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## RENTIER STATE AND SHI'A ISLAM IN THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

THEDA SKOCPOL

The recent overthrow of the Shah of Iran, the launching of the Iranian Revolution between 1977 and 1979, came as a sudden surprise to outside observers — from the American friends of the Shah, to journalists and political pundits, and to social scientists including those, like me, who are supposed to be “experts” on revolutions. All of us have watched the unfolding of current events with fascination and, perhaps, consternation. A few of us have also been inspired to probe the Iranian sociopolitical realities behind those events. For me, such probing was irresistible — above all because the Iranian Revolution struck me in some ways as quite anomalous. This revolution surely qualifies as a sort of “social revolution”. Yet its unfolding — especially in the events leading to the Shah’s overthrow — challenged expectations about revolutionary causation that I developed through comparative-historical research on the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions.<sup>1</sup>

“Social revolutions” as I define them are rapid, basic transformations of a country’s state and class structures, and of its dominant ideology. Moreover, social revolutions are carried through, in part, by class-based upheavals from below. The Iranian Revolution seems to fit this conception. Under the old regime, the Shah ruled through an absolutist-monarchical military dictatorship, styling himself a cosmopolitan Persian King in the 2,500-year-old image of Cyrus the Great. Iran’s dominant class, ostentatiously pro-Western in its cultural style, consisted of state bureaucrats, foreign capitalist investors, and domestic capitalists closely tied by patronage and regulation to the state machine. The Revolution itself involved revolts against this dominant class by urban workers, unemployed people, and old and new middle classes. Finally, the removal of the Shah was accompanied by the dispossession of many (especially politically privileged) capitalists, by the removal of all top officials

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and the reorganization of the administrative, judicial, and coercive state apparatuses, and by attacks on the lifestyles and institutional supports of Westernized dominant groups in Iran. As in most contemporary Third World countries, it is hard to distinguish political and social revolution in any firm way, because the state and its incumbent elites are so central to the ownership and control of the economy. But the Iranian Revolution has been so obviously mass-based and so thoroughly transformative of basic sociocultural and socioeconomic relationships in Iran that it surely fits more closely the pattern of the great historical social revolutions than it does the rubric of simply a political revolution, where only governmental institutions are transformed.

My previous work on social revolutions — not only my in-depth study of the French, Russian, and Chinese cases, but also my more superficial investigations of contemporary Third World cases — led to certain conclusions about the causes of this class of events. Social revolutions, I have argued, are not simply products of rapid modernization that lead to widespread social discontent and disorientation. Many theorists have suggested that this sequence produces revolution.<sup>2</sup> But I have stressed, following Charles Tilly, that the mass, lower-class participants in revolution cannot turn discontent into effective political action without autonomous collective organization and resources to sustain their efforts.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the repressive state organizations of the prerevolutionary regime have to be weakened *before* mass revolutionary action can succeed, or even emerge. Indeed, historically, mass rebellious action has not been able, in itself, to overcome state repression. Instead, military pressures from abroad, often accompanied by political splits between dominant classes and the state, have been necessary to undermine repression and open the way for social-revolutionary upheavals from below. In my view, social revolutions have not been caused by avowedly revolutionary movements in which an ideological leadership mobilizes mass support to overthrow an existing system in the name of a new alternative. Avowedly revolutionary leaderships have often been absent or politically marginal until after the collapse of prerevolutionary regimes. And popular groups, especially peasants, have contributed to revolutionary transformations by revolting for concrete ideals and goals separate from those espoused by the revolutionary leaderships that end up consolidating revolutions by building up new state organizations. In my book *States and Social Revolutions*, I was unremittingly critical of all theorists who have assumed that revolutions are “made” deliberately by revolutionary, mass-based social movements. Instead, I insisted on a structural perspective to get at the historically unfolding intersections of the efforts of differently situated and differently motivated groups — groups *not* operating even under the shared rubric of a revolutionary ideology. As I put it in the book, quoting the abolitionist Wendell Phillips: “Revolutions are not made. They come.”

The initial stages of the Iranian Revolution obviously challenged my previously worked-out notions about the causes of social revolutions. Three apparent difficulties come immediately to mind. First, the Iranian Revolution does seem as if it might have been simply a product of excessively rapid modernization. Through the decade of the 1960s, and at an accelerating pace in the 1970s, Iranian society underwent land reform, massive migrations from countryside to cities and towns (above all to Teheran), unprecedentedly rapid industrialization, and the sudden expansion of modern primary, secondary, and university education. When the Revolution came, all sectors of Iranian society seemed discontented with the Shah and with their own situations. Perhaps, therefore, the Revolution was straightforwardly the product of societal disruption, social disorientation, and universal frustration with the pace of change.

Second, in a striking departure from the regularities of revolutionary history, the Shah's army and police — modern coercive organizations over 300,000 men strong — were rendered ineffective in the revolutionary process between 1977 and early 1979 *without* the occurrence of a military defeat in foreign war and without pressures from abroad serving to undermine the Shah's regime or to provoke contradictory conflicts between the regime and the dominant classes.<sup>4</sup> Not only was the Shah himself ultimately left unprotected by the incapacitation of his armed forces, but these forces themselves proved unable to replace the Shah with a military regime (or a military-supported regime) that could preserve the integrity of the existing state organizations. Instead, both the Shah and his armed forces alike eventually succumbed to a domestic, mass-based revolutionary movement.

