
The Exceptionalism of the 1979 Iranian Revolution: Religion and Diplomacy

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The 1979 Iranian Revolution appears an aberration from previous revolutions and revolts in Iranian history due to the circumstances leading to the revolution and its aftermath. By the 1970s, the Iranian people had tired of living under an oppressive regime, which offered little to the citizens, while taking the fruits of the nation's wealth for lavish displays of luxury to impress the outside world, as the Iranian population suffered. In an effort to empower the people and to reinstall Islam in the country, Iranians turned to revolution and to a new leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. The 1979 Iranian Revolution should be considered an outlier from previous Iranian revolutions as the secular ideals of Iran changed suddenly with the installation of an Islamic ruler, Khomeini, who reversed domestic socioeconomic policies, changed diplomatic relations between countries, and altered the role of the government during the hostage crisis.

Following its reinstatement in 1953, the Pahlavi regime subjected its citizens to drastic secularization in its attempt to westernize the country. These policies included land reforms which took land away from wealthy owners and gave small chunks of land to peasants.¹ Because these pieces of land were not sufficient to sustain an existence, peasants were forced to sell their land back to the original owners and move into urban areas.² With this relocation, uprooted peasants became exposed to new ways of life and people with whom they had never interacted before. They were often left a poor, neglected population.³ Another faction in Iran who began to feel marginalized after the reinstatement of the Pahlavi regime and the secular government were religious groups. Due to increased secularization in Iran, many of the religious orders began to feel as though the Pahlavi dynasty was attempting to push away Islam in all aspects of Iranian life. This is how Ayatollah Khomeini viewed the series of reforms, known as the "White Revolution," instituted by the Pahlavi monarch in the 1960s.⁴ Khomeini saw the White Revolution as "an anti-Islamic sacrilege aimed at destroying the role of the clergy in Iran."⁵ The regime also banned head scarves for women in a drive to promote secularization throughout all aspects of Iranian society.⁶

The uniqueness of the 1979 Iranian Revolution centers around the role of the *ulama*, or religious class. Iran is an Islamic country largely dominated by Twelver Shi'is, though there is a small population of Sunni Muslims as well. Religion always has had a role in Iranian politics, however great or small depending on the time period. Early in its establishment, the *ulama* decided its involvement in politics would be minimal in order to keep ideology apart from the political systems. Unless the government became so corrupt that the *ulama* felt the need to interfere in order to save the country and its people, it stayed away from politics. But even after becoming involved in politics, rarely did the *ulama* maintain its involvement after achieving its goals in stopping corruption.

¹ Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 150.

² *Ibid.*, 153.

³ Michael H. Hunt, *Crisis in US Foreign Policy: An International Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 371.

⁴ David Farber, *Taken Hostage* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Roger M. Savory, "Social Development in Iran during the Pahlavi Era," in *Iran under the Pahlavis*, ed. George Lenczowski (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 115.

Historian Nikki K. Keddie explains, “some revolutions have had religious ideologies, but clerical rule after a revolution was new.”⁷

The Tobacco Protest (1891-1892) is an Iranian example of how the *ulama*'s involvement ceased after attaining its goals. The Shah at the time of this revolt, Nasir al-Din Shah, issued full rights to a foreign entity over the tobacco industry in Iran, which led to great upheaval throughout Iran as the company raised prices and made it difficult to buy and sell tobacco. Ayatollah Shirazi issued a fatwa against buying and selling tobacco for all Iranian citizens. The fatwa proclaimed that if people smoked cigarettes, they did so in defiance of the Hidden Imam. The Hidden Imam is Twelver Shi'i's belief that the son of the Eleventh Imam went into “occultation,” and this Hidden Imam is the true leader of the Shi'i Muslims who will return at some point in the future.⁸ To do something against the will of the Hidden Imam—in this circumstance smoking cigarettes—is incredibly disrespectful. Following several days of no smoking, the Shah retracted the concession over tobacco. After the *ulama* helped eradicate the meddling of outside forces in tobacco dealings, it stepped back from the political mainstage to allow the people to continue fighting the small injustices.

Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) also showcased the *ulama*'s active role in the government during the revolution and its withdrawal once goals had been met. During the Qajar Dynasty's rule, there was great unrest, stemming from the rising sugar prices.⁹ The Iranian government forced price controls on the *bazaaris*, or merchant class, in order to limit the power of the *bazaaris*.¹⁰ Along with their *ulama* allies, the *bazaaris* also had support from the intellectuals and the British government.¹¹ Starting in 1905, the *ulama* instigated multiple riots and strikes in order to protest the Qajars.¹² Anti-Qajar forces were able to escape the Qajar forces by camping out in the British Embassy, where the protestors demanded the establishment of a “house of justice.”¹³ After the creation of a parliament, the *ulama* held many seats in the new form of government and had great influence on the new constitution that was being written.¹⁴ Ayatollah Mohammad Husseim Na'ini stated, “constitutional government was the best form of rule in the absence of the Hidden (Twelfth) Imam,” which was greatly contested by other members of the *ulama* who said “constitutional government was a Western-inspired heresy.”¹⁵ Clearly the *ulama* still had a lot of power within the Iranian government at this time, though this power was protested by the members of the secular side of the Iranian government, and the *ulama* would eventually leave the Iranian government after the signing of the new constitution.¹⁶

The *ulama*'s expanded involvement in politics after the 1979 Revolution was likely due to the high status of Khomeini, who held the highest position in the *ulama* as an ayatollah. Khomeini stated that “neither he nor the *ulama* would hold direct power in a new government.”¹⁷ Though this was likely a sincere statement, Khomeini was the de facto leader of the revolution, even if he never formally took control of the people. Historian David Farber argues in his book, *Taken Hostage*, that Khomeini believed that “only in Islam could the Iranian people find their destiny and the Iranian

⁷ Keddie, 240.

⁸ Ibid, 7.

⁹ M. Reza Ghods, *Iran in the Twentieth Century* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989), 30.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fatih Varol, “The Politics of Ulama: Understanding the Role of the Ulama in Iran,” *Milel ve Nihal*, 13, no. 2 (2016): 133.

¹² Ghods, 31.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Varol, 135.

¹⁵ Ghods, 37.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 240.

state its political legitimacy.”¹⁸ Harnessing this sentiment with pointed rhetoric, Khomeini was able to rally the disgruntled people behind his religious takeover of the secularized government.

The seriousness of the corruption in the Iranian government determines how involved the *ulama* would be in a revolution. The 1979 Revolution saw great religious involvement from the start, especially compared to previous revolutions in Iran. After the Tobacco Protest, when the *ulama* decided its involvement would end after the fatwa was taken back and the people once again had access to tobacco. Of course, there were personal reasons for issuing the fatwa, as a fair amount of the money the *ulama* used for its organizations came from the assistance of the merchant class. These merchants gave money to the *ulama*, but were unable to do so after they could no longer sell tobacco. Though its initial involvement in the 1979 Revolution was to return Iran to a religious power, the *ulama* did not end its involvement there. Religious figures, in fact, enjoyed a large jump in social status and financial security due to the higher power of the Ayatollah as the leader.

Discontent with the regime had boiled throughout Iran for many years. Increasingly, the people wanted a leader to help eradicate the Pahlavi dynasty. As many of their problems rested with the growing secularization of Iran, many looked to the religious clerics to lead them to revolution. The outstanding member in the eyes of the Iranian people was Khomeini. An ayatollah is one of the highest-ranking clerics in the Islamic faith, which offers a logical reason why the people would choose Khomeini as their leader. He was also a longtime critic of the Shah’s leadership and was exiled from Iran for multiple years, until he returned around the time of revolution. Khomeini was not a silent protester against the Pahlavi government. In fact, Khomeini often spoke to students and against the Pahlavi Shah to persuade the Iranians to fight their current government. In the early months of 1970, Khomeini gave a series of lectures to Iraqi students of religion about implementing Islamic political principles in Iran. He used his charismatic leadership to present his beliefs on the role of Islam in Iran in the following section of his lecture.

So, courageous sons of Islam, stand up! Address the people bravely; tell the truth about situation to the masses in simple language; arouse them to enthusiastic activity, and turn the people in the street and the bazaar, our simple-hearted workers and peasants, and our alert students into dedicated *mujahids* [those engaged in jihad or holy struggle]. The entire population will become *mujahids*. All segments of society are ready to struggle for the sake of freedom, independence, and the happiness of the nation, and their struggle needs religion. Give the people Islam, then, for Islam is the school of *jihad*, the religion of struggle; let them amend their characters and beliefs in accordance with Islam and transform themselves into a powerful force, so that they may overthrow the tyrannical regime imperialism has imposed on us and set up an Islamic government.¹⁹

By appealing to students, Khomeini set up the educated youth to oppose western powers and the Pahlavi government with religion.

