

SOURCES OF MIDDLE EASTERN TENSION- The Iranian Model

BY

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To the outside observer in Asia and the West, the unbroken series of conflicts in the Middle East is sometimes almost incomprehensible. In truth the underlying tensions of the area are so complex that only repeated close examination of each region can provide clarity.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of regional tensions. What the article can show is how past tensions are active within current conflicts. In the Middle East the past is alive. In fact, what seems to be recent disintegration is really the reassertion of old patterns in the wake of the withdrawal of artificial Western control. The bitter communal warfare in Lebanon since 1975 is in fact the norm for Lebanese history, while the open society of 1943-1975, so fondly remembered by Westerners, is the anomaly. Recent conflicts have been more devastating not because they are different from or more severe than those of the past but because of modern technology (weapons, transportation, communications, etc.) allows a wider range of destructiveness.

The Iranian Revolution is a good example.

The growing movement against the Shah first came to the attention of a surprised world when anti-government riots grew serious enough to capture international headlines. This conflict, which would lead to the establishment of a fundamentalist regime under the Ayyatollah Khoemini was in fact a rematch of old enemies.

The revolution has too often been portrayed as a conflict between the so-called progressive authoritarian rule of the Shah and his reactionary religious opponents.

In fact the Shah's opponents were a coalition of forces which the Shah had previously slapped down as he consolidated power with American help from 1952 to 1967.

The Shah's father, Reza Shah, had been driven from the throne during World War II by the Allies who feared his pro-German sentiments would endanger supply lines

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from the Persian Gulf to Russia. The Shah on succeeding him was little more than a puppet. After the war, parliament asserted itself, and the Shah possessed less power than either parliament, the large landowners or the clergy.

The Shah lost his first major conflict with parliament. Mohammed Mossadegh, a powerful orator, began demanding the nationalization of the British-controlled oil industry. Mossadegh, supported by mob action in the streets, forced Britain to cede the oil industry. Then he challenged the Shah's right to rule.

The Shah fled to Geneva. In Geneva the Shah conferred with Allan Dulles, head of the CIA. He returned to Iran where the CIA organized an effective anti-Mossadegh opposition which, backed by American money, won control of the streets of the capital. Mossadegh was arrested, and the Shah emerged with the upper hand on parliament.

From 1954-1964 the Shah strengthened his hand. By 1964 he was ready to move against his enemies with the support of an American-trained army and secret police. The Shah announced a "sweeping, progressive" land reform. To Western observers, this was a grand liberal gesture for which the Shah set the example by renouncing claims to much of the royal land.

In fact, land reform was primarily a calculated attack on the major power groups opposing the Shah. Parliament, religious and tribal leaders all depended on land revenues to finance their power bases. Conservative, though not uniformly opposed to technological progress, these groups gathered support, and open revolt broke out.

In this revolt, which was barely reported in the international press, all the major forces that were to be arrayed against the Shah in 1978 took the field. The old leftist followers of Mossadegh rioted. The Shi's (Shiite) religious establishment, including the Ayattolah Khoemini, thundered against the Shah in the mosques. Students shut the universities and joined mobs from the bazaar and the poor quarters to bring life in the streets to a standstill. Turkish tribal leaders in the countryside staged armed insurrections and took control of much of Southern and Central Iran.

Initially, the Shah reacted with calculated inaction. He waited until the opposition had sufficiently exposed itself, then struck hard. Rioters from the bazaar were allowed to march unopposed north up a major Tehran street, attacking foreigners and improperly dressed women, and burning the British embassy. Still unopposed, the mob continued north to burn the international school. But as they crossed Zhaleh Square two blocks from the school, waiting government troops opened fire with machine guns,

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killing 5,000 rioters.

At the same time the Shah moved against students occupying Tehran University buildings. Iranian air force planes, reputedly flown by CIA pilots, bombed the campus and killed large number of students. And SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, arrested prominent opponents.

Khoemini was among those arrested. He had denounced the Shah in the mosque as the agent of the devil. Unwilling to make him a martyr, the Shah expelled him. He was given refuge in Iraq in one of the Shi'a holy cities.

Crushing the tribal revolt in the South proved harder as the tribesman remained in the Zagros Mountains safe from army thrusts. The air force was, therefore, ordered to bombard tribal civilian camps. These repeated attacks on mainly women and children brought an eventual surrender. The high tribal leadership, stripped of their lands and guns, went unpunished, though many rank and file tribesmen were tortured and executed. By 1967, Fars Province, the center of the revolt, was brought under control, and the Shah was able to enter Shiraz, its capital.

In the same year the Shah felt secure enough to proclaim himself Emperor. Through SAVAK he established almost total control of the country.

