The Iranian Revolution

Dr. Ali Shariati, an Iranian leftist on the left. Ayatollah Khomeini on the right.

The Iranian Revolution

Gelvin, ch. 17 & 18 & other sources, notes by Denis Bašić
The Pahlavi Dynasty

- could hardly be called a “dynasty,” for it had only two rulers - Reza Shah Pahlavi (ruled 1926-1941) and his son Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (ruled 1941-1979).

- The son came to power after his father was deposed by the Allies (the Russian and British forces) due to his alliance with the Nazi Germany.

- The Allies reestablished the majlis and allowed the organization of trade unions and political parties in order to limit the power of the new shah and to prevent him from following his father’s independence course.

- Much to the chagrin of the British and Americans, the most popular party proved to be Tudeh - the communist party with more than 100,000 members.

- The second Shah’s power was further eroded when in 1951 Muhammad Mossadegh was elected the prime minister on a platform that advocated nationalizing the oil industry and restricting the shah’s power.
Muhammad Mossadegh
1882-1967

• Iranian Prime Minister 1951–3. A prominent parliamentarian. He was twice appointed to that office by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, after a positive vote of inclination by the parliament. Mossadegh was a nationalist and passionately opposed foreign intervention in Iran. He was also the architect of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, which had been under British control through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), today known as British Petroleum (BP).

• He was eventually removed from power on August 19, 1953, in a coup d'état, supported and funded by the British and U.S. governments and led by an Iranian general. The operation came to be known as Operation Ajax in America, after its CIA cryptonym. Mosaddeq was imprisoned for three years and subsequently put under house arrest until his death.
Muhammad Mossadegh’s legacy

• In Iran and many countries, Mosaddeq is widely considered a hero of anti-imperialism and victim of imperialist greed. (see, Noreena Hertz, The Silent Takeover: Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy, HarperCollins, 2003, p. 88)

• A number of scholars believe that alongside the plotting of the UK and US, a major factor in his overthrow was Mossadeq's loss of support among Shi’a clerics and the traditional middle class, brought on by his increasingly radical and secular policies and by their fear of a communist takeover.

• However, due to his willingness to negotiate with Americans, he also lost the support of the communists.

• Mossadegh became aware of the plots against him and grew increasingly wary of conspirators acting within his government. Mossadegh then moved to dissolve parliament, in spite of the Constitutional provision which gave the Shah sole authority to dissolve Parliament. After taking the additional step of abolishing the Constitutional guarantee of a “secret ballot,” Mossadegh’s victory in the national plebiscite was assured. The electorate was forced into a non-secret ballot and Mossadegh won 99.93% of the vote. The tactics employed by Mossadegh to remain in power were dictatorial in their result, playing into the hands of those who wished to see him removed.
Muhammad Mossadegh’s legacy 2

- Mossadegh supported the policy of non-alignment. His attitude towards the superpowers was the attitude of “negative equilibrium.” (note: the Qajars had the policy of the “positive equilibrium.”) His policy of negative equilibrium alienated the U.S.

- Tried to eventually create a new Iranian economy that would not be dependent on oil.

- Eventually the CIA’s role in his overthrow became well-known, and caused controversy within the organization itself, and within the CIA congressional hearings of the 1970s. CIA supporters maintain that the plot against Mossadegh was strategically necessary, and praise the efficiency of agents in carrying out the plan. Critics say the scheme was paranoid and colonial, as well as immoral.
Muhammad Mossadegh’s legacy 3

- In March 2000, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated her regret that Mossadegh was ousted: "The Eisenhower administration believed its actions were justified for strategic reasons. But the coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development and it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America." In the same year, the New York Times published a detailed report about the coup based on alleged CIA documents.

- For his sudden rise in popularity inside and outside of Iran, and for his defiance of the British, Mossadegh was named as Time Magazine's 1951 Man of the Year. Other notables considered for the title that year included Dean Acheson, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and General Douglas MacArthur.

- In early 2004, the Egyptian government changed a street name in Cairo from Pahlavi to Mosaddeq, to facilitate closer relations with Iran.
Muhammad Reza Shah’s legacy

- Reza Shah was put in power once with the help of the foreign powers. His son, Muhammed Reza Shah was put in power twice by the Western powers. First time in 1941, and second time in 1953 after ousting the prime minister Muhammad Mossadagh.

- Muhammad Raza continued the modernization of his country like his father, using the oil revenues, of course without attempting the nationalization of the oil revenues.

