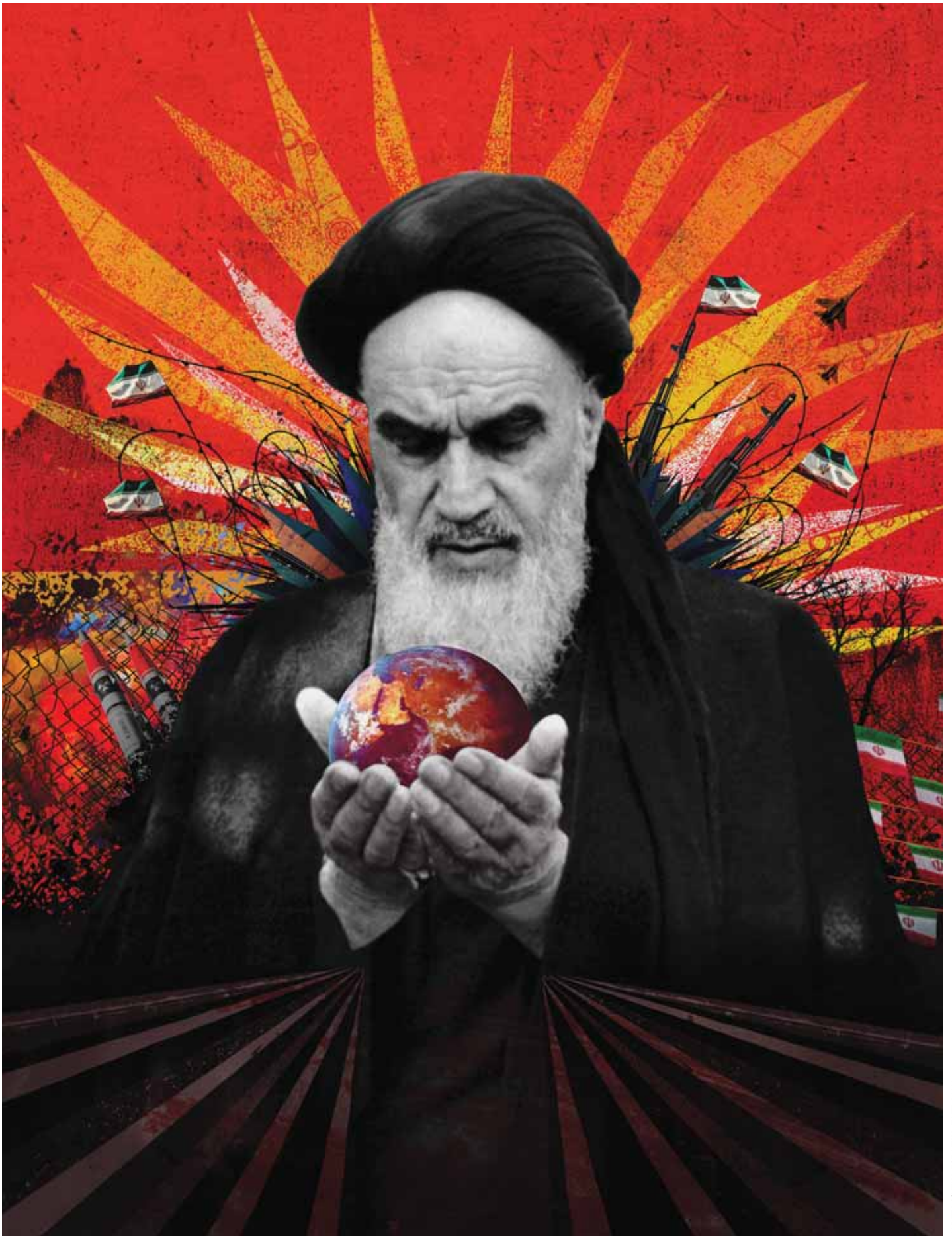




MARTIN O'NEILL FOR NEW STATESMAN

The revolution that shook the world

Forty years ago this month, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in France to overthrow Iran's corrupt monarchy. The revolt radicalised the region and inspired Muslims across the world. We are still feeling the aftershocks today

By Michael Axworthy

On 16 January 1979 Mohammad Reza Shah finally gave up his struggle to keep control of Iran and flew with his wife to Egypt. They had an improvised meal on the plane of rice and broad beans, eaten from paper plates. He had reigned since 1941; there had been numerous assassination attempts and he had fled the country briefly once before, in 1953, but now it was over for good. On 1 February Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile in Paris and on 11 February the last troops loyal to the Shah gave up too. Khomeini consolidated his grip on power, establishing an Islamic Republic with overwhelming popular support in a referendum at the end of March.

