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1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)		2. REPORT DATE 20 Sep 95	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE American Diplomacy in the Iranian Revolution, 1976-1981			5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) Constance Marie Meskill				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) AFIT Students Attending: University of Texas			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER 95-078	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE AFIT/CI 2950 P STREET, BLDG 125 WRIGHT-PATTERSON AFB OH 45433-7765			10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
12a. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release IAW AFR 190-1 Distribution Unlimited BRIAN D. GAUTHIER, MSgt, USAF Chief of Administration			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE	
13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words)				
14. SUBJECT TERMS			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 162	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	

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American Diplomacy in the Iranian Revolution, 1976-1981

by

Constance Marie Meskill, B.S.

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

August, 1995

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Unannounced	☐
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American Diplomacy in the Iranian Revolution, 1976-1981

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Acknowledgments

My sincere appreciation goes to Dr. Hafez Farmayan, an esteemed History professor and Middle Eastern scholar, for his guidance as my thesis supervisor. He always encouraged my interest in Iran. My gratitude also goes to Dr. Mohammad Ghanoonparvar, a respected Persian scholar, who provided me assistance as a reader.

A special word of thanks to my husband Bill, my parents, my parents-in-law, and my friend Theresa Svigel for their constant support and encouragement.

July, 1995

ABSTRACT

American Diplomacy in the Iranian Revolution, 1976-1981

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 1995

SUPERVISOR: Hafez Farmayan

This thesis examines the American diplomatic relations with the government of Iran and the opposition forces in that country during the upheaval of the Iranian Revolution. It shows the battle that was waged between the American desire for stability and the traditional U.S. preference for maintaining the status quo in its foreign relations with Iran. This battle deflected attention away from realization of the strongly anti-American aspect of the revolution and led to a series of major political errors. U.S. political errors fed the anti-American hysteria in Iran, ultimately resulting in the hostage crisis catastrophe, and the beginning of an era of hostility between the two countries.

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Historical Introduction

The relationship between the United States and Iran has undergone more significant changes within the past twenty-five years than it ever did in the preceding century. Iran has been seen as one of the United States' closest allies and it has also been viewed as one of its worst enemies. The main catalyst in this vacillation of perspective was the 1978-1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. The toppling of the pro-American Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and the installation of a theocratic government perceived as hostile to the United States shocked America to the core and these events continue to effect American foreign policy in the region.

The United States was particularly shocked by the speed and unexpectedness of the 1979 Revolution. Of course experts on Iran knew that various groups in opposition to the regime existed, but few, if any, credited them with enough strength to overthrow the Shah. According to Iranian scholar Jahangir Amuzegar, "In late August-September of 1978, the U.S. intelligence establishment was still relatively confident that the opposition did not pose a real threat to the regime."¹ The American Ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, is

¹ Jahangir Amuzegar, The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution: The Pahlavis' Triumph and Tragedy, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 11.

widely credited with the recognition in November 1978 of the possible success of the revolution, just two months before the Shah left Iran.²

The lack of U.S. insight into the internal affairs of Iran has been attributed to many factors, but perhaps the one factor that has been the most heavily criticized is the U.S. government's neglect or delay in establishing timely contacts with the religious elements that took power in Iran.³ The failure to establish contacts may be related to the association that existed between the U.S. government and the Shah of Iran. Over the years, U.S. policy-makers formed a close relationship with the Shah that brought Iran more in line with American policy. The U.S. began to accept the Shah's view of himself as the sole representative of the people of Iran, despite his lack of a constituency among any national groups. Gary Sick credits this acceptance of the Shah as the center of Iranian politics as the cause of the United States' neglect of contacts with the opposition.⁴

America's relationship with the Shah was not the sole determinant of U.S. contacts with the opposition groups, however. A number of factors affected the

² William H. Sullivan, Mission to Iran, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), p. 201.

³ Martin F. Herz (ed.), Contacts With the Opposition: A Symposium, (Washington: Georgetown University/Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1979), p. v.

⁴ See Gary Sick, "Washington's Encounter with the Iranian Revolution", in Keddie (ed.), The Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic, (Washington: The Middle East Institute, 1982), p. 127 - 131. Also Marvin Zonis, Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 4 and Amuzegar, Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution, p. 218.

U.S. desire as well as ability to establish contacts. A deficit of clear American policy guidelines also clearly contributed to a confused situation. This work examines the relationship that the American government had with the opposition forces in Iran immediately prior to and after the fall of the Shah and shows the battle that was waged between the American desire for stability and the traditional U.S. preference for maintaining the status quo in its foreign relations with Iran. This battle deflected attention away from realization of the strongly anti-American aspect of the revolution and led to a series of major political errors. U.S. political errors fed the anti-American hysteria in Iran, ultimately resulting in the hostage crisis catastrophe, and the beginning of an era of hostility between the two countries.⁵

Iran has occupied a special place in American foreign relations for a number of reasons. One of the reasons is its strategic location. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran shared a 1,600 mile border with the communist country in the north. Iran was widely regarded by American policy-makers throughout the Cold War period as the bulwark against Soviet expansion in the Middle East. Iran is also located on the east side of the Strait of Hormuz, the only

⁵ James A. Bill, The Shah, the Ayatollah, and the U.S., Headline Series, No. 285 (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1987), p. 46.

maritime exit from the Persian Gulf. During the 1970's, fifty percent of the petroleum consumed by the Free World passed through this strait.⁶

The presence of oil has also made Iran economically strategic. Iran has roughly 10 percent of the world's proven oil reserves of petroleum and was the world's second largest oil exporter throughout the 1970's. Its reserves of natural gas are also ranked as the world's second highest.⁷ The U.S., on the other hand, is the world's largest consumer of energy. With only 5 percent of the world's population, it uses approximately 30 percent of the world's oil production. Since 1979, the U.S. has sought out non-OPEC sources of oil and has decreased its dependence on Middle Eastern oil considerably, but U.S. access to oil remains a prime national objective.⁸ Former National Security Council Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski once said, "The American interest in Iran is a vital one. Iran represents strategically, both in an economic and political sense, a vital cog in the collective Western economic and political system."⁹

Now, however, Iran has become strategically important because it is the first country in the modern world that has undergone an *Islamic* revolution and

⁶ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. Policy Toward Iran, January 1979, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East. 96th Cong., 1st sess., 1979, p. 10.

⁷ Bill, The Shah, the Ayatollah, and the U.S., p. 8.

⁸ Alasdai Drysdale and Gerald H. Blake, The Middle East and North Africa: A Political Geography. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 333.