- The White Revolution land reforms were not quite successful, for they produced the dissatisfied ‘ulama and dissatisfied peasants, for most of them got land slots of poor quality.

- In 1940, 22% of Iranians lived in cities.

- By 1976, almost 50% of Iranians lived in cities.
Muhammad Reza Shah’s legacy 2

- Using oil revenues, the Muhammad Reza Shah’s government established strong police, abolished old guilds and created the new ones more loyal to the government, and even bulldozed the shops of disobedient shopkeepers.

- His government created their own “religious corps” that spread its own brand of Islam, closed religious publishing houses, asserted its control over religious endowments, and passed the family law that took precedence over, and frequently contravened the shari’a.

- The above measures infuriated the ‘ulama and shopkeepers and motivated them to rebel against Muhammad Reza Shah.

- To eliminate dissent, just like his father, Muhammad Reza resorted to repression.
He banned the political parties created in 1940's and 1950's and created two parties in the majlis ironically called “yes” and “yes, Sir” parties.

In 1975 he combined these two parties into one party - “National Resurgence Party” made up of “all loyal Iranians.”

In 1976 Amnesty International reported that “no country in the world has a worse record of human rights than Iran.”

In 1977, however, the U.S. president Jimmy Carter visited Iran and proclaimed it to be “an island of tranquility in the sea of turbulence.” Carter’s support emboldened the shah to begin a new round of repression.
Muhammad Reza Shah’s legacy 4
the wealth of Pahlavis

• By 1976 the Shah had accumulated upwards of $1 billion from oil revenues

• His family, including 63 princes and princesses, had accumulated between $5-$20 billion

• The family foundation controlled about $3 billion dollars

• The Foundation used the money for patronage and investment into agriculture, real estate, construction, insurance, hotels, publishing, automobile manufacture, food-processing, and textile factories. In all the Pahlavi Foundation controlled more than 200 factories.

• The family was the foremost beneficiary of the oil revenues and the line between the state and family earnings was blurred.
Conflict with the Clergy

- Clergy lost land in the White Revolution Land reform.
- ‘Ulema also objected the expansion of the right of Americans to be tried in their own courts (the right of extraterritoriality) and the new electoral law granting women’s suffrage.
- An unknown cleric of the time, Ayattolah Khomeini called the Shah to resign.
- In the wake of the anti-White Revolution agitation, the Shah forced Khomeini into exile in 1964.
- In 1978 an official paper published an attachment on Khomeini who was at that time in exile. The article sparked the revolution.
- The protest of Qom started. 70 people were killed in the police intervention. In accordance with the Shi’a rituals, memorial demonstrations were organized 40 days later. The police intervened again. And again demonstrators were killed. The cycle of violence started.
Khomeini was not the only opponent of the shah’s regime, nor ‘ulema was the only segment of the state to rebel. The revolution succeeded in part because of the strikes among oil field workers that limited governments’ access to revenues. Students, leftist guerillas, members of the Tudeh party, as well as women’s groups all mobilized to get rid of the shah.

However, the clergy took the upper hand in leading the revolution. They legitimized their leadership using the language that had a broad appeal. They denounced *secular nationalism* as something imported from the West.

The clergy was also well-connected with the bazaaris (bazaar shop keepers) who suffered together with the clergy under the Shah and who were very active now in the revolution.

The clergy also succeeded to impose themselves as the leaders of the revolution due to the support of new rural immigrants to the Iranian cities who were, generally speaking, much more religious than the old city dwellers.
Causes of the Iranian Revolution

• Some social scientists have proposed *religious or cultural explanations*.

• This explanation fails on three grounds:
  
  1. Shi’ism has been the religion of the majority of Iranians (Persians) since the 16th century. Why did the revolution then wait for 1979 to happen?
  
  2. Before the revolution, Shi’ism actually promoted obedience, i.e. the passive acceptance of any political order.
  
  3. Citing Shi’ism as the cause of the revolution also overemphasizes the role played by the ‘ulama in the revolution and discount the role played by the other groups.
Causes of the Iranian Revolution 2

- Other social scientists have proposed *economic and structural explanations*.

- Those who argue for *economic causes* point to the downturn in the economy in 1975-77. The Iranians rebelled due to the economic privation.

- Those who cite *structural reasons* usually point out the fact that Iran was a rentier state. When the government is not anymore able to distribute the social welfare to which the population feels entitled, then the population withdraws its allegiances.

- These reasons are neither persuasive.