Indeed, third, if ever there has been a revolution deliberately "made" by a mass-based social movement aiming to overthrow the old order, the Iranian Revolution against the Shah surely is it. By the end of 1978, all sectors of urban Iranian society were coalescing under the rubrics of Shi'a Islam and were following the direction of a senior Shi'a cleric, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in uncompromising opposition to the Shah and all who remained connected to him. An extraordinary series of mass urban demonstrations and strikes, ever growing in size and revolutionary fervor, even in the face of lethal military repression, pitted the unemployed, workers, artisans, merchants, students, and middle-ranking officials of Iran against the Shah's regime. What Western socialists have long dreamt of doing (without success except where war has intervened to help), the people of urban Iran did accomplish as they mobilized in an all-inclusive movement against a "corrupt," "imperialist" monarchy. Their revolution did not just come; it was deliberately and coherently made — specifically in its opening phase, the overthrow of the old regime.

There can be no question, therefore, about the sharp departure of the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution from the causal configurations that occurred in the outbreak of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. Fortunately, in *States and Social Revolutions* I explicitly denied the possibility of fruitfulness of a general causal theory of revolutions that would apply across all times and places. I am not caught in the embarrassing position of having to argue that the Iranian Revolution is “really just like the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions.” Nevertheless, I did suggest in the conclusion to my book that its basic framework of analysis should be applicable to other revolutions, even in different types of societies and different world-historical circumstances from the “classical” cases I studied. Indeed, the Iranian Revolution, too, must be understood from a macroscopic and historically grounded structural perspective, one that examines the interrelations of state, society, and organized politics in Iran, and situates Iran in changing international political and economic contexts. Only from this sort of perspective can we understand the vulnerabilities of the Shah’s regime, the cross-nationally distinctive sociopolitical roots of the revolutionary movement that brought it down, and the remarkable struggles since early 1979 over the creation of new state organizations in revolutionary Iran. The Iranian Revolution *can* be interpreted in terms analytically consistent with the explanatory principles I used in *States and Social Revolutions* — this is what I shall briefly try to show. However, this remarkable revolution also forces me to deepen my understanding of the possible role of idea systems and cultural understandings in the shaping of political action — in ways that I shall indicate recurrently at appropriate points in this article.

### **The Vulnerabilities of a Rentier Absolutist State**

Like the rulers of the Old Regimes in France, Russia, and China, the Shah of Iran was an “absolute monarch”. And in an important sense, the Shah was much more powerful than absolute monarchs of old, for he had at his disposal a thoroughly modernized army and a ruthless, omnipresent secret police force. Yet the Shah’s state was much less rooted, less embedded in society — especially rural society — than the “agrarian bureaucracies” of prerevolutionary France, Russia, and China.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Iran’s monarchs were “Oriental despots” who, despite awesome trappings of personal authority, reigned only by manipulating divisions among armed tribes, regional landlord potentates, and self-governing urban corporate groups.<sup>5</sup> A modern Iranian state, with a nationally centralized army and administration, emerged only in the 1920s, after Reza Kahn, the colonel of a tiny professional military force, seized power in a

coup d'état and expanded his army to pacify and unify the country. Shah Reza Pahlavi (as he crowned himself in 1925) constructed a kind of agrarian bureaucracy, a centralized state coexisting with landed aristocrats. During his reign Iran gained greater national unity and autonomy than ever before in modern times, yet still did not escape its destiny at the geopolitical interstices of great power rivalries. During World War II, Iran was occupied by Britain and the Soviet Union; Reza Shah, who had made the mistake of flirting with the Germans, was packed off into exile. After the war, Iran struggled for renewed national autonomy, first against the Soviets and then against the British and their oil interests. The upshot, after the failure of Muhammed Mossadegh's populist brand of nationalism, was American encouragement for a reassertion of royal power by Reza Shah's son, the (late) Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Helped by the US Central Intelligence Agency to defeat his domestic adversaries in 1953, the second Pahlavi Shah thereafter set his country on a course of cautious (though increasingly assertive) alliance with the newly hegemonic United States. Help from a far-away imperialist power was used to give Iran's state increased leverage in relation to the older, nearby imperial powers, Britain and Russia, and eventually to help it bid for regional military power in the Middle East.

Under the second Shah, the domestic underpinnings of the Iranian state also changed as the state became increasingly addicted to revenues from exports of oil and natural gas. Iran's government became a "rentier state," awash in petrodollars, and closely linked to the rhythms of the world capitalist economy.<sup>6</sup> Especially after the mid-1960s, this state did not need to wrest taxes from its own people, and the economic basis of its revenues was an industry oriented primarily to exports, and employing only a tiny percentage of the domestic labor force. The state's main relationships to Iranian society were mediated through its *expenditures* – on the military, on development projects, on modern construction, on consumption subsidies, and the like. Suspended above its own people, the Iranian state bought them off, rearranged their lives, and repressed any dissidents among them. The Shah did not rule through, or in alliance with, any independent social class. During the 1960s, he launched a "White Revolution" to buy out landlords, redistribute land to wealthier peasants, and extend bureaucratic state control into the villages. Poor planning left much of the agrarian economy impoverished, however, forcing millions of poorer peasants to migrate to the towns and cities. Urban Iran grew to become almost 50% of the population before the Revolution, and all urban strata relied heavily for privileges, employment, and services on burgeoning state expenditures.

