 Ramazani, p. 53.
31 Riedel, pp. 62-70.
32 Haqqani, pp. 188-191.
35 Abrahamian, pp. 167-169.
36 Panah, p. 51.
39 Abrahamian, pp. 161-162.
41 Abrahamian, pp. 162-163.
43 Abrahamian, p. 163.
44 Ansari, p. 221.
45 Abrahamian, p. 164.
46 Ansari, p. 220.