The Pahlavi regime viewed Khomeini as a threat, which led to a pro-Shah Iranian newspaper releasing an attack on Khomeini in January of 1978. This sparked protests throughout Iran, especially in Qom, where protests resulted in the deaths of at least 70 people in the span of two days.²⁰ This bloodshed is widely considered to be the catalyst for the Iranian Revolution as it showed the people how far the Pahlavi were willing to go in order to continue their rule. As Khomeini’s popularity grew, it became very clear to the Shah and his administration that they would not hold

¹⁸ Farber, 63.

¹⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini, “Lectures delivered to students of religion in Najaf, Iraq,” January-February 1970, in *Crisis in US Foreign Policy*, 395.

²⁰ Keddie, 225.

power in Iran much longer. The Shah fled from Iran, and after a few days of political stand off, power officially transferred to Khomeini in February 1979.²¹

One standout feature leading up to the 1979 Revolution was the public hatred for western powers, especially the United States.²² A few incidents altered the revolutionary mood, turning the Iranian people further against the United States. The first mistake made by the Carter administration was allowing Mohammad Reza Shah into America for medical treatment in the fall of 1979.²³ To some, this represented America's loyalty to its allies, but others perceived this action as Americans refusing to acknowledge the new Iranian government by aiding the previous regime, which was put in place by the CIA. The Carter administration debated heavily admitting the Shah for medical treatment, knowing the Iranian people would likely not view this decision in a positive light, and could potentially harm Americans. Just days before the Hostage Crisis began, a second diplomatic faux pas the United States made was at a meeting between President Carter's national security adviser, the Pahlavi Shah's Iranian prime minister, and the Iranian foreign minister.²⁴ By meeting with those who were against the new Iranian government, Americans appeared to be against the revolution. The meeting generated apprehension among Iranian citizens about whether the United States planned on repeating a coup, much like the coup that occurred in 1953.²⁵

Already, in February 1979, Iranian students seized the American Embassy in Tehran for several days. The Carter Administration reiterated to the Iranian government that it needed to stick to its obligations and coerce the students to let go of the embassy.²⁶ During this takeover in February, Khomeini told the students to stand down from taking over a foreign building.²⁷

That same year, a similar occurrence took place on November 4, but it resulted in a different outcome. The Carter Administration believed Khomeini would order the students to stand down like the February attack, but Khomeini did the opposite.²⁸ Both the cleric and his son condoned the students for overtaking the embassy.²⁹ This was a brazen, unprecedented move by a government, as embassies are viewed as being a part of another country. To attack an embassy amounts to attacking a country as a whole. Though the students were eventually convinced to release some hostages, mostly women and black men, they still kept 52 hostages for 444 days. According to Michael M. Gunter, the seizure of the embassy and the taking of hostages violated two principles of the international law of diplomacy created by the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.³⁰ These principles are "the immunity of diplomatic personnel from local arrest, detention, or trial, and the inviolability of embassy premises."³¹

The February takeover of the U.S. Embassy was a difficult time, but for the most part, the two countries came out of the takeover unscathed. This was not true for the November 1979 takeover of the American Embassy. After the students raided the embassy, they discovered Americans within the building shredding and burning government documents. Eventually they

²¹ Ibid, 238.

²² Ghods, 195.

²³ Christopher Hemmer, *Which Lessons Matter? American Foreign Policy Decision Making in the Middle East, 1979-1987* (State University of New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 51.

²⁴ Hemmer, 52.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 40.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 53.

²⁹ Harold H. Saunders, "Diplomacy and Pressure, November 1979-May 1980," in *American Hostages in Iran: The Conduct of Crisis*, ed. Paul H. Kreisberg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 72.

³⁰ Michael M. Gunter, "The Iranian Hostages Case: Its Implications for the Future of the International Law of Diplomacy," in *Jimmy Carter: Foreign Policy and Post-Presidential Years*, ed. Herbert D. Rosenbaum and Alexej Ugrinsky (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 191.