As a wealthy rentier state, the prerevolutionary Iranian regime was politically unassailable in certain ways — and potentially vulnerable in others. Because of ecological and sociopolitical arrangements in the countryside, Iranian peasants lacked the capacity to revolt autonomously.<sup>7</sup> Yet even if they could have revolted, it would hardly have mattered; for landlords were not a mainstay of the Shah's regime and agriculture was becoming ever more marginal in the national economy. Industry, construction, and services were the foci of national economic expansion fueled by the regime's expenditures. In turn, these expenditures were closely linked to shifts in the price of oil and the international demand for it. When the OPEC cartel raised oil prices in the early 1970s, the Shah suddenly had huge revenues for crash programs in industrial and military modernization. Along with windfall profits, rising wages, and new employment opportunities, urban Iranians experienced escalating inflation and an influx of privileged foreign skilled workers and technicians. Then, in 1975–77, world demand for Iranian oil contracted, and many projects had to be cut and workers thrown out of employment. All urban strata together could blame the state for their troubles, and the Shah himself was universally understood to be the autocratic embodiment of state authority. Indeed, the Shah was no figurehead monarch, but rather a practicing patrimonial absolutist.<sup>8</sup> He played bureaucrats and military officers off against one another, never allowing stable coalitions or lines of responsible authority to develop. The Shah personally made all major decisions — about official appointments, about military procurement, about major state economic investments. Once the Iranian state came under revolutionary pressure in 1977–78, the Shah's absolutist role would become very consequential. Universal social resentment was focused upon his monarchical person, yet without him the state could not function. Military officers, for example, lacked the corporate solidarity to displace the Shah in a coup and save the state at his expense. And once the United States prodded the Shah to leave Iran in January 1979, top government officials found it hard to hold together in the face of the revolutionary onslaught. (Remarkably, a leading military general as well as SAVAK's second-in-command secretly defected to the Ayatollah Khomeini even before the end!)<sup>9</sup>

Still, all of the foregoing vulnerabilities of the prerevolutionary Iranian regime could well have had little significance. The Shah, after all, had both munificent wealth and ominous repressive power at his disposal. Whatever the ups and downs of oil prices and revenues, he should have been able to ride out waves of urban social discontent, just as many other (less well-endowed) Third World rulers have been able to do. That he was unable to survive, that both he and his state succumbed to revolution, can be explained only by reference to the extraordinarily sustained efforts made by urban Iranians to wear down



and undercut the Shah's regime. These efforts, in turn, were based in traditional centers of urban communal life and in networks of Islamic religious communication and leadership. A look at such supports for intense opposition to the Shah is now in order.

### Urban Communities as the Basis for Political Resistance

In many social revolutions, the most politically significant popular revolts have been grounded in village communities, damaged by "modernizing" social change, but still intact as centers of autonomous, solidary opposition to dominant classes and the state. Peasant village communities were *not*, however the basis for popular insurrections in the Iranian Revolution. Instead, opposition to the Shah was centered in urban communal enclaves where autonomous and solidary collective resistance was possible. Historically in Iran, the socioeconomic world of the bazaar was the center of urban life, and there were strong links between the merchants and artisans of the bazaar and the agricultural producers in the countryside. Of course, as the Pahlavi Shahs used state power to promote modern capitalist industrialization and new forms of urban life, the bazaars of Teheran and other cities and towns were bypassed and squeezed, both economically and spatially. Yet the dislocations of Iran's hectic modernization also channeled new people and resources into the bazaar: rural migrants sought employment and social services. Small artisanal-industrial enterprises, employing less than ten workers, expanded in tandem with large modern factories (so that, as of 1977, 72% of all workers were employed in units of ten employees or less). And bazaar merchants, from major wholesalers to tiny retail shopkeepers, continued to handle much of the burgeoning import trade by which urban Iranians, especially the non-wealthy, fed and clothed themselves.<sup>10</sup> Far from being disorganized agglomerations of isolated, disoriented people, Iran's traditional urban communities remained buzzing centers of economic activity and rich associational life. Islamic religious groups and occasions were especially important in tying merchants, artisans, and workers together. Mullahs trained to interpret Islamic law adjudicated commercial disputes and taxed the well-to-do to provide personalized welfare services for devout poorer followers. Both clerical preachers and devout laymen orchestrated a never-ending succession of prayer-meetings and ritual celebrations of key Islamic holy days.<sup>11</sup>

The bazaar also enjoyed ties to even those expanding modern sectors of Iranian society that might seem (and, in a sense, were) displacing its activities. Many Iranian university students, oriented to new careers in the bureaucracy or the professions, were children of bazaaris, and many wealthier bazaar merchants were involved in state-sponsored industrial projects. Indeed, the



bazaar could conceivably have remained in loose alliance with the Shah's regime despite state-sponsored modernization. But by the mid-1970s, the Shah seemed determined to attack the traditional aspects of bazaar life. He attempted to bring self-regulating merchants' councils fully under state control, he tried to extend state involvement in wholesale and retail trade, and he launched an "anti-corruption" campaign against alleged profiteering in the bazaar. All of this coincided with the Shah's steady efforts to exclude the Islamic clergy, the ulama, from educational, legal, and welfare activities that historically had been theirs to perform. Thus, even as the bazaar remained a vital, solidary social world, somewhat autonomous from the centers of state power in Iran, the Shah attacked the leaders of this world and aroused their defensiveness and potential opposition.<sup>12</sup>