- Other Middle Eastern countries, rentier and non-rentier states, went through their economic troubles in the 70’s, however, in none other of them the revolution happened. Why in Iran?
Causes of the Iranian Revolution 3

- Finally, the third group of social scientists argue for what they call "conjuncturnal or multicausal theories."

- According to a scholar, the Iranian revolution might be traced to the simultaneous occurrence of rapid and uneven capitalist development, political weakness of the monarchy, the development of the broad oppositional coalition, the unification of that coalition around a set of key symbols, and the right international context.

- Gelvin considers the multicausal theories most convincing though, from the sociological point of view, they are disappointing, for they cannot be easily put into a scientific formula or law.

- The Iranian Revolution seems to be a reaction of the Iranian society on social and economic injustices and monopolies, i.e. monarchial nepotism and privatization of the state by the shah, disrespect for power-sharing, destruction of oppositional political parties, persecution of political opponents, detachment of the shah from the people and their cultural values, etc. To sum, the Shah’s regime lacked legitimacy.
Significance of the Iranian Revolution

- Some historians consider the Iranian Revolution one of the most significant events in the history of the Middle East. They believe that for two reasons:
  
  1. They argue that the Iranian Revolution established a **new model for the government one not borrowed from the West**. This model has inspired social movements from Algeria and Egypt to Palestine and Afghanistan.
  
  2. They argue that the doctrines of the dominant group of revolutionaries was exceptional in the history of revolutions.

- Significance of the Iranian Revolution depends first of all on the definition of the term revolution itself.

  - Some scholars do not call the change in the Iranian regimes “a revolution,” for its goal was not a utopian vision of a **modernizing society**, but rather a return to an ancient model (**theocracy**).
  
  - However, the 1979 events in Iran did bring a **radical change** in the country and any “radical change” is by definition called “a revolution.”
Was the Iranian Revolution Islamic?

• Gelvin questions how much the Iranian Revolution can be called “Islamic” at all, for it borrowed, according to him, a great many “Western” concepts like *elections*, *parliament*, and *constitution*.

• Islamic thinkers would disagree with Gelvin, recalling the Constitution of Medina drafted by the Islamic Prophet Muhammed as an early example of an Islamic constitution, and elections of the first caliphs and the establishment of the councils of the learned (’ulama) as the early Islamic examples and equivalents of democratic elections and parliaments. Hence, these allegedly “Western institutions” do not seem to be completely alien and novel in the Middle Eastern world.

• However, what may question the validity of the qualification of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 as “Islamic” is the fact that the participants in the revolution were not exclusively students of Islamic theological seminaries and that its leaders were not the traditionalist Shi’a clerics only. Actually, the ideological father of the Iranian Revolution is considered to be **Ali Shariati**, an Iranian sociologist, Third Worldist, and Islamic modernist who was “influenced by Marxist social ideas.” (More about ‘Ali Shariati.)
Ali Shariati (1933-1977) has been called the "Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution." His reinterpretation of Islam in modern sociological categories prepared the way for the Islamic revival that shook Iran in 1979, attracting many young Muslims who had been alienated both from the traditional clergy and from Western culture.

Shariati believed that every corruption and injustice in the world comes from a lack of unity. The Muslim proclamation that God alone is to be worshipped, made five times daily, conquers greed, envy, and fear by liberating the individual from selfishness.

The implications of this view are radical. If the central significance of the Muslim creed is individual liberation, then any form of dependency is wrong. The Muslim clergy have embraced the principle of imitation (taqlid) rather than creative innovation (ijtihad) as the basis for deciding Islamic behavior. Shariati opposed blind traditionalism, citing the Koranic statement that "God does not change what is in a people until they change what is in themselves" (Q: 13:11). The test of a Muslim society lies less in its traditionalism than in its ability to utilize traditional thought to meet the challenge of creating a just society. The ideal of unity requires individuals who can lead a society to the virtues it represents and the social justice which it demands. (Encyclopedia of World Biography 2004)
Ayattolah Khomeini (1900–1989)

Shi’ite cleric and leader of Iran (1979–89). He received a traditional religious education and settled in Qom in 1922, where he became a Shi’ite scholar of some repute and an outspoken opponent first of Iran's ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1926–41), and then of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–79). Popularly recognized as a grand ayatollah in the early 1960s, he was imprisoned and then exiled (1964) for his criticism of the government. He settled first in Iraq—where he taught at the shrine city of Al-Najaf for some years—and then, in 1978, near Paris, where he continued to speak out against the shah. During that time he also refined his theory of *velayat-e faqih* (“government of the jurist”), in which the Shi’ite clergy—traditionally politically quiescent in Iran—would govern the state. Iranian unrest increased until the shah fled in 1979; Khomeini returned shortly thereafter and was eventually named Iran's political and religious leader (*rahbar*). He ruled over a system in which the clergy dominated the government, and his foreign policies were both anti-Western and anticommunist. During the first year of his leadership, Iranian militants seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran—greatly exacerbating tensions with the U.S.—and the devastating Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) began.
Iranian State System