³¹ Ibid, 191.

stopped the shredders and locked the hostages away. But they noticed some documents that had not yet been shredded, which held valuable information about U.S. involvement in the 1953 Coup, a CIA-supported coup to instate the Pahlavi Shah back in power instead of the elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq. England and the United States enacted the coup in order to quell concerns about oil in Iran and the defensive position against the Soviet Union.³² Already aware of this incident, the Iranian people were distrustful and angry toward the United States.³³ But as the extent of U.S. involvement in the 1953 coup was discovered in these documents, anger grew to a fevered pitch. Naturally, the students figured out the most valuable documents were shredded first, leaving the less important documents for last. Students then went through each shredder and pieced back together every document that had been shredded, which took years to complete. As they found out about the involvement of foreign powers in their government, tensions grew to an all-time high between Iran and the United States. This was the catalyst for change in diplomacy between nations, especially Iran and the United States.

Prior to the 444-day incident, relations between Iran and America were relatively normal, though perhaps a little tense. The United States supported any country's government that was anti-communist, especially during the postwar period and the beginning of the Cold War. At its creation, the Pahlavi regime was anti-communist and supported by the United States, as the Pahlavis called for sweeping reforms that went along with the policies of the Americans, i.e. abolishing religion in the government and daily society. Tensions grew again after Mosaddeq was elected prime minister in 1951, then thrown out of office by a CIA sponsored coup. Following the coup, the United States supported the subsequent regime that ruled over the country. Though the regime was authoritarian, it was anti-communist. These diplomatic relations stalled completely after the Hostage Crisis began.

At the beginning of the Hostage Crisis, the Carter administration sent representatives to Tehran hoping to meet with Khomeini or his close cabinet. Yet anyone Carter sent to speak with Khomeini was seen as an enemy.³⁴ Carter would eventually choose former Attorney General Ramsey Clark and former Foreign Service Officer William Miller to speak with Khomeini to ask for the safe return of the American hostages.³⁵ But Khomeini ordered that no one in Tehran was to speak with the ambassadors from the United States.³⁶ Foreign Service Officer Miller recalled of communication between Iran and the United States,

We said we were sent by President Carter to discuss all these matters. The response was that they would consult with the Ayatollah and would have an answer in a day or two. The next stage was very frustrating because the Revolutionary Council, we were informed, had been ordered by Ayatollah Khomeini to have no contact with us.

Although the Ayatollah and his cabinet would not speak with the representatives directly, messages from the United States would be relayed through secretaries to the Iranian cabinet.³⁷ Without meetings and only indirect communication, the contact between the two nations was strained.

The United States then moved to the position of not negotiating with the captors until the release of all the hostages.³⁸ The Iranians responded with three demands: a return of the Shah's assets, an end to the American interference in Iran's affairs, and an apology from America for

³² Hunt, 368.

³³ Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 275.

³⁴ Saunders, 74-75.

³⁵ Ibid, 75.

³⁶ Ibid, 76.

³⁷ Ibid, 77.

³⁸ Ibid, 80-81.

previously committed crimes against Iran.³⁹ There was little movement on the demands made by the Iranians.⁴⁰ Eventually, the captors released thirteen women and black hostages back to the United States.⁴¹ The Carter Administration continued to concern itself with the rights and treatment of the hostages during this time, often attempting to go through back channels in order to find out about the welfare of the hostages.⁴² After the refusal to release all hostages, the United States adopted an embargo against Iranian oil, which extended to other American allies as well.⁴³

Diplomacy had never been as tense between the two countries as it was at this point in the Hostage Crisis. The Iranian revolutionaries and Khomeini were unwilling to meet and come to an agreement with the American representatives since the discovery of more documents in the embassy revealing the extent of American involvement in Iranian politics. Fanning anger after these findings, Khomeini dubbed America the “Great Satan.” The intensely political cleric clearly saw American involvement in Iran as an attack on Islam itself.⁴⁴ Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders sent a briefing memorandum to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance about the contact situation with Khomeini in September of 1979. An excerpt of this memo stated,

We have had no direct contact with the man who remains the strongest political leader in Iran. His hostility towards us is unlikely to abate significantly, although there have been fewer venomous statements against us recently. Clearly, a first meeting could be a bruising affair.⁴⁵

Communication between Iran and the United States was not only difficult, but also a political minefield, as the United States also strove to maintain ties to different groups. Saunders’ memorandum continues about this political minefield.