⁹ U.S. Congress, U.S. Policy Toward Iran, January 1979, p. 1.

developed a modern *Islamic* government. Iran introduced the idea of Islamic revolution to the Middle East and to the world. Very little was known at the time of the revolution about what an Islamic Republic would be. The United States, in fact, acknowledged the new government of Iran on February 12, 1979, the same day that Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan's Provisional Government took power to oversee the transition to an Islamic Republic.¹⁰

The government that the United States acknowledged in February, however, was not the same one that existed after the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Iran. According to Barry Rubin, "Iran...was to undergo both a February and a November revolution - the first a political struggle to unseat the old regime, the second a social, economic, and cultural revolution to build a new Islamic society."¹¹ While the U.S. thought that it could deal with the first revolution through its contacts with the opposition, it did not know how to deal with the second. The hostage crisis caused the U.S. to break off all relations with Iran and America still has not resumed diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic.

The Iranian Revolution gave birth to the specter of "Islamic Fundamentalism". The strong anti-American feelings that were exhibited during

¹⁰ Eric Hooglund (ed.), Iran: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1977 - 1980, (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healy, 1990), p. 71.

¹¹ Barry Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 300.

the Iranian Revolution have become associated with Islamic fundamentalism in many people's minds. The Islamic Republic of Iran is seen as an example of how an Islamic theocracy operates and many American policy-makers wish, therefore, to contain the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. A closer analysis of how the United States dealt with the revolutionary forces in Iran, though, may tell the U.S. something about the goals it seek in the Middle East and the ways of achieving these goals.

To understand the United States' role during the Iranian Revolution, a thorough understanding of the development of the relationship between the United States and Iran is needed. The United States first began to actively appear in Iranian affairs after the occupation of Iran by Allied Forces during the Second World War. Allied strategy in World War II and changes in the international balance of power enabled the United States to step in as a "third power" to counter the influence of Britain and the U.S.S.R. in Iran. This new role was demonstrated in 1946 when the U.S. called for the removal of the Soviet troops, which were supporting separatist movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, from Iran.¹²

¹² Hafez F. Farmayan, The Foreign Policy of Iran: A Historical Analysis, 559 B.C. - A.D. 1971, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1971), p. 23.

The United States, however, did not remain in its neutral, "third power" role for long. As Britain's power faded the United States found that its power grew. During the oil crisis in Iran during the 1950's the United States eventually sided with the British and aided in the coup d'etat that ousted the nationalist Prime Minister Mosaddeq.¹³

The United States was particularly interested during the 1950's and 1960's in seeing that a mutually beneficial, security-oriented relationship with Iran was maintained. U.S. interest in Iran led to a "client relationship" whereby the two countries exchanged goods and services that were designed to enhance the security of both countries.¹⁴ Political stability in Iran became of vital interest to the United States and the U.S. began to provide economic aid and security assistance in order to help the Shah reduce unrest within the country.

The U.S. felt more confident about the durability of the Shah's regime by 1963 and shortly afterward began to reduce the amount of military and economic aid to Iran. This coincided with the increase in U.S. preoccupation with the Vietnam War and later with the Arab-Israeli conflict. During the 1970's, the Nixon Doctrine was formed in an effort to contain the Soviet Union. The Nixon Doctrine was originally intended to signal a new American policy toward

¹³ Farmayan, Foreign Policy, p. 24.

¹⁴ Mark J. Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 2.

Southeast Asia, but it was also used to support a new strategy in the Persian Gulf. The United States shifted from direct military involvement to an indirect projection of power through specified Third World allies by providing a threatened nation with military and economic aid where required.¹⁵ Iran became an important focus of this doctrine of arming Third World clients and encouraging them to combat Soviet proxies because of its strategic location and its neutrality. U.S. policy-makers had less ability to pressure the Shah, though, and the tremendous increase in world oil prices during the early 1970's also contributed to the Shah's greater autonomy.¹⁶

By the mid 1970's Iran was in the beginnings of an economic crisis because of the overly ambitious design and unreachable goals of the Shah's development strategies combined with the sudden leveling off of oil revenues between 1975 and 1978. In addition, defense expenditures showed no sign of decreasing while the growth rate of agriculture showed no signs of increasing. Farm laborers and village workers began to leave the countryside in hope of finding better work in the cities.

It is in this environment that the opposition was able to take hold and grow. The disaffected populations in the cities grew restless at Iran's growing

¹⁵ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 128.

¹⁶ Mark J. Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 99.

economic, cultural and social problems, and especially with the lack of political freedom available to them. Widespread corruption and repression of the opposition only added fuel to the fire. Many groups emerged in opposition to the Shah, among them the Mojahedin-e Khalq, the Fadaiyan-e Khalq, the Tudeh (Iranian Communists), Mosaddeqists and the radical Islamic clergy. The effectiveness of these groups was shaped by their social bases of support which included, "the modern middle class, students, the industrial working class, and a closely knit alliance consisting of the traditional middle class, the urban lower class, and the Shi'i clergy."¹⁷ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was able to maneuver these groups into a temporary coalition and emerged as the guiding inspiration behind the revolution.¹⁸

When the overthrow of the Shah finally occurred, few could have predicted what the eventual outcome of the revolution would be, except perhaps Ayatollah Khomeini. The United States certainly did not envision that its once close relationship to one of the oldest monarchical systems in the world would end in such a disastrous way. Nor did the United States predict that it would still view Iran as the enemy a decade after these events.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 191-192, 213.

¹⁸ Bill, The Shah, the Ayatollah, and the U.S., p. 23.

I. The U.S. Relationship with Iran (1829 - 1976)

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran is a relatively recent development. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States was disinterested in the affairs of the far distant Iran, or Persia as it was called at the time. Iran, on the other hand, considered the United States as a possible ally in checking Anglo-Russian encroachment and proposed a number of alliances between 1851 and 1856.¹⁹ Although a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between the United States and Iran was signed in 1856, the United States persistently followed a policy of non-intervention and non-involvement in Iran until after World War II.²⁰

American interest in Iran during the nineteenth century was limited to two areas: American missionary activity and commercial relations between the two countries. American missionaries began to arrive in Iran in 1829 to work with the Christian minority communities by opening schools and clinics. Fear for the safety of the American missionaries in Iran led to the establishment of the first United States diplomatic mission in 1883. Samuel G.W. Benjamin was sent as the initial representative of the United States to the American legation in Tehran.

¹⁹ Farmayan, Foreign Policy, p. 18.

²⁰ Yonah Alexander and Allan Nanes (eds.), The United States and Iran: A Documentary History. (Frederick, MD: Aletheia Books, 1980), p. 2.