In the mass movements against the Shah during 1977 and 1978, the traditional urban communities of Iran were to play an indispensable role in mobilizing and sustaining the core of popular resistance. Modern industrial workers who struck depended on economic aid from the bazaar, and secular, professional middle class opponents to the Shah depended on alliances with the clerical and lay leaders of the bazaar, who could mobilize mass followings through established economic and social networks. Those theorists who argue that rapid modernization alone produces revolution are wrong — even though the Shah's crash program did create widespread disruption and discontent. In fact, disruption and discontent *alone* do not give people the collective organizational capacities and the autonomous resources that they need to sustain resistance to political and economic powerholders. In Iran, it was crucial that the cities and towns were not merely disorganized receptacles of millions of fresh rural migrants with only state employments and disbursements to sustain them. Revolutionary potential inhered, instead, in the socially coherent and somewhat independent world of the bazaar, surviving damaged but intact into the 1970s, as a locus of politically autonomous social life for millions of urban Iranians. Still, we have not yet solved the mystery of why, even if it was collectively possible for them to launch demonstrations and sustain strikes, urban Iranians ended up actually doing so in such large, well-coordinated numbers. And we have not explained why, to a cross-nationally and historically very unusual degree, so many Iranians were willing to face death again and again in the recurrent mass demonstrations that finally wore down, demoralized, and paralyzed the army, the Shah, and his US supporters. To deal with these issues, we must address the historical and changing place of Shi'a Islamic religious organizations and belief in Iranian society and politics.

## Shi'a Islam in the Forging of a Revolutionary Movement

Shi'a Islam is a major but nondominant branch of Islam, and Iran is the only nation-state where Shi'a rather than Sunni believers are in the majority. As a religious world-view, Shi'a Islam arguably has especially salient symbolic resources to justify resistance against unjust authority, and to legitimate religious leaders as competitors to the state. The founding myth is the story of Husayn's willing martyrdom in the just cause of resisting the usurper caliph, Yazid. And legitimate authority in the Shi'a community has long been shared between political and religious leaders, neither of whom can unambiguously claim to represent fully the will of the "Hidden Imam," a supreme leader who went into transhistorical occultation in the ninth century. The Shi'a "clergy,"<sup>13</sup> or ulama, are trained to interpret Islamic law for believers, and they can claim, as well or better than monarchs, to represent authentically the will of the Hidden Imam.

In the actual course of Iranian history, however, Shi'a Islam has been used at times (especially during the Savafid Dynasty) to justify the ulama's alliance with monarchs, and at other times to justify pious clerical withdrawal from the tainted secular world of politics.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the Husayn myth can lead among ordinary believers to submissive calls for Husayn's intercession to ensure individual salvation, rather than to collectively oriented acts of martyrdom in defiance to unjust authority.<sup>15</sup> In short, political developments are not logically deducible from Shi'a beliefs as such; rather Shi'a believers are inspired to varying political activities depending on the varying places of religious activities and outlooks in the changing life of Iranian society as a whole. By the nineteenth century, under the weak Qajar Shahs in Iran, the Shi'a ulama had achieved independent financial means — as landowners and as collectors of a special religious tithe (half used to support the clergy and religious students, and half used for social welfare disbursed by leading clerics, or ayatollahs). The ulama also enjoyed strong followings in the populace, especially of the cities and towns. At times in the nineteenth century, when Shahs were deemed vacillating in the face of Western imperialist intrusions into Iranian society, leading members of the ulama actually mobilized huge Islamic "nationalist" protests against government policies.<sup>16</sup> Yet the clergy were not unified in any single, disciplined hierarchy, and they were tied in many complex ways to the Qajar establishment of landed aristocrats, tribal chiefs, and patrimonial officials. Some ulama might support modern reformist movements, but well into the twentieth century (indeed as late as 1953, when the Shah reasserted royal power with US help), other leading clergy provided strong active or tacit support for the Iranian monarchy as an institution. Not until *after* the second Pahlavi Shah definitively broke with the clergy did its

political center of gravity shift toward firm political opposition and, finally, revolution.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, the late Shah used state power and programs of modernization to attack the Shi'a clergy.<sup>18</sup> Land reform from above in the 1960s dispossessed many individual clerics and also religious institutions, and served to cut the clergy's ties to the landed upper class. Educational, welfare, and legal reforms created modern, professional, state-employment competitors to the Shi'a clergy in all of their historically important social functions. Left intact by the Shah were a few traditional centers of Islamic religious education (like Qum), now bypassed by most students seeking higher education, as well as the ulama's social alliance with the people of the bazaars, who continued voluntarily to pay the religious taxes. Contemptuously, the Shah supposed that the old-fashioned, "turban-headed" clerics would silently fade from the scene as the inevitable course of modernization progressed. But, before this could happen, the still numerous ulama of Iran, and their shrunken but still significant lay and student followings, reacted by developing a politically aggressive and populist brand of Islamic traditionalism. Exiled to the traditional shrine center of Iraq in the 1960s, the Ayatollah Khomeini began to preach to students and pilgrims that the Shah was an agent of anti-Islamic foreign imperialism, and he called on the ulama to assert their right to lead "the Islamic community" in direct opposition to such unjust authority.<sup>19</sup> Khomeini's appeal and message gradually became predominant among students in Qum, and spread throughout (especially urban) Iran via the previously established networks linking mullahs and tithe-paying lay people to that city of religious learning.<sup>20</sup> All of this, in the mid-1970s, began to resonate with *widespread* Iranian disgust with the Shah and the policies of his regime — policies that did seem to be more closely attuned to military aggrandizement, ensuring oil supplies to the West, and following cues from the United States, than to the indigenous demands of the Iranian people.

