

AMERICAN MILITARY UNIVERSITY

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION OF 1979:
AN ESSAY ON R. K. RAMAZANI'S 1980 ARTICLE,
"IRAN'S REVOLUTION: PATTERNS, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS"

A CRITICAL ESSAY
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Many of the recent geopolitical and ideological clashes between Iran and other countries, including the United States, can be traced back to the origins and the maturation of the pivotal Iranian Revolution of 1979. R. K. Ramazani's 1980 article, "Iran's Revolution: Patterns, Problems and Prospects," was written during the Revolution's infancy, when the events were still unfolding and there was much uncertainty about the Revolution's survival or the direction it would take if it survived. Thirty-five years after Ramazani wrote his article, major questions, such as how to resolve the 444-day hostage crisis and the fate of the Revolution after Khomeini, have long been answered. However, for Ramazani in 1980, the lack of the benefit of hindsight forced him to analyze unfolding events and predict their eventual outcomes, which he did using examples of previous Iranian crises and a careful analysis of the internal and external environment within which the Iranian Revolution developed and has matured. Ramazani's article provides a detailed and accurate analysis of the nature of the Iranian Revolution and the prospects for the Revolution's stabilization. In addition, Ramazani's admonition that Iran must "temper ideological extremism with pragmatic requirements" is as appropriate in 2015 as it was in 1980, especially in light of Iran's nuclear program and other events currently unfolding in Iran.¹

According to Ramazani, the Iranian Revolution had substantial domestic, regional, and global consequences, the long-term result of which would have a great deal to do with Iran's ability to stabilize the Revolution to meet the practical needs of its people.² The Revolution

¹ R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Revolution: Patterns, Problems and Prospects," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 56, no. 3 (Summer, 1980): 457, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2617391> (accessed June 2, 2015).

² *Ibid.*, 443.

polarized domestic politics, exemplified by the clash between traditionalist theocrats and secular modernists. Tensions with Iraq magnified following the Revolution, eventually erupting in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. The Revolution damaged diplomatic and economic relations with the United States, most blatantly through the discontinuation of the Shah's immense foreign import expenditures, dwindling oil production, the hostage crisis, and the resulting imposition of sanctions. How the Revolution would deal with these problems, as well as class, ethnic, and ideological struggles, would determine the prospects for survival of the new regime.

To analyze the nature of the Revolution, as well as to consider how Iran might stabilize the Revolution to ensure its survival, Ramazani examines several "cycles of crisis" that plagued Iran during the first half of the twentieth century.³ Some of Iran's crises, most notably in 1914-21 (the fall of the Qajars), 1941-51 (British and Russian occupation and abdication of Reza Khan), and 1961-63 (Nationalist Party victory and the White Revolution), fail to match what Ramazani considers the required criteria of comparison with the 1979 Revolution, namely the tandem criteria of domestic uprising (as opposed to an uprising instigated by a foreign power) and regime change. The constitutional crisis of 1905-11 and the oil nationalization crisis of 1951-53 led to regime change through domestic uprising, thus Ramazani uses them for comparison with the 1979 Revolution. Due to the nature of all five of the considered crises and the numerous variables involved in each of them, Ramazani's use of only two criteria, domestic uprising and regime change, to narrow the acceptable crises to two, the crises of 1905-11 and 1951-53, cast some initial doubt on his methods.

Ramazani successfully dispels much of this doubt by identifying the primary factors shared between the 1979 Revolution and the 1905-11 and 1951-53 crises. These factors include

³ Ibid., 444.

rising alienation of the masses from the monarchical regime, perceived foreign domination, the coalition of diverse socio-economic and ideological groups during the crisis, and the growth of power centers after the crisis. Ramazani cites examples of poor choices made by the ruling elite that led to the crises of 1905, 1951, and 1979. These poor choices, such as the arbitrary rule and political repression of the Qajars and the usurpation of parliamentary power by Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq, were similar to the disconnectedness and alienation that led to the uprising against Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. This similarity between the three crises made them unique compared to other revolutions, reinforcing Ramazani's choice to use them as focal points of his article's analysis.