Commercial relations between the United States and Iran were first solidified in the 1856 Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, which lasted until 1928, and also in the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation, which was a reference point for commercial relations until the 1930's.²¹ The amount of U.S.- Iranian trade, however, was far below that of Iranian trade with Britain or Russia. At the end of the 19th century, the granting of economic concessions was one of the primary elements of Iran's foreign economic policy and the most important concessions were obtained by British or Russian interests.²² Since the United States refused to become politically involved in the power struggle between Britain and Russia, Iran sought to learn America's commercial and technical excellence which could then be used against Anglo-Russian expansion.²³

The United States' disinterest in internal Iranian affairs was viewed as a positive factor when Iran was seeking outside advisors to manage its finances early in the twentieth century. At the Iranian government's request, the United States provided Iran with a list of impartial American financial people who would be suitable to serve as treasurer general for Iran in 1911. W. Morgan Shuster was selected and approved by the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, but his financial

²¹ Alexander and Nanes (eds.), *The U.S. and Iran*, p. 2.

²² Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Foreign Policy of Iran: A Developing Nation in World Affairs, 1500-1941*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), p. 66.

²³ Farmayan, *Foreign Policy*, p. 20.

reforms soon met strong resistance from the prevailing powers in Iran, including the British and the Russians. According to Shuster in his cable to the U.S.

Secretary of State,

In reference to my contract with Persian Government on file Department of State, I have faithfully performed same, executing duties of treasurer general under greatest difficulties to the satisfaction of Persian Legislature, Government, and people. At noon yesterday Russia presented 48-hour ultimatum to Persia demanding my dismissal and that my assistants should be subjected to the approval of Russia and England....Russia evidently intends making it impossible for Americans to serve Persian Government.²⁴

Struggle For Control

Morgan Shuster was merely a victim of a struggle between European powers and Iranians that had been growing since the late 1800's. In the later years of Nasir al-Din Shah's (1848-1896) reign his attempts at reform and modernization began to backfire. He had antagonized the religious leaders and caused a tide of anti-foreign and anti-shah sentiment. In 1890 he made a serious mistake by granting a huge concession to a British subject creating a monopoly on tobacco in the country. The terms of this concession aroused opposition from Russia, but more significantly, it created popular opposition within Iran. The opposition to this concession is often regarded as the "first major milestone in the history of the national awakening in Iran."²⁵ Although the Shah later canceled

²⁴ Alexander and Nanes (eds.), The U.S. and Iran, p. 8-10.

²⁵ Ramazani, Foreign Policy of Iran, p. 69.

the concession, American Minister Truxton Beale noted that, "This affair has brought forth a power in this country that the oldest Orientalist and even the Persians themselves did not dream of, to wit, the extent of the power of the mollahs [religious leaders]."²⁶

Nasir al-Din Shah, longtime ruler of Iran and principle promoter of modernization, was assassinated in 1896. His son, Muzaffar al-Din Shah, assumed the throne, but he was confronted by a country that was very short of funds while he was in poor health and desired to travel to Europe for medical treatment and a holiday. The Shah first approached Britain to borrow money, but the British were preoccupied with the Boer War and hesitated. After Britain procrastinated, the Shah proceeded to heavily mortgage his country to Russia to obtain loans. The rule of the Shah became increasingly unpopular, especially among the small number of Persians who had been educated in Europe and absorbed the ideas of representative government.²⁷

Serious rioting broke out in Tehran in December 1905, and by the first of August, 14,000 Iranians had taken sanctuary (*bast*) in the British legation demanding, "the dismissal of the Prime Minister, ...the grant of a constitution, and

²⁶ U.S., Department of State, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1892, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1893), p. 357.

²⁷ Benson Lee Grayson, United States-Iranian Relations. (Washington: University Press of America, Inc., 1981), p. 17, 20.

the establishment of a national assembly.”²⁸ On August 5, 1906 the Shah signed a decree introducing constitutional reforms, including a national assembly. A constitution based on the Belgian model was quickly drafted and so began what many call the Constitutional Movement.

The Constitutional Movement arose out of opposition to foreign domination. The tobacco concession uprising and popular opposition to the Russian loans became a rallying point. According to the eminent scholar, Rouhollah Ramazani,

Constitutionalism became the symbol around which various groups gathered because it meant to most of its supporters a movement for the “true independence” of Iran. The bazaar merchants, the clergy, the Western-educated intellectuals, and some members of the newly emerging groups in Iranian society all were agreed, at least in principle, that independence was a worthy cause.²⁹

Although United States-Iranian relations were dominated from 1904-1907 by disagreement about the handling of the death of an American missionary, Benjamin Labaree, the U.S. welcomed the introduction of a national assembly (*Majlis*) in Iran. The U.S. legation, however, felt that, “nothing substantial and permanent will grow out of this sudden movement for reform.”³⁰ Indeed, the Majlis was confronted by domestic and foreign opposition from its beginning in

²⁸ Ramazani, Foreign Policy of Iran, p. 84.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 82-83.

³⁰ U.S., Foreign Relations, 1906, p. 1217.

October 1906. In January 1907, the Shah died, and he was succeeded by his son, Mohammad 'Ali Shah who cared little for the constitution and its restrictions. The new shah was strongly influenced by his Russian supporters and favored an overturn of the constitutional government.

External developments during this time greatly affected what was to happen in Iran. When the Constitutional Movement first began, the Anglo-Russian rivalry was the dominant factor in Iranian foreign policy. The Russians, due to their extreme influence over the government, were assumed to side with the monarchy, while the British, who had provided sanctuary to the constitutionalists during their struggle, were viewed as favoring the nationalists. By 1907, however, Russian and British interests began to coincide. Russia desired to bolster its international position after its defeat in the Russo-Japanese war. Britain, on the other hand, wanted to establish closer relations with Russia and France to counter Germany's growing power.³¹

On August 31, 1907, the two Imperialist powers signed the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 which divided Iran into spheres of influence. The Russian zone in the north, which included Tehran, was far larger and richer than the British zone in the southeast because Russia possessed greater influence in Iran at

³¹ Grayson, U.S.-Iranian Relations, p. 21.

the time.³² Iran was not informed about this agreement until after it was completed. London and St. Petersburg told the United States of the agreement later, and the United States accepted it without protest. Iran remained remote to U.S. interests.

With control of external affairs taken out of his hands, the Shah turned to dealing with his internal opposition. In June 1908, he established martial law and sent the Russian-officered Cossack Brigade to attack the Majlis, forcing the destruction of the First Majlis. Resistance in Tabriz, however, kept the movement alive and constitutional supporters, known as Nationalists, with the support of tribal elements defeated Mohammed Ali, forcing him into exile and installing his son Ahmad on the throne. The second Majlis took power in July 1909. The U.S. government again welcomed the new constitutional government, but America's ability to influence anything in Iran at the time was severely limited by the power of Russia and Britain.

Russia's power in Iran was demonstrated in the "Shuster affair" when she gave an ultimatum to the government of Iran demanding the removal of the American treasurer general, Morgan Shuster. The Iranian government at first refused, but was eventually forced to give in when the Regent executed a coup d'etat and put an end to the Second Majlis, and the Constitutional government.

³² Ramazani, Foreign Policy of Iran, p. 93.

