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Nationalism through Insecurity: Why 1979 Iranian Revolution Started?

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When faced with danger, individuals tend to revert to what they know, including their cultures and histories. This sociological circumstance is particularly true when looking at peoples and nations exposed to international security threats. These threats bring forth questions of the nation's identity, and what identities need to be protected. In turn, once nations have selected which identity, or identities, needs to be protected, a sense of nationalism is created amongst these groups. Some scholars have argued that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was initiated because of the uprising of religious ideologies that were largely ignored and punished under Mohammad Reza Shah's regime.[1] In addition, some argue that the Revolution can be largely explained through the tumultuous economic situation in the nation, which created social inequalities that led to the general unhappiness with the regime.[2] However, while these instances of citizen unrest can be explained through a study of religious and economic policies, these arguments tend to ignore a much larger instigator: the West. This paper examines the Iranian Revolution from 1975-1979 by looking at the processes that led to a surge in nationalism. This

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[1] John D Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).
[2] Misagh Parsa, *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

instance of revolution was not a mere expression of Iranian identity or religious zeal, but rather a response to the perceived threat of Western powers, particularly the United States.

The Iranian Revolution strengthened the Iranian national identity as a way for the newly formed government to distance itself from the politics and interventions of the West. During the mid-twentieth century and the course of the Pahlavi regime, security threats to Iranian identity quickly became salient political and cultural topics. In the case of Iran, the rise of nationalism was a response to the perceived threat of Western control, and this threat is still influencing Iranian nationalism today.

Before Western intervention came to dominate Iran's domestic and foreign policies, various peoples with complex ethnic backgrounds hailing from many regions were dispersed throughout the territory of the Persian Gulf. However, many in the region did not identify as "Iranian" by any standards, even after the revolutions of the 1950s, even though they followed the direction of the Shah.[3] While there had been instances of Iranian dissent in the past, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked a critical point in the formation of the Iranian identity for these various groups, and in turn, created an identity separated from other parts of the world (i.e. the West).

In order to understand the rise of Iranian nationalism in the 1970s, several basic terms must be defined. Kanchan Chandra best defines "identity" as "any social category in which an individual is eligible to be a member."[4] What make up these "identity" categories are religion, race, origins, ethnicity, language, etc. These identifications allow

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[3] David N Yaghoubian, *Ethnicity, Identity, and the Development of Nationalism in Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014).
[4] Kanchan Chandra, *What is Ethnicity and Does it Matter?* (Annual Review of Political Science, 2006), 4.

for groupings into larger "social networks."[5] Therefore, when individual identity, or national identity, is discussed in this paper, it will refer to how individuals choose and relate these categories compared to others. Second, the word "nation," as used in this essay, will refer to what Snyder calls "a group of people who see themselves as distinct in these terms and who aspire to self rule."[6] Finally, it is important to realize that I use the word "nationalism" to mean a political system that is designed to work towards protecting the territory and characteristics of a nation, essentially state-building—as Snyder describes nationalism as "the doctrine that a people who see themselves as distinct in their culture, history, institutions, or principles should rule themselves in a political system that expresses and protects those distinctive characteristics."[7]

Leading up to the events of the Iranian Revolution, there was a growing and prospering American presence in Iran, especially in Tehran. The Persian Gulf was one of the main producers of oil for the United States, so the oil business was attracting American workers. In order to protect their interests, a growing population of America's military was also present in the region. In fact, the American presence in Iran had grown so significantly that U.S. Counselor Gordon Winkler noted that, "the American population [had] grown to 'around 16,000'" and that this population was quickly becoming an important statistic to watch.[8] By November 1975, the American population

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[5] James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Explaining Interethnic Cooperation," *The American Political Science Review* 90, No.4 (Dec., 1996): 719.

[6] Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*. (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2000), 23.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Gordon Winkler, Memorandum from the Counselor for Public Affairs of the Embassy in Iran (Winkler) to the Ambassador to Iran (Helms), "Iran; Iraq," 24 Nov 1975, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1973-1976, Vol. 27, Doc. No. 149, 444.

was becoming a growing force, that not only the American embassy was taking notice of, but so too were the Iranian people.

In an Iranian newspaper, one dissident described the growing American population as a flooding of "prostitutes, the ailing of the Vietnam War and in general the rejects of Western society."[9] Additionally, for most dissatisfied Iranians, foreign (American) presence in Iran brought some individuals to cast blame on the Americans for the "[plundering] of economic wealth" in Iran.[10] For struggling Iranians, Americans had come to represent a threat to the welfare of not only the country as a whole, but also the economic security and stability of everyday life.