Once protests against the Shah began, the networks and symbols of communication among Shi'a clerics, and between clerics and lay people (through mosques and religious occasions) became crucial to orchestrating and sustaining widespread popular resistance to the state.<sup>21</sup> The Husayn myth provided a framework for labelling and reacting against the Shah as the evil, tyrannical "Yazid of the present age". The Islamic annual calendar of collective rituals, the weekly public prayer meetings, and the prescriptions for public funeral processions to mourn the dead all provided widely understood forms in which to channel simultaneous mass political action. Significantly, too, Iranians could join together even beyond the ranks of the religiously devout, because Shi'a Islam and Khomeini's visibly uncompromising moral leadership

provided a nationally indigenous way to express common opposition to an aloof monarch too closely identified with foreigners. Even secular Iranians could participate under these rubrics. And those Iranians who were devout — especially young men from bazaar families — could find inspiration in the Husayn myth for martyrdom in the face of repression. Thus, the huge mass demonstrations were often led by men wearing white shrouds to symbolize their readiness to risk death at the hands of the army. It *did* matter that the Iranian crowds were willing to face the army again and again — accepting casualties much more persistently than European crowds have historically done — until sections of the military rank-and-file began to hesitate or balk at shooting into the crowds. Over time, the crowds would therefore grow while the army became less and less active and reliable as an instrument of repression.

In sum, Shi'a Islam was both organizationally and culturally crucial to the making of the Iranian Revolution against the Shah. Radicalized clerics, loosely following the Ayatollah Khomeini, disseminated political ideas challenging the Shah. Then the networks, the social forms, and the central myths of Shi'a Islam helped to coordinate urban mass resistance and to give it the moral will to persist in the face of attempts at armed repression. All of this meant that a very “traditional” part of Iranian life — albeit a traditional part fitting in new ways into a steadily changing modern sociopolitical scene — provided crucial political resources for the forging of a very modern-looking revolutionary movement. Many social-scientific theorists of revolution have argued that revolutionary ideologies and organizations must convert and mobilize mass followings before a revolution is possible. Actually, this has rarely been the case in social revolutions of the past, which “were not made,” but came unintentionally on all concerned. In Iran, uniquely, the revolution was “made” — but not, everyone will note, by any of the modern revolutionary parties on the Iranian scene: not by the Islamic guerillas or by the Marxist guerillas, or by the Communist (“Tudeh”) Party, or by the secular-liberal National Front. Instead it was made through a set of cultural and organizational forms thoroughly socially embedded in the urban communal enclaves that became the centers of popular resistance to the Shah. Even when a revolution is to a significant degree “made,” that is because a culture conducive to challenges to authority, as well as politically relevant networks of popular communication, are already historically woven into the fabric of social life. In and of themselves, the culture and networks of communication do not dictate mass revolutionary action. But if a historical conjuncture arises in which a vulnerable state faces oppositionally inclined social groups possessing solidarity, autonomy, and independent economic resources, then the sorts of moral symbols and forms of social communication offered by Shi'a Islam in Iran can sustain the self-conscious making of a revolution. No inno-

vative revolutionary propaganda retailed to “the masses” overnight, in the midst of a societal crisis, can serve this purpose. But a world-view and a set of social practices long in place can sustain a deliberate revolutionary movement.

### **Since the Shah: The Struggle Over a New Iranian State**

Once the broad and heterogenous revolutionary alliance arrayed around the Ayatollah Khomeini triumphed in Iran, many Western observers hoped that Western-oriented liberals would shape the new regime. The Shah’s overthrow depended on the symbolic forms of Islam, but the revolution was in essence a struggle for Iranian liberal democracy — so the optimistic Western argument went.<sup>22</sup> Then, as the months of 1979 went by and the liberals of the National Front lost out thoroughly to clerical and lay proponents of an avowedly Islamic Republic, with strong powers for a supreme religious leader and for Islamic jurists written into the new Constitution,<sup>23</sup> Western observers switched their hopes to modern-educated intellectuals who were trying to govern in uneasy alliance with the clergy-dominated Islamic Republican Party. Supposedly, the mullahs, ayatollahs, and other traditionally educated Iranians were “medieval,” and not technically competent to run a modern polity. Especially after Iraq invaded Iran and the professional military leadership had to be reinvigorated, predictions of the imminent eclipse of the “theocrats” in Iran again flourished in the Western media.<sup>24</sup> Where liberal republicans had failed, technically trained modern officials — military officers and government bureaucrats — might succeed in displacing (or taming the powers of) the Islamic clerics. But no such developments occurred. Many observers in the West were thus truly confounded as the Shi’a clerics and their followers succeeded step by step, from 1979 into 1981, at consolidating their cultural and political hegemony as custodians of the Iranian Revolution.

But placed in historical perspective in comparison to the course of struggles in earlier social revolutions, the events since early 1979 in Iran do not seem so surprising.<sup>25</sup> In the classic social revolutions, liberals and democratic socialists — people who wanted to limit or to decentralize state power — invariably lost out to political leaderships able and willing to mobilize and channel mass support for the creation of centrally controlled agencies of coercion and administration. New state organizations built up within social-revolutionary situations were more mass-incorporating than either prerevolutionary states or abortive liberal political arrangements, and these new state organizations became ideologically and organizationally more autonomous in relation to foreign powers and domestic social classes. The particular political leadership that created such state organizations — winning out in the

process over other leaderships advocating counterrevolutionary, liberal, or decentralist political solutions — were equipped with mass-mobilizing political capacities and with ideological world-views that gave them the self assurance to use unlimited coercive means to establish vanguard control in the name of the whole revolutionary people. Thus, to understand which political leadership will win out in (at least the initial stages of) the consolidation of state power in a social-revolutionary situation, one must ask *not* which leaders are “most modern” by some Western or technical standard, but which possess, or can easily develop within given historical circumstances, the appropriate political resources. In Iran after the demise of the Shah and the partial distintegration of his state, it was precisely the radical-fundamentalist Shi’a clerics, following the Ayatollah Khomeini and organized by Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti under the rubric of an Islamic Republican Party, who could develop the appropriate resources to triumph as revolutionary state-builders.