The Iranian government had appealed for Washington's help, but the most that the U.S. did was to express concern for securing Shuster's personal safety.³³ However, Shuster's dedication to the Iranian constitutional government and the Iranian people is credited with being a major determinant of Iranian attitudes in the early 1900's and was responsible for pro-American feelings in Iran.³⁴

World War I issued in many changes, but the American policy of non-intervention in Iran continued. The Shah declared neutrality in the conflict, but he could do little to contain anarchy in the country. Iranian neutrality was increasingly violated as the Allies and the Central Powers vied to strengthen their positions. Ottoman troops occupied parts of western Iran, and German agents were active amongst the former constitutionalists and the tribes. Czarist forces in northern Iran withdrew after the 1917 Communist seizure of power in Russia. British troops then moved north through Iran to counter a Central Power drive. Once the Ottoman Empire and Germany agreed to an armistice in 1918, Britain perceived itself as having a free hand in Iranian affairs.

At this point Britain devised a new policy towards Iran that was encompassed in the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919. The pact would have essentially established a protectorate over Iran. American response was swift and

³³ Alexander and Nanes (eds.), *The U.S. and Iran*, p. 13.

³⁴ Richard W. Cottam, *Iran and the United States: A Cold War Case Study*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), p. 34.

firm. For instance, the American Secretary of State stated in a cable to the Minister in Persia,

You are instructed to deny both to Persian officials, and to any one else interested in this matter, that America has refused to aid Persia. You will also state that the United States has constantly and consistently showed its interest in the welfare of Persia..."³⁵

Although this was a small incident to the U.S., it confirmed Iranian perceptions that the United States was interested in a free and independent Iran.

The Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 was never implemented, not only because of U.S. opposition, but also because Russia was emerging from its civil war. In the spring of 1920, Soviet troops entered northern Iran in pursuit of anti-Communist forces in the Caucasus and occupied ports on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea as well as the province of Gilan. British troops who had been stationed there before the end of World War I withdrew.³⁶ Despite Iranian protests, a Soviet republic was briefly established in Gilan, while separatist revolts occurred in Azerbaijan and Khorasan.³⁷

The British were unwilling to lose influence in Iran, however, and looked with favor upon efforts by a group of Iranians to stage a coup d'état and establish a strong authoritarian regime.³⁸ In February 1921 a coalition of army officers led

³⁵ Alexander and Nanes (eds.), *The U.S. and Iran*, p. 23.

³⁶ Grayson, *U.S.-Iranian Relations*, p. 34.

³⁷ Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 38.

³⁸ Cottam, *Iran and the U.S.*, p. 30.

by Colonel Reza Khan and a pro-British newspaper editor, Sayyid Zia al-Din Tabatabai, seized power. Sayyid Zia became prime minister and Reza Khan became commander of the armed forces. Zia's government was widely perceived as being influenced by the British, but it still had to conform to the geopolitical reality of the time and deal with Russia.³⁹

Iran's new relationship with Russia was summed up in a Treaty of Friendship in 1921. This treaty had advantages and disadvantages for Iran. It led to the fall of the Soviet Republic in Gilan and wrote off the debts Iran had incurred with the Czarist government, but in Article Six it also gave Russia the right to occupy Iran should any third nation use Iran for an attack on Russia. At the time, Article Six was not perceived as being ominous since war-weakened Russia was seemingly unwilling to push its limits, and the U.S. did not protest the treaty. During the twentieth century, however, this article of the treaty came to be seen as a serious threat to the independence of Iran.

Despite the treaty with the Soviet Union, Iran anticipated a strengthening of relations with the United States. This desire may have been a factor in Iran's decision to again seek U.S. help in strengthening out its finances. Iran hired Dr. Arthur Chester Millspaugh to serve as the financial advisor to the Persian

³⁹ Ramazani, Foreign Policy of Iran, p. 176-177.

government in 1922. Millspaugh's mission was left uncompleted, however, as a result of his coming into conflict with the growing power of Reza Khan in Iran.

Reza Khan followed a deliberate strategy in his rise to power. He first centralized and strengthened an internal security force, then he allied himself with the traditional upper class and forces favoring change, namely land owners and the commercial middle class. He was opposed only by a small group of liberal intelligentsia and by the left.⁴⁰ By 1923, Reza Khan had forced Sayyid Zia out of office and had himself appointed prime minister. Reza Khan became Reza Shah in 1925 when he displaced the last ruler of the Qajar dynasty and established the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty. Iran's history between the two world wars was dominated by Reza Shah whose nationalistic policies and modernizing programs had a profound impact within Iran.

The U.S. paid little attention to the aspirations of the new shah to modernize his country and the Shah became increasingly unwilling to humor the United States. In 1927, the Shah terminated the services of the American financial advisors and abolished the capitulations which had relinquished jurisdiction to foreign governments for trying their nationals who were accused of committing crimes in Persia.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the Iranians continued to hold an

⁴⁰ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 38.

⁴¹ Grayson, U.S.-Iranian Relations, p. 37 - 41.

idealized image of the United States, and expected that the U.S. would do what it could to allow Iranians to gain control of their own destiny. The U.S. was unaware of this image, yet it was able to reinforce it during World War II.⁴²

The Entrance of a Third Power

Prior to World War II, Nazi Germany was well aware of Iran's hatred toward Britain and Russia. Germany courted Reza Shah throughout the 1930's and by 1941 was Iran's largest trading partner.⁴³ Iran was included in Hitler's pan-Aryan nationalism and German agents and sympathizers were prevalent in the country. Iran's relationship with Germany concerned British and Soviet officials, but they were somewhat satisfied with the status quo in Iran until the initial German victories in Europe.

When Nazi forces invaded the Soviet Union, both Britain and the USSR recognized the serious German threat in Iran. The success of the Allied cause depended on the survival of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's survival depended on a steady and large flow of U.S. supplies. The most convenient and secure supply route was via the new Trans-Iranian Railroad that the German's had just helped to build. To secure the railroad, to protect the oilfields and to keep the

⁴² Cottam, *Iran and the U.S.*, p. 54.

⁴³ Ramazani, *Foreign Policy of Iran*, p. 283.

country out of German hands, British and Soviet forces invaded Iran on August 25, 1941 and easily defeated the Iranian army.⁴⁴ On September 16, 1941 Reza Shah Pahlavi abdicated the throne and went to Mauritius and later to South Africa where he died in 1944. His twenty-two year old son, Crown Prince Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was then proclaimed Shah.⁴⁵

Old and new patterns began to emerge in Iranian politics. The state's autonomy declined because of the initial intervention of the British and Soviets in Iran's domestic affairs and the lack of a strong state leadership. The Russians once again controlled the north, while the British controlled the south. But Reza Shah's policies had led to an increase in the number of Iranians participating in political affairs. The modern middle class and the industrial working class had grown and were challenging the traditional upper class. Nationalism, anti-imperialism and democracy became prominent themes within Iranian political discourse.