As a result, when an opposition movement surfaced at the beginning of 1978, almost all observers readily dismissed it as insignificant, and the January riots which swept seven provincial centers went almost unnoticed.

Yet a rematch of the forces arrayed against each other in 1964 was shaping up. In the fall of 1977 the Mujahedini Khalg (the Islamic Marxists), the only anti-Shah group to remain active in the preceding decade, approached key leaders among the religious opposition. They proposed an alliance of convenience until they had driven the Shah from Iran. It was recognized a leader was needed, one who had never compromised with the Shah in any way. The Ayatollah Khoemini was suggested. Approached, he delightedly accepted the mantle of infallible leadership which Iranian psychology requires of those aspiring to power.

In February new anti-Shah demonstrations/riots broke out in the northwest city of Tabriz. Unopposed rioters burned hotels, movie theaters and western-style shops, then stopped for dinner. Returning three hours later, they were machine-gunned by government troops who left six to eight hundred dead. In the months to follow, demonstrators would riot in the name of the martyrs of Tabriz. These demonstrations would occur on days specified by the opposition leadership. The time for the dem-

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onstrations would be passed so openly by word of mouth on the opposition grapevine that both government and foreign residents would know in advance when riots were scheduled.

The opposition clearly hoped for fresh casualties to create new martyrs and increase anti-government sentiment. The government's actions, however, were puzzling. Except in Tabriz, no strong action was taken although political agitators were often clearly visible. University strikes grew, and nonpolitical students began to be pressured and even attacked by anti-government student groups. (Prior to 1978 anti-government students had been tightly controlled, often disappearing from their dormitories at night or being pulled off buses by SAVAK agents, not to reappear for six months to a year.)

An explanation soon passed down the grapevine. The Shah, as in 1964, was waiting, hoping to flush all opponents into the open before striking a decisive blow. He was also hoping to demonstrate to Jimmy Carter, now highly critical of his human rights record, that a strong hand was essential in Iran. As in 1964, the Shah was formulating policy to appease an American president. Land reform had been initiated to show John Kennedy, angered over the arrest of the Shah's sister at Geneva Airport for possession of \$3,000,000 in heroin, that his regime was progressive. As with Kennedy, he also hoped to use the situation as an excuse to crush his opponents.

In May, 1978, the riots reached Tehran, and the world at large took notice of the conflict. Through the summer the frightening game of cat and mouse continued with growing riots in an increasing number of cities. Then in August a tragic fire swept a movie theater in the southwest oil center of Abadan which was caused by police using inflammable gas to flush fugitives from the air duct system. Following a huge public outcry the government announced plans for democratic reform.

But the rioting continued. All universities closed, and the government could claim only limited urban control away from its military and police barracks. The Shah was now ready for his move. On a late September day the sons, nephews and cousins of the 1964 dead poured out of the bazaar once more and march toward Zhaleh Square where the Shah's troops waited. An estimated 5,000 were machine-gunned in a massacre which the Shah announced was "tragic" and "unplanned". Observers of this "unplanned" massacre reported trucks massed behind the square which, as soon as the shooting had stopped, were used to cart away the dead. After then came water-trucks, also parked and waiting prior to the massacre, to wash away the blood.

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The Shah had made his counterstroke. To his amazement it neither stopped nor slowed the rioting. Government control deteriorated further. The Shah, at a loss, went into a depression. Control of the government fell to the Iranian ambassador to America, who had returned earlier in the fall for consultations.

In October strikes began which quickly spread around the country' crippling the government and the day to day operation of the economy. These strikes involved the previously-politically uncommitted who had been disaffected by the unchecked inflation of the early '70's. They were further alienated by the Shah's continued inability to control the opposition and by his Mafia-style favoring of a few families. Nowhere could popular support be massed for the regime. The Shah could order his army from his palaces to strike at the opposition, but he could no longer rule. Then the strikes reached the oil industry in the south, and oil production ceased. In Washington, fearing that the Shah could no longer insure the flow of oil to the West Carter began to pressure him to leave Iran. Khoemini, it was hoped, could be dealt with on his arrival.

In January the Shah left Iran. Shortly afterwards Khoemini arrived, bringing an all-too temporary halt to disorder. He also brought an implacable desire for vengeance that would destroy any hopes for peace in Iran.

The 1978 fall of the Shah is only one of the many examples of the need to know the past to understand the present in the Middle East. The Lebanese conflict is rooted in the centuries old Christian-Muslim conflict which has been fueled by repeated Western favoritism of the Christians. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is rooted in the valid claims of both sides to the same piece of land. New oil states like Libya and Kuwait are governed by doctrines of Islamic supremacy which date back 1300 years. All these forces from the past combine to produce the dramatic headlines of today.