A meeting with Khomeini will signal our definite acceptance of the revolution and could case somewhat his suspicions of us...On the other hand, we would risk appearing to cave in to a man who hates us and who is strongly deprecated here and by Westernized Iranians. Thus, we would want to be careful not to appear to embrace Khomeini and the clerics at the expense of our secular friends...

The symbolism of a call on Khomeini would not attach to visits to the other religious leaders, but they will not see us until we have seen him. We badly need contacts with...moderate clerics. We want to reassure them of our acceptance of the revolution as their influence may rise in the months ahead.⁴⁶

Rarely in Iran or elsewhere has diplomacy between two nations come to a virtual stand still, as was seen during the 1979 Revolution. Diplomatic principles had been upheld by governments throughout history. Rulers of Ancient Greece recognized their political mistakes after killing representatives from the Persian kingdom, which was resolved after two men from the Grecian

³⁹ Saunders, 75.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 84.

⁴¹ Ibid, 85.

⁴² Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986), 181.

⁴³ Saunders, 93.

⁴⁴ Farber, 65.

⁴⁵ Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, briefing memorandum of 5 September 1979, *Crisis in US Foreign Policy*, 408.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

kingdom offered their lives in return.⁴⁷ Hugo Grotius, considered to be the father of international law, once stated, “two points with regard to ambassadors which are everywhere recognized as prescribed by the law of nations, first that they be admitted, and then that they be not violated.”⁴⁸ Clearly the treatment of representatives from other countries has been well established throughout time, and is generally understood throughout all nations. This knowledge was lost on the Iranian revolutionaries and Khomeini himself as they refused to release over 50 hostages until America caved to pressure and granted them their demands. A few days after the Hostage Crisis began, Ayatollah Khomeini spoke out about the Hostage Crisis and the discontent with the Pahlavi regime in an unapologetic voice.

The young people of our nation, after long years of oppression and misery, have decided to hold in that nest of spies a few individuals who were spying on our nation and conspiring against it, or rather, against the whole region... We fear neither military action nor economic boycott, for we are the followers of Imams who welcomed martyrdom... we are warriors and strugglers; our young men have fought barehanded against tanks, cannons, and machine guns, so Mr. Carter should not try to intimidate us... As for economic pressure, we are a people accustomed to hunger. We have suffered for about thirty-five or fifty years.⁴⁹

Khomeini's outward defiance in the face of international law and proper hostage conduct was not a normal occurrence, a fact upon which President Carter commented during a press conference on the Hostage Crisis a few days after Khomeini's address. Carter focuses on how Iran had broken not only international law, but also the laws of most religions.

The actions of Iran have shocked the civilized world. For a government to applaud mob violence and terrorism, for a government actually to support and, in effect, participate in the taking and the holding of hostages is unprecedented in human history. This violates not only the most fundamental precepts of international law but the common ethical and religious heritage of humanity. There is no recognized religious faith on Earth which condones kidnaping. There is no recognized religious faith on Earth which condones blackmail. There is certainly no religious faith on Earth which condones the sustained abuse of innocent people.⁵⁰

As President Carter mentioned in his speech, there has been nothing like the Hostage Crisis in human history, since it is so unheard of that a government would participate in the kidnaping and blackmail of another country's embassy.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution continues to baffle historians because of its deviation from normal Iranian revolutionary standards. Rarely in history were revolutions largely inspired by religion, and even more unique was the emergence of a religious-based government (a theocracy) following the revolution. This variation from past Iranian revolutions is clear in the role played by the *ulama* in politics. The *ulama* had great power that was deeply rooted in Iranian history; to fail to see their large role in the 1979 Revolution would be impossible. Another way the 1979 Revolution changed the idea of revolutions was the issue of diplomatic relations. It is unusual that a government

⁴⁷ Gunter, 196.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini, address delivered to Monsignor Bugnini, special papal emissary to Iran, 12 November 1979, in *Crisis in US Foreign Policy*, 408-409.

⁵⁰ President Jimmy Carter, "Press Conference Comments," 28 November 1979, in *Crisis in US Foreign Policy*, 409-410.

would support the taking of hostages, and even praise their citizens for taking a foreign embassy. Though many revolutions or governmental disruptions have occurred during Iranian history, the 1979 Revolution was a stand-alone event due to the unprecedented involvement of the religious class and the lack of concern for proper diplomatic proceedings.