Forty years after those events, how should we think of the Islamic Revolution? As an outbreak of madness, or of common sense? As an appalling accident, or as somehow inevitable? As a fulfilment of Iranian history, or as a bizarre aberration?

Why did it happen, and what have its consequences been? Does the revolution still affect the motivation of the Islamic Republic in its conduct today? Such questions crowd in. Many otherwise well-informed people have a problem with the revolution,

and Iran more widely. There is often a comprehension gap – perhaps especially about how a popular revolution in our contemporary world could produce a religious, conservative government.

A conventional summary of the slide towards revolution that culminated with the Shah's flight and Khomeini's return can be set out quite simply. It began with a surge of economic unease, after the oil-fuelled boom and rapid development of the early 1970s began to falter, with rising inflation and unemployment. In 1977 the Shah's government, seeking to avoid the displeasure of the new Carter administration in the US, relaxed some of its repressive measures, permitting some expressions of dissent from the liberal left to reappear.

Then, in January 1978, a deliberately offensive article against Khomeini in a government-backed newspaper provoked a demonstration by religious students in the shrine city of Qom, in which demonstrators were shot and killed by police. Fuelled by condemnations from Khomeini outside Iran and from other clerics within, a cycle of further demonstrations and shootings followed, after intervals of 40 days each time (it is traditional in Iran to hold a day

of mourning 40 days after a death). The demonstrations, mainly involving young students and people from the bazaars, grew steadily larger and more violent (at least against property such as banks, police buildings and cinemas; violence against persons by the demonstrators was rare, and overall the Iranian Revolution, despite shocking incidents and images, was much less bloody than the French or Russian revolutions). The numbers shot by the security forces also grew.

From the summer and early autumn workers frustrated at low pay began to join demonstrations, and went on strike, and the strikes in the oil industry became especially damaging as the autumn went on. On 8 September – afterwards known as Black Friday – martial law was declared and about 80 demonstrators were killed in Tehran (at the time people believed it was many more). For many Iranians, the bloody outcome of that day meant the Shah lost all remaining credibility, and the general wish was for him to go, as Khomeini had long been demanding from his exile in France.

Strikes and demonstrations continued and increased in intensity, especially in the religious season of Ashura in December. —

– Troops began to desert, and by the beginning of January the Shah had recognised that exile was unavoidable.

Through the 1960s and especially the 1970s, many Iranians had transformed their lives through participation in the Shah's economic development plans, which he called the "White Revolution". They encompassed land reform, movement to the cities (it has been estimated that the rate of internal migration reached 8 per cent per year in 1972-73, and that by 1978 46 per cent of the population were living in cities) and re-employment in industrial and service industries. But a major underlying cause of the revolution was widespread distaste and

did great things for Iran.

So why was he deposed? Some (including it seems, the Shah himself, dying of cancer in Egypt in 1980) believed that the Americans and the British created the revolution.

One factor in this, and in the Shah's view before 1979, was that he and his regime had been looking the wrong way. The Shah was focused on the communist threat – on the remnants of the communist Tudeh party and related underground groups, and on the possible activities of Soviet agents. He believed economic development and greater material wealth would overcome political problems. His contacts in Western governments, notably the US, tended to think that

sometimes been characterised as the university-educated children of older middle-class leftists or liberals. The leftists were the grouping that the Shah had been most worried about and that his secret police, Savak, had targeted most energetically, to such effect that by the late 1970s most of their overt activity was in exile. They revitalised themselves within Iran once the revolution gained momentum. But after Khomeini had consolidated his position of supremacy, the leftists generally felt bitter that, in their view, their revolution had been stolen from them by the clerics.

Liberals such as Mehdi Bazargan and Ebrahim Yazdi represented the tradition inherited from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11. This was Iran's first revolution of the 20th century, which limited the monarchy's power, established an elected parliament and gave Iran a constitution for the first time. For them, the Iranian Revolution should have been liberal, following on from 1906 and Mosaddeq's prime ministership in 1951-53, with the goal of realising political freedoms, the rule of law and properly representative democratic government. Undoubtedly, a lot of Iranians were hoping for that in 1979. One could make a case that Bazargan came surprisingly close to achieving that kind of leadership as prime minister in that year.