Iranian leaders turned to the United States for assurances in the face of the Anglo-Soviet invasion. Although the U.S. refused to try to end the occupation, President Roosevelt sought an Anglo-Russian declaration that the takeover was temporary. The USSR and Britain signed a treaty with Iran in January 1942

⁴⁴ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Grayson, U.S.-Iranian Relations, p. 59.

stating that Allied forces should be withdrawn from Iran no later than six months after the war's conclusion.

The U.S. role in Iran became an important one after the United States became involved in World War II. As the Secretary of State wrote to President Roosevelt, "The United States is the only nation in a position to render effective aid to Iran, specifically through providing American advisers and technicians and financial and other material support. We are also the only nation in a position to exercise a restraining influence upon the two great powers directly concerned."⁴⁶

By 1944, some 30,000 U.S. troops were dispatched to Iran to secure transportation and communications lines.⁴⁷ American advisors were sought after in the areas of finance, the economy, and internal security. H. Norman Schwartzkopf, who headed an advisory mission for the gendarmerie and General Clarence C. Riley, who headed a military advisory mission followed Shuster's favorable example of an advisor. Unfortunately, the director of the financial mission, Arthur Millspaugh, again left an unfavorable impression on the Iranian people and the resentment against him forced his resignation. In addition, Iran received eight and a half million dollars in U.S. military and economic aid under the Lend-Lease program. America's deepening commitment to Iran was summed

⁴⁶ Alexander and Nanes (eds.), The U.S. and Iran, p. 103-104.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

up in the Tehran Declaration in 1943 whereby the three Great Powers promised to preserve Iran's unity and independence and to promote development there.⁴⁸

As World War II drew to a close, Soviet behavior heightened U.S. suspicions of Stalin's postwar intentions. The first major post-war crisis with the Soviet Union came as a result of secret negotiations the Iranian government had in 1943 with several British and American oil companies to grant new oil concessions. When the Soviets caught wind of the negotiations they began to pressure the Iranian government to give them the concession for northern Iran. The dispute caused tension within the Iranian government but a bill authored by Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1944 was passed which outlawed all further oil concessions and attempted to end the conflict. The USSR, however, continued to press for a concession and helped to cause uprisings in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Soviet support for the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, established in 1945, and the Kurdish People's Republic, formed in 1946, appeared to be similar to that of establishing client states. Soviet troops also remained in northern Iran, including Azerbaijan and Kurdistan.⁴⁹

Throughout 1945, President Truman pressed the USSR to withdraw its troops from Iran, and in 1946 the U.S. strongly supported Iran's appeal to the

⁴⁸ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 23.

⁴⁹ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 46.

U.N. for a Soviet withdrawal. In March 1946, the new prime minister of Iran, Ahmad Qavam traveled to the USSR and obtained an agreement that the Soviets would withdraw their troops from Iran in exchange for an oil concession that was subject to Majlis approval. When the Soviet troops left in May 1946, the local autonomous governments they left behind were weakened and fell as the central government forces approached. The Soviet oil concession was later soundly defeated in the Majlis.⁵⁰

The U.S. in Iran

To this point, the United States had not actively intervened in Iranian domestic politics. The United States had merely been playing the role of the third power regulating the influence of the British and the Soviets in Iran. The start of the Cold War, however, was to make the United States an active participant.

After the collapse of the autonomous republics of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, Iran became less of a concern for the United States. The Shah, on the other hand, expected the U.S. to provide his country with massive economic and military assistance as it had done for Turkey and Greece with the Truman Doctrine and for Europe with the Marshall Plan. The Iranian government repeatedly asked the United States for diplomatic support and a large aid

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 46-47.

package, but U.S. officials did not believe that a large aid package would enhance Iran's security and might be seen as provocative by the USSR. Rather, the U.S. believed that small amounts of economic aid would be most useful in strengthening the social structure and central government of Iran.⁵¹

The Shah of Iran, however, had different ideas of what his country needed. He continually pressed for a large army, supplied with U.S. weaponry. The Shah was particularly enamored with large tanks and jet planes and emphasized that this type of equipment was needed to fight any Soviet advancement. U.S. policymakers did not agree with the Shah. As Secretary of State Dean Acheson put it, "Even though we might supply all of the foreign exchange costs of an enlarged and modernized Iranian Army, I should think the internal costs would be an extremely severe drain on the Iranian budget and would handicap the implementation of the economic development program."⁵² Instead, the U.S. maintained a small level of military support to Iran and emphasized economic development and political reform as the best means of promoting political stability.

Iran's political stability was of particular concern to the U.S. in early 1950 as unrest had been building in Iran for several years. An organization named the

⁵¹ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 36-37.

⁵² Alexander and Nanes (eds.), The U.S. and Iran, p. 194.

National Front had emerged in 1949 after the Shah had attempted to rig elections to the Majlis. The National Front was able to emerge as a major factor in Iranian politics by agitating for reforms aimed at reducing the Shah's power and improving the welfare of the middle and lower classes. The Tudeh party, the Communist party of Iran, that had been established in 1941, was also emerging as a force once again. The Tudeh party was popular in the mid-1940's, but an assassination attempt on the Shah in 1949 caused it to be banned. The Fadaïyan-e Islam, a small group of Muslim extremists supported by some Shi'i clergymen and bazaar merchants, was also involved in Iranian affairs at this time.⁵³ In addition, Iran had been hit with a crop failure and a subsequent economic depression. The situation in the country was near explosive.

The country's growing political and economic problems, and the U.S. refusal to grant more aid to Iran, put increased pressure on negotiations between Iran and the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) for a more favorable petroleum revenue contract for the Iranians. The AIOC had a virtual monopoly over Iranian oil production since the early 1900's and Iranian resentment of the venture had been growing since its establishment. Because of

⁵³ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 49, 44-45.

its size and importance, the AIOC came to symbolize foreign domination in Iran.⁵⁴

During the 1948-1951 oil contract negotiations, the AIOC offered only minor concessions that were not enough to satisfy growing Iranian demands. The British did not know how to deal with the rise of nationalism within Iran and took a hard-line in the negotiations. The United States, believing that Iran's nationalists would provide a bulwark against Communism, encouraged the British to be flexible and give in to Iranian demands in order to promote political stability. Washington supported local complaints against the British and sought to encourage forces that enjoyed popular support as long as they were anti-Communist. There was the fear, however, that liberal nationalists could set in motion forces that could lead to a Communist takeover.⁵⁵

U.S. concern about the situation in Iran was exhibited through the steps it took to enhance U.S. influence there. In 1950, a Mutual Defense Agreement was signed which provided some military aid. The U.S. Embassy staff in Tehran was expanded greatly and a new highly regarded diplomat, Henry F. Grady, was appointed ambassador. Finally, a Point Four aid program was begun to provide technical assistance to Iran.