Some of the clerical leaders’ resources were cultural. For example, “Imam” Khomeini’s role as a continuing central focus for the revolutionary leadership resonated with the popular messianic yearning for the return of the Twelfth Imam, who long ago disappeared from human sight to await the coming of a perfect Islamic community as the telos of history.<sup>26</sup> Other ideational resources available to the entire revolutionary leadership were more specifically ideological, derived from the politically assertive interpretation of Islam and clerical leadership elaborated by Khomeini. In the fall of 1979, the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci conducted a remarkable interview with Khomeini, during which she asked about the tensions between democracy and clerical authority embodied in the then soon-to-be-ratified Islamic Constitution:

*Fallaci's question:* In drafting the new constitution, the assembly of experts passed one article . . . by which the head of the country will have to be the supreme religious authority. That is you. And the supreme decisions will be made only by those who know the Koran well — that is, the clergy. Doesn't this mean that, according to the constitution, politics will continue to be determined by the priests [clergy] and no one else?

*Khomeini's answer:* This law, which the people will ratify, is in no way in contradiction with democracy. Since the people love the clergy, have faith in the clergy, want to be guided by the clergy, it is right that the supreme religious authority should oversee the work of the prime minister or of the president of the republic, to make sure that they don't make mistakes or go against the Koran.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Khomeini and his clerical associates thought of themselves as the true interpreters of Islam, automatically worthy of willing followship by all good officials and people in Iran. And Islam to them was an all-encompassing totality. As Khomeini put it to Fallaci, “the word Islam does not need adjectives such as democratic. Precisely because Islam is everything, it means every-



thing. It is sad for us to add another word near the word Islam, which is perfect.”<sup>28</sup> Dissidents, as they emerged in opposition to policies sanctioned by Khomeini, could simply be reclassified as “corrupt” and “evil,” not part of the true Islamic nation. Clerical judges could then as easily condemn to prison or death members of such formerly anti-Shah groups as liberals or Kurds or Marxists as they could condemn the former officials of the Shah’s regime itself. Their location in the social structure, as well as the political legacies of the revolutionary movement against the Shah, afforded the Shi’a clergy even more decisive advantages in the struggles to mobilize and channel mass support for a new Iranian regime. Liberal groups and Leftist parties might enjoy support in the universities, among the middle strata, and among organized sectors of the industrial workforce, but the mullahs had unparalleled access to the majority of poorer Iranians – small merchants, artisans, workers, unemployed, and rural people – through the mosques, local Islamic courts, and informal local institutions for popular education and welfare. Under the Shah, more severe repression and surveillance had been directed against secular oppositionists, making it difficult for them openly to appeal to popular support. And during 1977–78, the central locales for revolutionary mobilization of the lower and middle classes had been the traditional urban *residential* communities where the Islamic clergy were established leaders.

Once the Shah’s regime was destroyed, popular demonstrations led by the Shi’a clergy could continue to be fielded – now directed against “US imperialism,” a powerful symbol for Iranians mindful of American interventions in the past, and against all domestic political forces led by non-Islamic or by secular elites. Within the localities, armed militias and local committees of surveillance were organized under clerical leadership. Leading clerics came to dominate the new Majlis (Parliament) after riding to power through an electoral system that in practice required the illiterate majority of Iranians to gain the mullahs’ help in voting. Islamic legal education was expanded enormously after early 1979; meanwhile the universities were purged of “Western cultural influences” and then closed down pending basic curricular revisions. Islamic courts recaptured their long-eclipsed centrality in the nation’s judicial system, and the judiciary claimed authority to review legislation and administrative actions. Possible competing centers of authority within the state – such as the military command, or the bureaucratic ministries and the Presidency under Abolhassan Bani-Sadr – were brought thoroughly under the control of the leaders of the courts, the Majlis, and the Islamic Republican Party. Remarkably in the overall history of religion and the state in Shi’a Iran, the central phalanx of the clergy fused its authority and activities with the state itself. This was not a “return to tradition” in Iran, but rather a strikingly innovative contemporary departure, in which Khomeini and his associates took upon



themselves a vanguard, state-building and state-controlling role analogous to that of the Jacobins in revolutionary France and the Communists in revolutionary Russia and China.

Would the Iranian theocrats fall from power before the end of the revolutionary interregnum, as did the Montagnard Jacobins in France, or would they manage to maintain vanguard control, as did the Communists of Russia and China? As of the time this article was completed, in the summer of 1981, it was certainly too early to tell. But already by then the Shi'a leaders of Iran had proved themselves more able to establish their Islamic Republic than the French Jacobins had their Republic of Virtue – and this despite the lack of military successes in the Iranian revolutionaries' wars with Iraq and with domestic regional rebels. Nor have the Iranian Shi'a leaders been very successful at managing, let alone expanding, national economic production in agriculture or industry. Why had not "objective" constraints and failures undermined clerical rule in Iran before mid-1981? And how might an enduring Islamic regime look if the clerical vanguard succeeds in retaining control after the unexpected death (in late June, 1981) of its crafty organizer, the Ayatollah Beheshti, and after the inevitably coming death or enfeeblement of Imam Khomeini?