But whatever it may have been in the 1950s, the level of support for the liberals in 1979 was not sufficient. Bazargan only had such power as he did because Khomeini gave it to him, for as long as he was useful; and in November 1979 he had to resign when student demonstrators occupied the US Embassy and took the diplomats there hostage, beginning a crisis that lasted until January 1981.

Khomeini's view was that there should be an Islamic government. Born in 1902, he underwent the long training for the clergy in the 1930s and 1940s and rose to prominence in 1963-64, when he spoke out against the Shah during another period of unrest and demonstrations. He went into exile in Iraq in 1964, and by the early 1970s had reached the view that the Shah should be removed and monarchy itself was illegitimate.

Just as there were a range of attitudes to the Shah's regime, so there were a range of problems by the mid-1970s. These included the disruptive effects of his sweeping land reform and other measures for economic development in the 1960s and 1970s, the failure of his regime to allow a degree of political activity as a safety valve for the stresses of modernisation, and the alienating effect of rapid urbanisation.

Yet the Iranian Revolution took place at a

Revolutions are supposed to be radical and progressive. But in Iran religion returned to dominate

distrust for these huge changes, especially among young people. And Iran was a young country – the birth rate had been frenetic for many years and in the mid-1970s two-thirds of the population were aged under 30.

One problem with interpreting the revolution is that different groups still disagree strongly about it, reflecting the divisions at the time. The revolution was not successful because all Iranians thought the same way, but because for a brief time a large majority, despite differences between the social and ideological groups to which they belonged, came together, accepting the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, to demand an end to the monarchy. It is important to grasp this, because after 1979 those groups diverged, and have had their own partisan views of the revolution, and what went wrong, ever since.

The supporters of the monarchy never agreed with the revolution and never accepted Khomeini as leader. Their view is that the Shah was a strong, competent king who wanted the best for his people and

way too, and encouraged him. The clergy were thought of either as part of the junk of the past, to be bypassed by secular modernisation, or, for what influence they might have, as allies against the communists.

The next group to consider is the leftists – broadly, those who supported the revolution because they wanted a socialist or communist revolution, and regarded the alliance with Khomeini as a temporary necessity of realpolitik. This grouping contained various elements in 1978-79. There were supporters of the old pro-Soviet Tudeh party. There were left-leaning elements of the Jebhe Melli or National Front – the coalition that had backed Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq in the early 1950s; and there were newer, more radical groups, including the Fedayan-e Khalq, which had taken a militant approach since the late 1960s. There was also the Mojahedin-e Khalq, which fused Marxist and Islamist revolutionary ideas.

There were generational and social differences between these groups – the more militant and radical ones tended to have a younger membership, and they have

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Playboy of the eastern world: the Shah on holiday with his family in St Moritz, February 1969

time when the working assumption among Westernised elites in the Middle East and Western governments was that the region in general and Iran in particular were developing in their direction. The Shah believed that economic growth and material prosperity would drive out dissent.

The Islamic Revolution overturned those assumptions and reasserted the importance of religion, with lasting regional and global effects. This is the crucial question about the revolution of 1979: revolutions are supposed to be radical and progressive, pushing aside older forms and structures such as religion. But in Iran religion returned to dominate.

A large part of the explanation lies in the clergy's position in Iranian society. In the early 18th century, the clergy had been close to the monarchy and powerful in politics. This position was broken by an Afghan revolt that destroyed the Safavid dynasty in 1722, bringing decades of civil war and trauma. The clergy were blamed by some for the Safavid debacle and shared in the general suffering of the country. Some emigrated, to Iraq, to India or to the southern shore of the Persian Gulf.

But through the latter part of the 18th century, and the 19th, while the monarchy remained relatively weak the Shia clergy grew stronger again. They developed a hierarchy of religious appeal and guidance on the one hand, supported by a hierarchy of money payments on the other, with appeals rising up to be heard by senior clerics considered specially qualified to give guidance

based on the sharia.

Clerics became important authority figures, especially in villages and smaller towns where there was little or no sign of central government; but also in larger towns and cities, where they strengthened their close links with the bazaar class of merchants and artisans through donations, guidance, patronage, and often through intermarriage.

The clerical network was almost a government in waiting. It had a cohesive hierarchy of authority and deference, arrangements for handling large amounts of money, connections to even the most remote parts of the country, and social connections too that broadened its class base, so as to make its influence dominant in many urban centres, small and large.