⁵⁴ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 43.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

Tensions erupted in 1951 when the Iranian Prime Minister was assassinated by a member of the Fadaiyan-e Islam, apparently for his support of an oil agreement. The Iranian Oil Commission headed by Dr. Mohammed Mosaddeq immediately called for nationalization of the AIOC and the Majlis approved the resolution. Mosaddeq, supported by the Ayatollah Kashani's religious faction, the Marxists, and the nationalists in the struggle for independence, eventually became the new Prime Minister.⁵⁶

Washington supported Iran's right to nationalize but urged both sides to work out differences peacefully. By September 1951, the Iranian oil refinery was closed and neither the Iranians nor the AIOC were making money from the oil. American attempts to form compromise plans between the two sides repeatedly failed. The U.S. would have been happy to see Mosaddeq succeed in reshaping Iran, if it remained friendly to the U.S., but his inability to defeat the AIOC or to compromise with it prevented the creation of a stable regime. Although Mosaddeq's inability to compromise can perhaps be attributed to internal opposition from anti-British extremists such as Kashani, the possible breakdown of the country would have left the Communist Tudeh party as Iran's only cohesive political force.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Cottam, Iran and the U.S., p. 93-95.

⁵⁷ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 57-58.

By mid 1952, the situation in Iran had deteriorated to a drastic point. Middle-class elements had begun to desert the National Front while the Tudeh party began to offer alliance with Mosaddeq's coalition. Mosaddeq did not give up because he was sure that the U.S. would drop support for Britain in order to save Iran from Communism and economic collapse. The prime minister continued to try to expand his powers in July 1952 by demanding that he be appointed Minister of War and be given the power to rule by decree for six months. When this did not happen, he temporarily resigned until pro-Mosaddeq rioting brought him back to office.

As the political atmosphere became more unruly, the U.S. role in Iran was widely interpreted as interference. According to Barry Rubin,

The embassy's main function was the gathering of information. American diplomats met not only with the shah, Mossadegh, and other government officials, but also with a wide range of people on all sides of the political disputes. A series of discussions were even held with Ayatollah Kashani....

This kind of research, an integral part of the diplomat's job, was often viewed with suspicion by Iranians.⁵⁸

Mosaddeq did indeed have outside interference to worry about.

Throughout 1951 and 1952, the British tried to engineer the overthrow of the prime minister. Even the CIA, which had begun an anti-Soviet and anti-Tudeh propaganda operation under the code-name of BEDAMN in 1948, used the

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

program in the early 1950's to undermine the National Front popular base by provoking splits in the coalition. When Iran broke diplomatic relations with Britain in November 1952, the British turned to the U.S. seeking support for an overthrow of Mosaddeq.⁵⁹

With the entrance of the extremely anti-Communist Eisenhower administration in 1953, the decision was made that Mosaddeq should be overthrown. Opposition to Mosaddeq had been growing in Iran and the American government feared that the erosion of his power base could lead to a greater reliance on the Tudeh and the Soviets. In a secret operation code-named AJAX the CIA provided money to assist in generating anti-Mosaddeq disturbances and planned for the removal of Mosaddeq.⁶⁰ A reservoir of support for the Shah still existed among those tired of the chaos during Mosaddeq's reign or afraid of the Tudeh. On August 13, 1953 the Shah was encouraged to send word to Mosaddeq that he had been removed from office. After the Shah's initial attempt to oust Mosaddeq appeared to fail, pro-Shah demonstrations initiated by the CIA led to the arrest of Mosaddeq and the return of the Shah.⁶¹

The U.S. had organized the coup to restore political stability to Iran and prevent a Communist takeover, but the coup had many unwanted consequences.

⁵⁹ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 69-70.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁶¹ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 84-85.

First, the U.S. had started out as the nationalists' ally in their struggle against outside control, and ended up becoming identified as the new imperial force in Iran. Secondly, U.S. financial assistance was quickly arranged for the struggling Iran, but it was not to be a one-time gift. An American-supported compromise solution was devised to resume oil production in Iran and compensate the AIOC for the nationalization of its properties, but it also meant that U.S. companies would become involved in Iran's oil industry. Finally, the U.S. had succeeded in strengthening the Shah, but only by contributing to the elimination of the division of power in Iran. The Majlis still continued as a parliament, but it became a mere rubber stamp for the Shah. Fixed elections eliminated the possibility of peaceful parliamentary opposition and the Shah became the sole ruler.⁶²

With the flow of oil restored and internal order improving in Iran, the Shah once again tried to obtain foreign commitments for Iran's defense. He did this first in 1955 by joining the Baghdad Pact, consisting of Turkey Iraq, Britain and Pakistan, in the mistaken hope that the U.S. would become a member. Rather the U.S. was moving to restore stability in the Middle East by forming the Eisenhower Doctrine, whereby the President could employ American armed forces as he deemed necessary against communism. The 1958 coup in Iraq which established a leftist regime caused the U.S. president to send Marines to Lebanon

⁶² Ibid., p. 57, 89, and 95.

and later to sign a defense agreement with Iran, but this was still not enough for the Shah.

During the Kennedy administration, Iran felt that the U.S. State Department accorded it too low a priority and that aid was not enough. Iran also felt pressured by American suggestions that the Shah speed up the move to greater democracy and give greater emphasis to economic development than to the military. The U.S. firmly insisted that the Shah broaden his base of support and make overtures to the moderate opposition. U.S. Embassy personnel also increased their contact with prominent opposition leaders in an effort to encourage them to moderate their demands.⁶³ In 1963 the Shah announced a program of political, economic, and social reform that was later called the "White Revolution".

Although the U.S. approved of the changes, extensive reforms were opposed by the traditional upper class and Shi'i clergy. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a prominent religious leader, led rioting against it. Khomeini's protest led to his being arrested several times. After his third arrest in October 1964, Khomeini lashed out in protest to the 1964 Status of Forces Agreement between Iran and the U.S. which gave U.S. military personnel the same immunity as diplomats. To Khomeini, this agreement continued the tradition of western

⁶³ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 98, 180.

imperialism. Khomeini's clash with the government over the agreement resulted in him being exiled, first to Turkey and then to Iraq. He did not return to Iran for another fourteen years, and he held the U.S. responsible.⁶⁴

Some groups, such as the National Front, approved of the Shah's reforms, and called for even greater democratization of the political system. These calls for further reform led to protests that were often broken up by arrests. The arrests affected the National Front by causing it to break into two factions: the moderates, who were reluctant to challenge the government and the radicals, who were more vocal and were made up primarily of students and Islamic modernists. The radicals would later become the Liberation Movement of Iran.⁶⁵