Ironically enough, Iran's Islamic Republic has enjoyed surprisingly propitious international conditions for survival. Whereas the French revolutionaries in the mid-1790s faced multiple military invasions from an alliance of European enemies, revolutionary Iran has been directly at foreign war only with Iraq, a less populous state that has not been able to parlay early victories into continued military momentum. In a bogged down, inefficient defensive conflict, the Iranian military's awkward admixture of regular soldiers and revolutionary guards has been able to hold its own – and, after all, Shi'a culture justifies prolonged suffering even in a losing or inconclusive struggle against an evil foe! Meanwhile, Iran's superpower neighbor, the USSR, is reluctant to invade directly for fear of provoking the United States. The Iranians themselves continually excoriate US imperialism in their domestic propaganda, but sheer distance and the nearby Russian presence prevent *that* superpower from intervening militarily. Thus the Iranian Islamic Republic has been able symbolically to assert its revolutionary autonomy against Soviet and (especially) American imperialism, without fearing military repercussions from these major powers. And at the same time, it has been able to hang on doggedly in an inconclusive, limited conflict with neighboring Iraq.

Iran's international economic role has been just as helpful to the Islamic revolutionaries as her geopolitical position. Continued international sales of

oil, albeit at a lower rate than before the Revolution and before the war with Iraq, have been the key to the fiscal survival of the fledgling Islamic Republic of Iran amidst an unvictorious war and domestic economic disorder. Indeed, one might wonder how Islamic clerics, whose world-view and skills have so little to offer to the productive development of the Iranian economy, could remain indefinitely in power in a contemporary nation-state. There may be a not-so-comforting answer to this question. In past social revolutions, new regimes have often recapitulated the ills of the old in newly mass-incorporating ways. Prerevolutionary Iran was, as we have seen, a rentier state, where revenues from exports of oil and natural gas were channeled by the state, not so much into truly productive economic investments, but instead into lavish purchases of modern armaments and into elite luxury consumption. An Iranian Islamic Republic could remain, for quite some time, another sort of rentier state: a populist, welfare-oriented rentier state, with the ulama passing out alms in return for moral conformity on a grander scale than ever before. Unemployment and underemployment could continue at high levels in a stagnant national economy. Like all regimes forged through social revolution, the Iranian Islamic Republic is puritanical in its official moral style. But rather than this entailing the triumph of a new work ethic to spur the development of Iran's agriculture and industry before the oil revenues run out, it can simply mean the enforcement of orthodox Islamic mores for families and residential communities, as the Shi'a clergy lead the masses of Iran toward the timeless utopia of the ideally just Islamic commonwealth.

Of course, events in Iran may outrun the Shi'a revolutionary leadership. The clerics may lose their political unity and the army or a secular political party may step in. Or regional revolts and foreign subversion may lead to the dismemberment of the country. But if the cleric-ruled Iranian regime does survive, it will only testify to a wonder that is possible in the world of the late twentieth century: when a historically distinctive politico-religious culture, the exigencies of social-revolutionary state-building, and the material windfalls of exported oil intersect, they can hand power to modern-day proponents of an Islamic Republic of Virtue. These Islamic Jacobins may well endure quite a bit longer than their eighteenth-century French predecessors. Nevertheless, they cannot last indefinitely. For when the oil runs out, or if international demand goes severely slack for a prolonged period, then the material basis for an unproductive revolutionary utopia will be gone. Iranian history will then reach a watershed perhaps even more momentous than the revolutionary events of the present time.