These revolutions were also unique due to their political and religious natures, which clashed with the increasingly out-of-touch ruling regime. Unlike most other revolutions, they were not of a military nature.⁴ The demonstrations that erupted in each of the crises were part of grassroots internal rebellions, with no counter-offensives by the falling regimes. As Ervand Abrahamian wrote about the 1979 Revolution, "it was mostly peaceful...particularly street demonstrations and general strikes, that destroyed the 400,000 man army – the world's fifth largest military force, equipped with the most ultra-modern weapons petrodollars could buy."⁵ Because the Shah built his massive modern army with the help of wealthy foreign powers and their oil money, the modernization that accompanied the military buildup faced scrutiny from the rebels. In their opinion, according to Ramazani, modernization under the Shah created "social, psychological, cultural, moral, and religious effects."⁶ By 1979, the Shah's military budget was

⁴ Fred Halliday, "The Revolution's First Decade," *Middle East Report*, no. 156, *Iran's Revolution Turns Ten* (January-February, 1989): 20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012808> (accessed June 2, 2015).

⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, "Structural Causes of the Iranian Revolution," *MERIP Reports*, no. 87, *Iran's Revolution: The Rural Dimension* (May, 1980): 21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3011417> (accessed June 2, 2015).

⁶ Ramazani, 444.

nearly \$10 billion, much of it spent buying weapons from the United States.⁷ After the Revolution, all orders of United States military hardware were cancelled. Ramazani contends that this action created a split between the ruling authority and the military, a traditional alliance at “the core of the traditional power structure” in Iran.⁸ This was a clear sign that the revolutionaries were eager to cut their ties with the old regime and with the entangled foreign powers.

Ironically, the revolution grew during the waning years of a period of dramatic economic growth in Iran, as the Shah’s huge military expenditures illustrate. The number of schools and factories skyrocketed from 1953-1977, thanks to enormous oil revenues.⁹ The United States invested \$457 million in Iran’s oil industry, helping to generate \$770,000 per day in oil revenue by 1978.¹⁰ Despite the improved economic and educational climate in Iran during the oil boom, however, the Shah implemented policies that benefitted the upper class at the expense of the growing middle and lower classes, contributing to resentment against him. Ramazani points out that many of the demonstrators whose actions prompted removal of the Shah from power in 1979 were intellectuals, religious leaders, and bazaar merchants.¹¹ However, Ramazani fails to give sufficient credit to the role of lower class demonstrators who were alienated by the Shah’s policies.

According to Eric Hooglund, urban and rural lower class youth were key components in the Revolution.¹² Many lower class youth chafed at the Shah’s secularization programs, but

⁷ Khosrow Fatemi, “The Iranian Revolution: Its Impact on Economic Relations with the United States,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 3 (November, 1980): 304, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/163003> (accessed June 2, 2015).

⁸ Ramazani, 448.

⁹ Abrahamian, 22: see Tables I and II.

¹⁰ Fatemi, 308.

¹¹ Ramazani, 445.

¹² Eric Hooglund, “Rural Participation in the Revolution,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 87, *Iran’s Revolution: The Rural Dimension* (May, 1980): 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3011409> (accessed June 2, 2015).

religion was not the only reason they began to support Ayatollah Khomeini. After all, they had aspirations of buying cars and having nice houses, materialistic goals that the economic boom under the Shah could provide; however, their frustration rose as they failed to reach their goals. Their frustration led them to become receptive to Khomeini's revolutionary ideas. They were motivated by the fusion of nationalist and religious ideology embodied by the Revolution, making them a powerful force in the Revolution.¹³ Ironically, as Ramazani points out, the Revolution hurt the Iranian economy, creating more problems for the lower class. Wealthy individuals loyal to the Shah fled the country, taking much of their cash reserves with them. The strikes and acts of sabotage that were consequences of the revolutionary demonstrations created unemployment that affected one-third of the labor force, a great irony since one of the goals of the Revolution was to raise the standard of living for the poor.¹⁴ Additionally, oil exports dwindled by eighty percent, weakening Iran's position in OPEC.¹⁵