As the U.S. became more preoccupied with the Vietnam War and later with the Arab-Israeli conflict, and as the Shah's ability to contain domestic unrest grew, the United States began to reduce the intensity of its relationship with Iran. Declining military and economic aid reduced the U.S. ability to pressure the Shah for more reforms. The State Department and the CIA significantly cut the size of their intelligence gathering capabilities in the 1960's as a result.⁶⁶

During the 1960's and 1970's, the U.S. role in the Arab-Israeli conflict played an important part in fueling anti-American feelings among Iran's religious

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 186.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 183.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 99.

establishment and individuals. Secular individuals were affected as well since the Palestinian issue was not only a religious issue but also a colonial one. Among the people, Israel was viewed as a tool of Western imperialism. Israel's role in Iran had increased throughout the 60's and early seventies, however, because it was often willing to provide Iran with services that the U.S. and other countries did not offer. Israel's increased involvement in Iranian affairs also contributed to anti-American feelings in Iran.⁶⁷

Closer ties between the U.S. and Iran were to come, however, as a result of the British announcement that it would withdraw all its forces from the Far East and Persian Gulf by the end of 1971. The U.S. had no intention of replacing British forces with its own, but when the Shah asked for additional military assistance the Republican administration assured him of additional sales. Arms sales were to become a key to future U.S.-Iranian relations under the Nixon Doctrine. This policy called for the U.S. to provide military assistance to countries to defend their own independence rather than having the U.S. intervene directly. The large number of arms and military people the U.S. sent to Iran for technical assistance indicated Iran's important role in America's defense plans.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Shireen T. Hunter, Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 53.

⁶⁸ Grayson, U.S.-Iranian Relations, p. 146.

The Shah welcomed the opportunity to act as a regional policeman. Iran obtained the financial means to pursue its desire to purchase the most state-of-the-art arms as a result of an increase in oil prices by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1973. The allocation of so much oil money to military procurement may have damaged Iran's economic development program and destabilized her economy, which contributed to Iran's instability prior to the Islamic Revolution.

Status Quo Versus Stability

After the overthrow of Mosaddeq, many U.S. officials came to see relations with the Shah as the same thing as relations with Iran. The Shah's government appeared stable and stability has always been a key in U.S. foreign policy. Hence, by 1976, the world expected the United States to stand by the Shah and maintain the status quo no matter what. Only after 1976 did some U.S. officials realize that maintaining the status quo was not the best means of maintaining stability.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Gary Sick, All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran. (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 21.

II. Emergence of the Opposition (1976 - 1977)

In 1971, the Shah of Iran threw one of the world's grandest and most opulent parties to commemorate the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of the founding of the first Iranian royal dynasty. Set amongst the ruins of Persepolis - the city of Darius the Great - a tent city was created to cater to the whims of heads of state from around the world. No expense was spared. Food, wine, silks, and designers were flown in from France. The contrast between the elegant ceremonial preparations and the elementary life of the nearby villages was so pronounced, however, that it could not possibly be overlooked. The Iranian people's resentment of the Shah's extravagance and his favoritism for foreigners grew and the Shah's enemies took advantage of this resentment. As William Lewis, a former foreign service officer with considerable experience in the Middle East, described it,

In retrospect, Persepolis was a turning point in the anti-shah movement, alike for secular and religious opponents of Mohammed Reza. The shah...managed to get the worst of both worlds: his intense and in many ways admirable pursuit of modernization alienated the traditional sectors of society; while his inability to create new political institutions at first frustrated, then antagonized the newly emerging groups and classes.⁷⁰

Although Iran seemingly attained its greatest stability in U.S. eyes during the early to mid 1970's, indications of an impending internal crisis began to show

⁷⁰ Michael Ledeen and William Lewis, Debate: The American Failure in Iran. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 22.

by 1976. Economic problems increased political dissatisfaction and aggravated social imbalances. The Shah's modernization program raised expectations that often went unfulfilled. U.S. policy makers, believing that Iran was a modernizing society under the firm control of the Shah, did not recognize the magnitude of popular dissatisfaction within Iran and its deep historical roots. Iranian leaders, on the other hand, assumed that internal political developments were the result of external intervention and failed to understand the true nature of the forces tearing their country apart.⁷¹ This situation set the stage for opposition elements, including the clergy strengthened by secular supporters from the bazaars and the universities, to step in and capitalize on these issues, thus obtaining their objective of overthrowing the Shah.

Atmosphere of Unrest

In the early 1970's, Iran's economic system had many problems including uneven growth, barely-concealed corruption, a widening income gap, and considerable purchases of state-of-the-art weapons and technology. But the economy was not entirely in poor shape since employment was high, inflation was not a serious problem, and most citizens expected to be better off financially in the near future. The huge rise in oil prices after 1973, however, made extra

⁷¹ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 34.

income available to the government and enabled the Shah to accelerate development. The country's overloaded infrastructure buckled under the strain. The inability of Iranian ports to deal with the rapid increase in purchases from abroad created bottlenecks and construction delays. By 1974, the economy became overheated resulting in rising inflation. The prices of all goods increased dramatically, with the cost of urban housing leading the way.⁷²

The housing situation was exacerbated by the influx of farm workers, many of whom were young and active, from the rural areas into the cities. Although the oil bounty resulted in rising demand for agricultural commodities, the agricultural growth rate stagnated as villagers left their fields in hope of finding more lucrative work in the urban centers.⁷³ Towns and cities were not prepared to absorb migrating young farmers and the number of under-employed and unskilled workers increased. Tehran's population reportedly increased from 2.8 million in 1971 to close to 5.9 million in 1979, and other cities had similar growth.⁷⁴ The regime found it difficult to satisfy this population.

The Shah's constant reiteration that he was building "The Great Society" whetted the population's appetite for more of the expected benefits. Overall, the

⁷² Cottam, Iran and the U.S., p. 155.

⁷³ Amuzegar, The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution, p. 186.

⁷⁴ John D. Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 10.

economy improved from 1974 to 1978, but for the majority there was no dramatic change. Wealth became concentrated in the hands of a new class of industrial entrepreneurs. The ostentatious living of the *nouveaux riches* made everyone even more aware of the growing income gap. The situation was aggravated by the large population of foreign technicians, businessmen, and military advisors (mainly Americans) who lived in the cities. The foreigners clearly benefited from Iranian oil wealth in ways the average Iranian could not. The presence of foreigners heightened suspicion of foreign intrigue and offended religious sensibilities.⁷⁵

The lack of adequate social services was an example of the regime's problems in the area of allocation. After 1974, the Plan and Budget Organization ceased to function effectively since the intake of oil money and its disbursement surpassed planning limitations. Despite a large civil service (800,000 by the late 1970's⁷⁶) filled with many capable individuals, the regime often failed to provide the most elementary requirements for a rapidly expanding population. Traffic jams, air pollution, water shortages and power blackouts all impacted on the urban lifestyle. The impact was especially devastating on the lower middle class who grew increasingly restless. The gradual breakdown of the economic structure

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 9 and Ledeen and Lewis, *Debacle*, p. 32.