- Iran is a theocracy. According to the Iranian constitution of 1979, all laws of the Islamic republic must be based on the “Islamic principles.”
- The primary political, military, and judicial figure in the Islamic republic is *vali-e faqih* (literally, *the Governor - Islamic jurist*., usually translated as *supreme leader*) defined by the Iranian Constitution as a “just and pious faqih [a legal expert qualified to rule on matter pertaining to Islamic law] who is acquainted with the circumstances of his age, courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability, and recognized and accepted as leader by the majority of the people.
- The first *vali-e faqih* was Ayatollah Khomeini.
- The Supreme Court of Iran, the Supreme Juridical Council are also composed of ‘ulama, as is the Council of Guardians whose job is to ensure that the laws passed by the *majlis* are compatible with Islam.
Iran Hostage Crisis
(November 4, 1979 - January 20, 1981)

• Iran hostage crisis, in U.S. history, events following the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran by Iranian students on Nov. 4, 1979. The overthrow of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlevi of Iran by an Islamic revolutionary government earlier in the year had led to a steady deterioration in Iran-U.S. relations. In response to the exiled shah's admission (Sept., 1979) to the United States for medical treatment, a crowd of about 500 seized the embassy. Of the approximately 90 people inside the embassy, 52 remained in captivity until the end of the crisis.

• President Carter applied economic pressure by halting oil imports from Iran and freezing Iranian assets in the United States. At the same time, he began several diplomatic initiatives to free the hostages, all of which proved fruitless. On Apr. 24, 1980, the United States attempted a rescue mission that failed. After three of eight helicopters were damaged in a sandstorm, the operation was aborted; eight persons were killed during the evacuation. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who had opposed the action, resigned after the mission's failure.
In 1980, the death of the shah in Egypt and the invasion of Iran by Iraq made the Iranians more receptive to resolving the hostage crisis. In the United States, failure to resolve the crisis contributed to Ronald Reagan's defeat of Carter in the presidential election. After the election, with the assistance of Algerian intermediaries, successful negotiations began. On Jan. 20, 1981, the day of President Reagan's inauguration, the United States released almost $8 billion in Iranian assets and the hostages were freed after 444 days in Iranian detention; the agreement gave Iran immunity from lawsuits arising from the incident.

In 2000 former hostages and their survivors sued Iran under the 1996 Antiterrorism Act, which permits U.S. citizens to sue foreign governments in cases of state-sponsored terrorism. The following year they won the lawsuit by default when Iran did not offer a defense. The U.S. State Dept. sought dismissal of the suit, arguing it would hinder its ability to negotiate international agreements, and a federal judge dismissed the plaintiffs' suit for damages in 2002, ruling that the agreement that resulted in their release barred awarding any damages.

Watch the reactions of Iranians to the movie Argo on

- the Jewish News 1 Channel / clip 1 & the Jewish News 1 Channel - clip 2
- the Press TV - an Iranian Channel
In July 1988 the U.S.S. *Vincennes*, an Aegis cruiser sent to help guard U.S.-flagged tankers in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), erroneously shot down a commercial airliner flying from Iran to Dubai. It had been a stressful day for the captain and crew; U.S. ships in the Gulf had just finished a skirmish with Iranian boats, sinking two, when radar reported a plane taking off from Bandar Abbas airfield in Iran. Information regarding this plane from radar and electronic intelligence sources was ambiguous, and the captain and crew had only a scant few minutes to determine what to do before the plane would be within range to launch an air-to-sea torpedo at the *Vincennes*. In an attempt to determine whether the plane might be a commercial airliner, one crew member was given the task of checking the airliner guide for flights from Bandar Abbas; the crewman hurriedly thumbed through the guide and missed the flight (which was seventeen minutes late). Another crewman incorrectly recalled the plane's altitude from the screen, leading all concerned to believe the plane to be descending toward the *Vincennes* rather than ascending. Independent psychologists who reviewed the incident concluded that the mistakes were due to combination of stress, information overload, and a breakdown in communication among the *Vincennes'* staff in the Combat Information Center.
Iranian Air Flight 655 Aftermath

- All 290 onboard, including 66 children and 16 crew perished (254 Iranians and 36 foreign nationals).