Again and again, from the later 19th century onwards, when secular government faltered, ordinary, pious Iranians turned to the Shia clergy for leadership – they were the other authoritative institution in Iranian society. This happened in 1892, in 1906, in 1953 (at least to some extent) and 1963. It is perhaps at least as legitimate to ask why an Islamic revolution did not happen earlier, as to ask why it finally did happen in 1979.

Until the 1960s and 1970s, the clergy, faced with the challenges of social and economic change and Western influence, had as a body been divided and uncertain about how to respond; sometimes siding with liberal intellectuals, sometimes with the monarchy. Traditionally, most of them disdained and avoided politics.

In the revolution of 1906-11, one leading cleric, Fazlollah Nuri, was executed by

resurgent revolutionaries after he sided with the monarchy in a coup. In 1953, the defection of Ayatollah Kashani from the coalition behind Mohammad Mosaddeq weakened the prime minister and prepared the way for the coup planned by Britain and the US.

Familiar with this history, by 1979 Khomeini was determined that, having achieved success in the revolution, the clergy would not again be manipulated or outmanoeuvred by secularised, leftist or pro-Western elements in the country.

Khomeini understood the essentials of power in Iran and he was ruthlessly determined to stay in control. One sign of this was the establishment of the Revolutionary Guards Corps in May 1979 as an armed paramilitary force to protect the new republic. Another was the way that political groups and newspapers dissenting from Khomeini's line came under increasing pressure over the summer of 1979, with offices broken up by Khomeini's followers.

Like any group of intellectuals, the clergy were disputatious and given to faction. In the late 1970s many of the ulema – a body of Islamic scholars recognised as having special knowledge of sharia – were politically much more moderate than Khomeini, or still followed the quietist, traditional Shia position and avoided political involvement altogether. Before the revolution was successful, Khomeini's doctrines on Islamic government (he circulated a pamphlet based on a series of lectures he gave in exile in the early 1970s) were known to relatively few and accepted by fewer still; essentially only by his own small circle of immediate adherents, mostly his ex-students.

Important figures such as ayatollahs Taleqani and Shariatmadari differed from him in important respects, and the latter came to confront and oppose him (unsuccessfully) in the aftermath of the revolution. Other major figures, such as Ayatollah Abol-Qasem Khoei in Iraq, disagreed with Khomeini's ideas fundamentally and held to their position after 1979. Many clergy in Iran were coerced to follow Khomeini's line during the revolution by his popularity and the zeal of his young followers; this realignment within the ulema was in itself a significant part of the revolution.

Khomeini's ideas were home-grown; there was no discernible trace of the thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or their ideologues, Hassan al-Banna or Muhammad Abduh, about political Islam, for example. His thinking on an Islamic state evolved from strands of thought in traditional Shia religious scholarship. Khomeini was a Shia phenomenon and an Iranian phenomenon.

The Iranian Revolution had huge effects beyond Iran after 1979. One immediate effect was to stimulate the occupation of the sacred precincts in Mecca in November and December that year by Saudi radicals. Eventually they were overcome (and executed) but the incident gave the Saudi monarchy a major jolt, and led to a wide-ranging cultural and religious shift, including a revitalised effort to proselytise Saudi Wahhabism around the Islamic world.

And the Iranian Revolution inspired many other Sunnis across the region, for good or ill, by example. For a time, Khomeini and other radicals in Iran talked seriously about exporting revolution, but this did not survive the early years of the Iran–Iraq War, except in connection with its Shia proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon. The war lasted from 1980 until 1988, claiming more than a million lives.

Iran's Shiism made direct influence and export of Iran's revolution to the Sunni world improbable (85 per cent of Muslims worldwide are Sunni). Nonetheless, the example of the Islamic Republic, in overturning previous assumptions about the inevitable movement of the region towards Westernised secularism, was profound.

Khomeini's adamant position in the early 1970s that the Shah had to go looked extreme and unlikely to happen. As the rest of the country lost trust in the Shah's government, however, Khomeini and his followers moved from the periphery to the centre of politics, much as Russians had rallied to Lenin's insistence on peace in 1917 as the Kerensky government weakened. Khomeini was also careful, in the final phase of his exile, to sound appealing to a broad range of opinion, while avoiding statements of his underlying convictions that would have been divisive.