As Iranians became more disenchanted with the Pahlavi regime, strong resentment towards foreigners began to grow as well. In Iran, as Americans moved into new areas, and more importantly, moved further from the center of the capital (Tehran), new social environments were created. For a majority of the rural Iranian people before the Revolution, coming into contact with Westerners, particularly Americans, was a rare occurrence. Once these occurrences became more common, hostilities arose. This hostility was influenced by many factors, but "one of which [was] undoubtedly a deep concern on the part of conservative and traditional Iranians about the erosion of their culture."[11] As Americans moved into these conservative and traditional Iranian spaces, they brought with them Western styles of socialization and commercialization. For example, Westernized living standards influenced some Iranians to yearn for better (i.e.

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[9] "A Brief Look at the Sit-in of the Moslems of Isfahan," in *Pareh*, 1978, quoted from Said Amir Arjomand, From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 184.

[10] Said Amir Arjomand, *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 183.

[11] Winkler, Memorandum, 445.

more extravagant) living conditions, particularly ones that mirrored Westernized homes in American cinema, which Iranians had begun viewing.[12] This idealization of a materialized lifestyle offended traditional Iranians and ostracized those Iranians who did not want, or have the means, to participate in a Westernized and commercialized lifestyle. In turn, this Westernized lifestyle alienated portions of the conservative Iranian communities who did not want to be forced to assimilate to Western norms. This situation also created a condition of hostility towards Americans when Iranians failed to meet the modernized, Western lifestyle.[13]

In addition to Americans moving to more rural areas during the mid-1970s, rural Iranians were emigrating from rural areas to more urban areas; consequently, when they reached urban areas, they were met with these unfamiliar Westernized norms and were further alienated. This resulted in angered populations that could not successfully integrate, which the Americans had never had to confront until then .[14] This difficult transition was made worse when rural Iranian emigrants perceived that Americans were stealing their jobs and were creating a situation of job insecurity. For example, pamphlets created by political propagandists were distributed in rural areas, marking Iranian dissent of foreign products, particularly with American wheat and Israeli eggs. These political groups were creating a narrative that Americans and their subsequent allies were creating a stagnant Iranian economy due to marketing foreign goods over Iranian domestic goods.[16] This narrative allowed dissident Iranians to create a larger discourse of

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[12] Mehran Kamrava, *Revolution in Iran: The Roots of Turmoil* (London: Routeledge, 1990).
[13] Leonard Sullivan Jr., Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Program Analysis and Evaluation (Sullivan) to Secretary of Defense Schlesinger and the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Clements), "Iran; Iraq," 23 Jan 1975, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1973-1976, Vol. 27, Doc. No. 99.
[14] Kamrava, *Revolution in Iran: The Roots of Turmoil*.
[16] Said Amir Arjomand, *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

insecurity directed to attract vulnerable (i.e. economically poor emigrants and rural Iranians) recruits in their struggle against the Shah and Western influence.

For Iranians, this became a perceived security threat, not only to their culture, but also their everyday lives, once the American population continued to grow. In fact, over the next few years, it was noted that the American population in Tehran alone was projected to reach 80,000, making Americans the second largest minority group and "equal to the Jewish population."[17] It is not difficult to understand how the Americans quickly became a target for Iranian resentment once the Westernization process undermined and fundamentally challenged traditional Iranian culture.

Also, within the social realm, the United States was pressuring for human rights advancement throughout all parts of the Iranian regime and society. While the ideas and theories behind increasing human rights were seemingly innocent, for some Iranians, especially traditional and conservative ones, these ideas seemed to be too Westernized (or "too alien"[18]) and did not allow space for an Iranian perspective.

These new ideas about human rights increased Iranian concerns of another imperialistic attempt at control. The general Iranian insecurity over a United States intrusion of Iranian societal issues is plausible because even when the United States wanted to ensure human rights were being implemented, one of the stated goals of these new rights was to "maintain public order…in connection with U.S. public opinion."[19] By not allowing Iranians to decide solutions to societal issues on their own terms, but instead implementing solutions based on United States' interests, Iranians viewed these new

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[17] Gordon Winkler, Memorandum, 446.

[18] Chronology: Iran: the Making of U.S. Policy, "Iran Revolution," *Digital National Security Archive*, 1977-1980.

[19] Human Rights Goals-Iran, "Iran Revolution," 31 May 1978, *Digital National Security Archive*, 1978.

measures as simply another attempt of United States control over the Shah and his regime—in turn, increasing resentment and distrust of the United States and its intentions in Iran and creating a climate of security concerns for Iranian citizens. However, the rise of nationalistic and revolutionary sentiments was not spurred by livelihood and cultural insecurity alone. Aggravating these issues were grave feelings of insecurity with the Shah, and specifically, with his regime's security forces, SAVAK.