## NOTES

1. See Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).
2. See, for examples: Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Little Brown, 1966); Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton University Press, 1970); Ivo K. and Rosalind L. Feierabend and Betty A. Nesvold, "Social Change and Political Violence: Cross-National Patterns," in Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Guss, eds., *Violence in America* (Signet Books, 1969); and Edward A. Tiryakian, "A Model of Societal Change and Its Lead Indicators," in Samuel Z. Klausner, ed., *The Study of Total Societies* (Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1967).
3. See Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Addison-Wesley, 1978).
4. Some American analysts, for example Michael Ledeen and William Lewis in *Debauch: The American Failure in Iran* (Knopf, 1981), have argued that President Jimmy Carter's human rights policies put pressure on the Shah to avoid domestic repression of those challenging his regime. However, as Barry Rubin points out in *Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (Oxford University Press, 1980), Chapters 7–9, the Carter Administration directed its human rights effort primarily against practices in the Shah's prisons, and maintained public support for the Shah throughout the escalating troubles of 1977–78. The Carter Administration did not develop a timely, consistent plan for "saving" the Shah's regime, but it did encourage him to plan and act on his own with symbolic American backing. Perhaps the Shah expected and wanted more initiative from the United States, but the failure of that to materialize does not constitute "pressure" against his regime. By the 1970s, the Shah was far from being a US puppet in any realm of domestic or foreign policy.
5. See the excellent analysis in Ervand Abrahamian, "Oriental Despotism: The Case of Qajar Iran," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 5 (1974), 3–31.
6. For the concept of a "rentier state," I am indebted to Hossein Mahdavy, "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran," in M. A. Cook, ed., *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 1970).
7. See Farhad Kazemi and Ervand Abrahamian, "The Nonrevolutionary Peasantry of Modern Iran," *Iranian Studies* 11 (1978), 259–303.
8. Arguably, a state whose revenues come from charges on an easily extractable, exported resource such as oil is *extremely* amenable to control by an individual autocrat and his or her immediate relatives and personal following. However, the divide-and-rule tactics of a patrimonial ruler are classic; they have been applied in varying ways in all historical types of states. In states with strong bureaucratic features, rulers who do not apply such tactics risk de facto or actual removal from power by solidary collectivities of civilian or military officials.
9. Rubin, 239–40.
10. For a good synthesis of information on rural-urban migration and the working class, see Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Penguin Books, 1979), chapter 7.
11. See Gustav Thaiss, "The Bazaar as a Case-Study of Religion and Social Change," in Ehsam Yar-Shater, ed., *Iran Faces the Seventies* (Praeger, 1971).
12. A good account of the Shah's attack on the merchants appears in Paul Balta and Claudine Rulleau, *L'Iran Insurgé* (Paris: Sindbad, 1979), 167–172.
13. "Clergy" does not necessarily convey the right connotations, for the Shi'a ulama are not like Catholic priests. They do not administer sacraments, are not hierarchically organized, and do not intercede directly between believers and God. Rather, the ulama are like a cross between Protestant ministers, who interpret and preach on holy texts, and judges, who adjudicate disagreements in terms of legal norms.
14. See Said Amir Arjomand, "Religion, Political Action and Legitimate Domination in Shi'ite Iran: Fourteenth to Eighteenth Centuries A.D.," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 20 (1) (1979), 59–109; and Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran* (State University of New York Press, 1980), Chapters 1 and 2.
15. On this point, see Mary Hooglund, "Accommodation and Revolution: Symbiotic Ideologies in Shi'ite Islam," paper presented in the panel on "Islamic Ideology" at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC, 7 December 1980.
16. See Hamid Algar, *Religion and the State in Iran, 1785–1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (University of California Press, 1969); and Nikki Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891–1892* (London: Frank Cass, 1966).

17. Said Arjomand, in an article on "Shi'ite Islam and Revolution in Iran" forthcoming in *Government and Opposition*, is particularly good at analyzing how the Shi'ite clergy became "disembedded" from the state and landowners as a result of Pahlavi policies. Without this, the clergy could not have turned into a radical, populist political leadership.
18. See Akhavi, Chapters 2 and 5; and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1980), Chapter 4.
19. Khomeini's *Islamic Government* presents what was originally a series of lectures to students and clerics. It is remarkable for its invocation and reinterpretation of Islamic texts in support of a politically assertive stance by the clergy, in opposition both to the Shah and to Westernized groups in Iran. See the translation by Joint Publications Research Service, Arlington, Virginia (Manor Books, 1979).
20. Ironically, Khomeini and his militant followers were eventually able to make use for their own political purposes of traditional Qum-centered networks of tithe-collection and communication consolidated by a politically quietist leading Ayatollah (*majlis-i taqlid*), Sayyid Aqa Husayn Burujirdi, who was hegemonic in Shi'a religious affairs from about 1947 to his death in 1961. As Hamid Algar writes in "The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth-Century Iran," in Nikki Keddie, ed., *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis* (University of California Press, 1972), 243–44, one of Burujirdi's most important accomplishments "was his organization of the affairs of the *majlis* [supreme religious authority] on a more efficient basis: bookkeeping was introduced to record the sums of money received and dispersed . . . [from religious tithes], and a register was established of local agents authorized to collect money and forward it to Qum. This network of communication, set up by Burujirdi, . . . survived his death and serves to disseminate guidance in political as well as narrowly religious matters." In the 1960s and 1970s, when the Shah cut state subsidies to the Shi'a clergy, they were also able to use this (and other) tithe collecting systems to sustain themselves through contributions from merchants and other devout lay people.
21. See especially Fischer; and Arjomand. Both are good on the cultural and religious-organizational underpinnings of the revolutionary movement. Fischer emphasizes more than Arjomand the broad alliance of *disparate* forces that participated in the Shah's overthrow. It was not just an Islamic movement, still less a clergy-led effort to install theocratic rule. These features became more important *after* the Shah's overthrow, in the struggle to control the institutions that would replace the former regime.
22. See, for example, Michael M. J. Fischer, "Protest and Revolution in Iran," *Harvard International Review* (March 1979), 1–6. "It is to be hoped," wrote Fischer, "that the leadership of Ayatullah Khomeini . . . has helped midwife the bourgeois revolution twice begun before. . . . In the long run, the intelligentsia's democratic and open style – religious and secular – must succeed" (6).
23. A valuable translation into English of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran appeared in *The Middle East Journal* (Spring 1980), 181–204.
24. For example: Sharif Arani, "The Theocracy Unravels," *The New Republic*, 6 December 1980, 19–21.
25. Although the launching of the Iranian Revolution in the movement of 1977–79 against the Shah challenged the generalizations I put forward in *States and Social Revolutions* about the causes the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions, the struggles for power in revolutionary Iran since early 1979 actually can be understood quite straightforwardly in terms of the frame of reference I offered in Part II of the book for analyzing revolutionary outcomes. See especially Chapter 4, "What Changed and How: A Focus on State-Building."
26. Khomeini did not have to assert the messianic identity directly, for "Imam" is an ambiguous term in Iranian Shi'a discourse. It can refer simply to a prayer leader or to a leading learned cleric; or it can refer to the historic twelve Imams after Mohammed, and to the long-awaited Messiah.
27. Reproduced in the *International Herald Tribune*, 15 October 1979, 5.
28. *Ibid.*

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