Khomeini benefited from a powerful popular urge, especially among the huge new cohort of young people coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, towards national independence and reassertion and against the many humiliations of the past and cultural encroachment in the present. Few non-Iranians have much of a grasp of this, but it is vital for understanding the country both in 1979 and today.

Iranian history can be read as a list of invasions, occupations and humiliations; from Alexander to the Arab conquest in the 600s, subsequent invasions by Turks, Mongols (which were hugely destructive) and Tamerlane, and conquest by Afghan rebels in the 18th century. In the 19th century there was humiliation and military



intervention by the British and the Russians, and then invasion and occupation by the same powers in both world wars. This was accompanied by British control and exploitation of Iranian oil from 1908 to 1953, and followed by the coup that removed Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953. That episode renewed and intensified anger at foreign interference in Iran, as it had been planned and set in motion by the CIA and MI6, and for many discredited the Shah as a Western puppet.

Islam and Khomeini became the focus for this resentment. The Western presence was intrusive and brash before 1979, especially the American element.

Some young students had been swung towards Islam by a new generation of thinkers that had sprung up since the Mosaddeq coup. In addition to its other effects,

**“This was for Islam,
no one gave their blood
for cheaper melon”**

the coup spread disillusionment about the democratic tradition among liberals and the left, since Mosaddeq had personified the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11.

One thinker who changed his position after 1953 was Jalal Al-e Ahmad. He gave up his previous leftist anti-clericalism and turned back to Iranian Shiism as the central, authentic identity of Iran, while remaining critical of what he regarded as old-fashioned, superstitious forms of Shiism. He supported Khomeini's attacks on the Shah in the early 1960s. For many he was a charismatic hero; the archetype of the politically committed intellectual, complete with beret and tobacco-stained walrus moustache. He died in 1969.

Ali Shariati was younger, and was a stronger influence on young students in

1979. He too had been a Mosaddeq supporter, but came to believe that democratic principles were not radical enough to overcome tyranny in Iran. He was a charismatic teacher and advocated a new form of revolutionary Islam, stressing the ideas of social and political justice that underpinned the revelation of Mohammad.

Sometimes it is said of Shariati that his views fused Marxism and Islam. In fact, he aimed to present Islam anew as an ideology that could bring about revolutionary change – like Marxism, but better. He was imprisoned by the Shah's secret police, Savak, in the 1970s and then held under house arrest before going into exile in Britain. He died in 1977. Shariati's slogans were on the lips of demonstrators everywhere during the revolution, and Khomeini even repeated some in his speeches.

Khomeini himself was quite clear what the purpose of the revolution had been. It was not economic or material. Khomeini combined a religious and revolutionary purpose with an unyielding political awareness of how to achieve it. Everything else was, for him, irrelevant. In September 1979 he said: “Our revolution was for Islam... Blood was given and young people were lost, families were destroyed... this was for Islam. I cannot accept, no one can accept, that we gave our blood for cheap melon.”

Strikes were crucial to the success of the revolution in the latter part of 1978, but few of the rural poor and it seems not even a majority of the urban working class were actually involved until the very last stages, in December 1978 and January 1979. The middle class led the revolution. The rural population were nonetheless significant, because the clergy knew they had their allegiance, at least more than anyone else did.

The Shah had hoped to gain their support, through the land reform of the “White Revolution” programme, as a kind of Napoleonic peasantry – small landowners, nationalistic and loyal to the monarchy. But it didn't happen. They didn't trust central government, especially not this one, which seemed alien and secular- and Western-minded. The mullah was at least familiar and a known quantity.

So 1979 was predominantly a middle-class revolution in which a new Western-looking, secularised, leftist or liberal middle class were eventually outmanoeuvred by the old middle class: clerics, bazaaris, religious conservatives. The leadership of the left had been persecuted almost out of existence by Savak, whereas the clergy had largely been left alone.

As it turned out, Khomeini was a cleverer politician than the leftists and liberals had expected and with the help of former

students and close associates, notably Mohammad Beheshti, he prevailed over them. It may be that Khomeini had originally hoped to rule with a light hand, but in the course of 1979 and then during the Iran-Iraq War he took tighter control. It is likely that he was driven by events, and his determination not to allow the prize of Islamic supremacy in the state to slip away, rather than planned from the start the autocratic ideological Islamic state that came to be, with the Intelligence Ministry and the mighty Revolutionary Guard Corps.