Because the Revolution of 1979 had a much greater religious component than the crises of 1905 and 1951, the Revolution's economic risks and hardships were believed by many to be worth enduring for ideological reasons. Khomeini rejected both Western and Eastern democracy, striving instead for an "Islamic democracy," which would provide justice, brotherhood, equality, and unity for all, founded on "superior righteousness" rather than on material or privileges.¹⁶ Halliday acknowledges the regime's success in maintaining the "neither East nor West" principle as of 1989, having reduced external political and economic influence and having resisted foreign invasion.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ Ramazani, 449.

¹⁵ Fatemi, 310.

¹⁶ Ramazani, 450.

¹⁷ Halliday, 19.

Although the Revolution survived long enough for Halliday to write about its ten-year anniversary, Ramazani criticizes a key component of it: its constitution. According to Ramazani, the Revolution's constitution was a failure of liberal nationalists and other moderates, both lay and religious, to persuade the fundamentalist clergy to offer another option other than the "Islamic Republic."¹⁸ Exemplifying Ramazani's criticism of the one-question referendum that ushered in the Republic, he cites Khomeini's move in May of 1979 to establish a 75 member "Assembly of Experts," dominated by clerics, instead of the constitutionally prescribed "Constituent Assembly," whose 300 members would have been an elected political body. Ramazani blames the Revolution's adherence to Twelve Imam Shiism for grating Khomeini the power to create the Assembly of Experts, which drafted and approved a constitution that created a "stifling political climate," according to some detractors.¹⁹ The Ayatollah Shariatmadari, for example, feared the constitution approved by the Assembly of Experts could result in a dictatorial government, and that sovereignty should rest with the people instead. The ideological conflict between Khomeini and Shariatmadari caused friction between Iran and Azerbaijan, Shariatmadari's power center, but the two sides reached an agreement. In the end, Khomeini did amend the constitution, allowing Sunnis to enjoy "complete respect," even though Twelve Imam Shiism would remain the "official religion" of Iran.²⁰ Clearly, religion and politics blended after the Revolution.

An early test of the Revolution was the hostage crisis at the United States embassy. This crisis highlighted President Bani-Sadr's limited ability to resolve it, highlighting the limited political power of the president as opposed to the nearly unlimited power of Khomeini. While the

¹⁸ Ibid., 450.

¹⁹ Ibid., 451.

²⁰ Ibid., 452.

economy already suffered from declining oil revenue and diminished productivity due to the effects of strikes and sabotage during the Revolution, the hostage crisis further damaged the economy due to the sanctions the Carter administration imposed in April of 1980. Ramazani criticizes both clergy and lay leaders of the Revolutionary Council, a key power center of the Revolution, for allowing Khomeini to decide whether to allow a United Nations commission to meet with the hostages.²¹ Khomeini refused them, embarrassing President Bani-Sadr and inducing the Carter administration to impose sanctions. This incident offers yet another example of how, according to Ramazani, the Revolution failed to act in the best interests of the Iranian people.

While Ramazani concedes that not enough time had passed by the publication date of his article to tell which emerging trends in Iran would prove significant going forward, he expresses confidence that historical precedents evident in the 1905 and 1951 crises could predict what would unfold. With uncanny precision, the events of the subsequent years largely illustrated many of Ramazani's concerns. When Ramazani's article was published in the summer of 1980, Iran had failed, in his opinion, to temper its ideological extremism with its pragmatic requirements. Ramazani's article ends, however, with a ray of hope for the future of Iran. History shows that "the glorious achievements of Islamic civilization were always made possible by the ability of Muslim leaders to wed their faith to an accurate reflection of the real facts of life."²² Post-Revolution Iran continues to try to balance its faith and the lives of its people.

²¹ Ibid., 455.

²² Ibid., 457.

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