Leading up to the 1979 Revolution, SAVAK yielded tyrannical power in order to protect the regime from collapse. Unfortunately, this unrestrained force (power) led to the isolation and resentment of the majority of Iranian citizens. Many citizens came to view this branch of power as an evil that needed to be abolished. This sentiment resulted from the involvement of the United States in SAVAK's tainted history.

In order to understand the resentment towards SAVAK and the security concern it created, the relationship between SAVAK and the United States must first be examined. Wanting to strengthen the Shah, protect his regime, and ensure strong U.S.-Iran ties, the United States' intelligence agencies, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and to some extent, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), helped create a model for Iran of a strong security/intelligence apparatus—SAVAK.[20] In addition, as the Shah underwent more domestic turmoil and unrest within his country in the 1970s, the United States sent larger caches of weapons to support the Shah, with the hope of stabilizing the country.[21] However, these weapons ultimately were used to support SAVAK, which is important because SAVAK used any force necessary to protect the Shah's regime—even

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[20] Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*.
[21] The Evolution of the U.S.-Iranian Relationship. A Brief Overview of the U.S.-Iranian Relationship 1941-1979, "Iran Revolution," 29 Jan 1980, *Digital National Security Archive*.

committing heinous acts in violation of human rights.[22] Before the Revolution, most Iranian families knew of, or had first-hand experience with, SAVAK torture and intimidation.[23] The United States was well aware of this fact by the late 1970s, yet still continued to support the Shah and SAVAK. This connection between the United States and the SAVAK created a security concern and a narrative of resentment towards Americans, which some Iranians were able to use to advance the nationalistic and revolutionary rhetoric.

The cruel acts by the SAVAK security apparatus led many Iranians to equate the United States and the Shah with the same levels of distrust and resentment. In 1975 this attitude towards the United States was evident when the U.S. Department of State discovered that terrorists had infiltrated the embassy in hopes of "disrupting the regime's ties with the U.S. and exploiting nationalist resentment against privileged Americans."[24] Ironically, as more attacks on Americans occurred in Iran, the more frequently the United States seemed to interact with and to support the SAVAK's interrogation processes.[25] By the United States involvement of SAVAK's human rights violations, Iranians had come to view the United States as not only an extension of their issues with the Shah, but also as a security threat—a security threat due to lack of protection against SAVAK mistreatment. No longer did a vast majority of Iranians view the United States as an ally, and this insecurity helped create, or at the very least, reinforced, the nationalistic response in the country.

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[22] Documents from the US Espionage Den, Iran Embassy-CIA Station 1979, "Iran CIA," 1979, *Internet Archive*.

[23] Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*.

[24] Report Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Iran; Iraq," 7 Oct 1975, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1973-1976, Vol. 27, Doc. No. 146, 436.

[25] Telegram from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State, "Iran; Iraq," 28 Aug 1976, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1973-1976, Vol. 27, Doc. No. 186.

While Iranian nationalism, and the 1979 Revolution that it resulted in, may be a creation of religious and academic elites, religious zeal and intellectual enlightenment cannot be the sole, or even strongest, explanation. Nationalism and revolutions are highly volatile processes and typically can be seen as attempts to create a unified society. However, with Iran, the nationalism was evoked not out of a desire to necessarily create a new nation, but instead to create an independent nation out of the control of Western powers, particularly the United States. The United States was forcefully creating new cultural identities and Westernized lifestyles, which some Iranians viewed as a security concern for Iranian culture, identity, and safety.

The state of Iran was going through massive changes after the Shah and his regime tried to maintain power; in doing so, the volatile system created a shared narrative for the Iranian people to rally behind. The United States had an interest in helping the Shah maintain power, but this process ostracized and threatened many Iranians. Iranians feared another Imperialist power, so through activism and the process of resisting, they sought to keep Iran separate from Westernized cultures. Iranian elite, mainly with strong religious backgrounds, realized these security concerns and emphasized 'Iranian,' in all aspects of society, in order to defend against these perceived Western threats. By resisting American involvement in cultural, economic, and political affairs, Iranian resistors instilled a sense of security throughout the region, while also creating a nationalistic society. In the wake of nationalism and revolution, Iranians created an Iranian agenda in foreign and domestic policy, highlighting the need to oppose foreign powers. In the 1970s, Iranians felt threatened by America's presence and involvement in

Iranian politics and everyday life, and as a result, sought to regain their sovereignty through nationalistic means.

About the author

Ryan M. Schweitzer is a senior at Columbia University interested in political science and history, particularly the process of nationalism and identity formation.

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