His pre-revolution ideas about an Islamic state had been largely about justification from the sharia for such a thing, and provided very little detail of what it would mean in practice. Khomeini's underlying position had been the traditional one that in principle the sharia provided everything necessary for the conduct of a Muslim's life, including the conduct of government (Mohammad had governed, after all).

But the price of developing the strong state is that religion has been hollowed out by power, just as ideology was sidelined by the necessities of power in the French and Russian revolutions.

The Shiism of the Islamic Republic today is different from the Shiism of before 1979, and many Iranians have rejected it, at least in the form offered by the regime.

What of the future? Since 1979, despite much speculation and predictions of its imminent demise, and despite the vicious eight-year war with Iraq and various other attempts at regime change, the Islamic Republic has survived, proving more stable than expected. It is reasonable to make a connection between this stability and the Islamic part, unlike the anti-clerical or secular regimes set up by the French and Russian revolutions. Islam has given the regime deeper ideological roots in domestic society than the innovative ideologies of the Jacobins and Bolsheviks achieved. Islam is more embedded in people's lives and could have sustained a more liberal, democratic regime than the current autocratic form of government.

But those at the top run a risk. Shiism, more than any other form of Islam, is traditionally, acutely, almost obsessively sensitive to the abuse of political power. Islam still works as a support to the regime because a significant portion of the population still accept its Islamic credentials. But when innocents are beaten up, tortured and shot for asking what has happened to their vote; when peaceful funerals are broken up by club-wielding thugs; and when the gap between the pious poor and corrupt members

of the elite yawns ever wider, the danger to the regime intensifies.

Part of the power of Islam lies in the fact that it is not susceptible to the control of a political regime in the way that Jacobinism and Marxism were – it is an independent standard ultimately beyond political reach. If a sufficient number support the Islamic Republic, that is a strength. But if a critical mass of believers among the Iranian people decide that the government has become un-Islamic, then Iran's rulers will be gone as if they had never been more substantial than a puff of smoke.

It may be for this reason that the Iranian leadership were particularly rattled by the protests that took place in the last days of 2017, which involved a spread of the lower and lower-middle classes, including from provincial and rural areas. These are people the regime has been accustomed to think of as its natural supporters, rather than the more educated elements that were the backbone of protest in 2009.

Many Iranians, perhaps most, are highly critical of the current regime, especially for its failure to improve the economy and the general well-being of the population; but also for corruption, the sometimes brutal repression of dissent and free speech, and the widespread human rights abuses (the worst of which were the prison massacres of 1988, in which 4,000 to 5,000 were killed). But set against this, there have been two major achievements since 1979. One, to be expected perhaps from a revolution that raised up a clique of clerical intellectuals, is education. This has been extended to all, even in the most remote villages, with a consequent boost both to the literacy rate, up to a respectable 85 per cent, and to women's education especially. This has enabled intelligent middle-class women to move through university to careers in teaching, health and the civil service in large numbers, despite the obstacles of custom and prejudice in their way.

The other – which non-Iranians often miss or misunderstand entirely – is the success of the Islamic Republic in finally achieving national independence and self-determination after decades and centuries of humiliation and subordination by foreigners. Iranians are proud people and for many of them this achievement, which they connect directly to the revolution and the country's endurance of the long war with Iraq is beyond price. It means many ordinary Iranians remain loyal to the Islamic Republic, at least in some way, when they might otherwise not be; and makes them determined to support it in resisting external pressure – notably, now, the exaggerated hostility of the Trump administration

and renewed sanctions. It underpins and validates the determination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, along with the Revolutionary Guards and other parts of the state apparatus, to defend and maintain the Islamic Republic.

The threat of a direct conflict between Iran and Israel in Syria has for the moment receded, but the hostility of the Iranian regime to Israel remains as part of the ideological bedrock established by the revolution and is a touchstone for revolutionary loyalty, despite the damage it has done for years to Iran's foreign relations. Rivalry with Saudi Arabia also traces back to the revolution, at least in part, but draws force too from centuries of sometimes bitter Sunni/Shia sectarianism.

The Trump administration's hostility to Iran draws force, still, from memory of the revolution and the hostage crisis. Iran's current problems reflect its past; but are also distorted by misunderstandings both about that past and Iran's behaviour, which for the most part is determined by state interests and, above all, the preservation of the Islamic Republic. |

Michael Axworthy is the author of "Revolutionary Iran" (Penguin)



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