- In February 1996, the United States agreed to pay Iran US$131.8 million in settlement to discontinue a case brought by Iran in 1989 against the U.S. in the International Court of Justice relating to this incident, together with other earlier claims before the Iran-United States Claims Tribunal.

- US$61.8 million of the claim was in compensation for the 248 Iranians killed in the shoot-down ($300,000 per wage-earning victim, $150,000 per non-wage-earner). It was not disclosed how the remaining $70 million of the settlement was apportioned, though it appears a close approximation of the value of a used A300 jet at the time. Further compensation was paid for the 36 non-Iranian deaths.
Pan Am Flight 103 Incident

- Pan Am Flight 103, also commonly referred to as the **Lockerbie bombing**, was the bombing of a Pan Am transatlantic flight from London Heathrow Airport to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport on Wednesday, **21 December 1988**, some five months after the Iranian Air Flight 655 Incident. A Boeing 747-121, named Clipper Maid of the Seas, was destroyed by an explosive device killing all 243 passengers and 16 crew members. Large sections of the plane crashed into Lockerbie, in southern Scotland, killing an additional 11 people on the ground.

- The British and American governments initially blamed the PFLP-GC [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_Front_for_the_Liberation_of_Palestine), a Palestinian militant group backed by **Syria**, with assumptions of assistance from **Iran** in retaliation for Iran Air Flight 655. The cause of the crash was later determined to be a bomb associated with the **Libyan intelligence service**.
Pan Am Flight 103 Aftermath


• The motive that is generally attributed to Libya can be traced back to a series of military confrontations with the US Navy that took place in the 1980s in the Gulf of Sidra, the whole of which Libya claimed as its territorial waters. First, there was the Gulf of Sidra incident (1981) when two Libyan fighter aircraft were shot down. Then, two Libyan radio ships were sunk in the Gulf of Sidra. Later, on 23 March 1986 a Libyan Navy patrol boat was sunk in the Gulf of Sidra, followed by the sinking of another Libyan vessel on 25 March 1986. The Libyan leader, **Muammar Gaddafi**, was accused of retaliating for these sinkings by ordering the 5 April 1986 bombing of West Berlin nightclub, La Belle, that was frequented by U.S. soldiers and which **killed 3 and injured 230**.
Pan Am Flight 103 Aftermath 2

- The U.S. National Security Agency's (NSA) alleged interception of an incriminatory message from Libya to its embassy in East Berlin provided U.S. president Ronald Reagan with the justification for USAF warplanes to launch Operation El Dorado Canyon on 15 April 1986 from British bases — the first U.S. military strikes from Britain since World War II — against Tripoli and Benghazi in Libya. The Libyan government claimed the air strikes killed Hanna, a baby girl Gaddafi claimed he adopted (her reported age has varied between 15 months and seven years). To avenge his daughter's death, Gaddafi is said to have sponsored the September 1986 hijacking of Pan Am Flight 73 in Karachi, Pakistan.

- The U.S. in turn encouraged and aided the Chadian National Armed Forces (FANT) by supplying satellite intelligence during the Battle of Maaten al-Sarra. The attack resulted in a devastating defeat for Gaddafi's forces, following which he had to accede to a ceasefire ending the Chadian-Libyan conflict and his dreams of African dominance. Gaddafi blamed the defeat on French and U.S. "aggression against Libya." The result was Gaddafi's lingering animosity against the two countries which led to Libyan support for the bombings of Pan Am Flight 103 and UTA Flight 772.
On May 29, 2002, Libya offered up to US$2.7 billion to settle claims by the families of the 270 killed in the Lockerbie bombing, representing US$10 million per family. The Libyan offer was that:

- 40% of the money would be released when United Nations sanctions, suspended in 1999, were cancelled;
- another 40% when US trade sanctions were lifted; and
- the final 20% when the US State Department removed Libya from its list of states sponsoring terrorism.

Many in the Middle East consider insulting the settlement, which the Iranian families of the victims of the Iranian Air Flight 655 bombing received from the U.S. in 1996 ($300,000 per wage-earning victim, $150,000 per non-wage-earner) keeping in mind the settlement, which Gaddafi was requested to pay and did pay to the Western families who lost their loved ones in the Pan Am Flight 103 ($10 million per family.) They keep on asking whether the Middle Eastern lives are less worthy than the American (or Western) ones.