⁷⁶ Ledeen and Lewis, *Debacle*, p. 28.

in 1976-1977 caused many who had originally supported the boom to feel alienated.⁷⁷

The Shah's "White Revolution" modernization program led to unrest in a number of other areas as well. In order to implement his program, the Shah required a Westernized middle class. This new class was achieved through education in Iranian and foreign universities. Students who went abroad, usually to Western Europe and the United States, were often frustrated upon their return to Iran, however, because they could not find positions equal to their new expectations. They were often unemployed or underemployed. The size of the middle class was indeed expanded by 1976, but these same people were well aware of what was wrong with the Shah's regime. The Shah created the single *Rastakhiz* (Resurgence) party in 1975 to nominally give this middle class greater weight in government but in actuality the political action of the party was severely limited. Once again, the students, intellectuals, and businessmen who had joined the party were disappointed.⁷⁸

Even the traditional merchant class, the bazaaris, resented the modernization program. Western-style banks infringed on the bazaaris income from money-lending and threatened their traditional activities. The government

⁷⁷ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 10-11.

⁷⁸ Ledeen and Lewis, Debacle, p. 29.

campaign against merchants who were “overcharging” in the fall of 1975 increased uncertainty within the entire business community which had been a strong supporter of modernization. According to the international economist, Jahangir Amuzegar, “No other single economic measure did as much damage to private entrepreneur’s confidence, businessmen’s feeling of security, the country’s investment climate, or the bazaar’s waning loyalty to the regime.”⁷⁹ The bazaaris, in particular, saw the government campaign as a means of destroying their power.⁸⁰

Another group that was fearful of modernization’s effect on their power base was the clergy. The Shah’s provision of civil judges deprived the mullahs of financial and political opportunities. In addition, the Shah’s granting of civil rights, especially for women and minorities, went against Islamic teachings. Although the religious community was not identified as a strong opposition force in 1976, it was the only group that had a significant system of communication with the masses and an established structure in the form of mosques and religious schools.⁸¹ As thousands of young Iranians felt increasingly disaffected by the lack of effective political institutions under Pahlavi rule, they turned to the fundamentals of Islam as a force of liberation. Large numbers of men and

⁷⁹ Amuzegar, *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution*, p. 246.

⁸⁰ Ledeen and Lewis, *Debacle*, p. 31.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

women, especially from secondary schools and universities, flocked to religious study centers where they discussed social and political matters.⁸²

By the beginning of 1976, economic and social problems motivated people to question the Shah and the better life he had promised them. The economic situation strengthened the existing feeling of alienation and caused the urban masses to feel deprived. This feeling of deprivation fueled the growth of opposition groups.⁸³

America's Position

Evidence indicates that the Shah of Iran was aware of the pressure for change at the time, but did not recognize its enormity. According to the former ruler,

Media attacks, terrorism, student agitation, the beginnings of Western pressure to liberalize my regime, all began to converge on my government in the mid-seventies. Curiously, the clergy were largely silent in those years...The first signs of organized opposition to my rule came toward the end of 1976 from liberals, left wingers, and people of wealth and power inside my country.⁸⁴

Unknown to the Shah at that time, his power and the internal situation in Iran were about to deteriorate at a rapid pace.

⁸² Bill, The Shah, the Ayatollah, and the U.S., p. 12.

⁸³ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 16.

⁸⁴ Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Answer to History. (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), p. 148-149.

Meanwhile, the political situation in the United States with regard to Iran had also changed. President Gerald Ford, Nixon's successor, still favored a policy of cooperation with the Shah, but the Watergate affair reduced the power of the executive branch in the U.S. in comparison to the legislative branch. Critics of the Shah, both Iranian and American, found the legislative branch to be more receptive to their charges that the monarch was a repressive ruler who did not merit U.S. support.⁸⁵

Greater U.S. emphasis on morality in government as a result of Watergate also effected American attitudes towards Iran. Charges of corruption were exchanged between the two countries and investigations of U.S. companies that paid illegal sums of money to Iranian officials to obtain profitable contracts slowed the momentum of the arms sales program. Criticism of the Shah and U.S. concern about the pace and scope of the Iranian military buildup grew within Congress, as demonstrated by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations' commissioning of a staff study on the implications of the explosion of arms transfers to Iran. The Ford administration, however, concluded that the basic policy of supporting Iran's political and military role in the Middle East was sound.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Grayson, U.S.-Iranian Relations, p. 148.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151-152.

American -Iranian relations were further strained when U.S. legislation requiring greater attention to human right violations by recipients of American military and economic assistance prompted the Ford administration to question the Shah's treatment of political dissidents. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's Iran's security forces were notorious for their brutal methods of repression. The SAVAK, or the Iranian State Intelligence and Security Organization, acted as the most effective component of the Shah's repressive apparatus. This apparatus enhanced the state's autonomy by weakening opposition political organizations and creating a climate of fear that discouraged many Iranians, especially those in the middle and lower classes, from engaging in political activity. Labor unions, student groups, prominent intellectuals, artists and clergymen who criticized the regime were harassed and individuals often arrested. In the mid 1970's estimates of the number of political prisoners in Iran ranged from the Shah's estimate of three thousand to the opposition's claim of one hundred thousand.⁸⁷

The Shah's abolishment of Iran's two-party system, the creation of the single National Resurgence Party and the election of an opposition-less Majlis in 1975 provoked irritation and opposition to the Shah at home and abroad. These feelings fueled growing charges from international human rights organizations of

⁸⁷ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 152, 156.

alleged government torture of political prisoners.⁸⁸ Iran's brutal repression was aimed not only at guerrilla groups but also at moderate opposition figures, and prominent intellectuals and writers. Since the U.S. had deferred to the Shah's sensitivities about contacts with his political opponents during the Nixon and Ford administrations, America had only a sketchy knowledge of what groups were considered as a part of the opposition. According to former Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance,

The dissenters appeared to consist of Westernized secular politicians (grouped around the old social democratic National Front coalition), religious fundamentalists, leftist radical students and intellectuals, and the small Tudeh (Communist) party. But the opposition did not appear to pose an immediate threat to the shah.⁸⁹

A number of events took place in 1976 that kept the focus on American-Iranian relations sharp. During the 1976 Presidential election debate, Jimmy Carter, the Democratic candidate, criticized Iran's priority in purchasing sophisticated U.S. equipment. Although this criticism was dismissed by President Ford, the allegation was to come up again once Carter won the election. The Shah himself contributed to Iran's poor image by mentioning on American

⁸⁸ Grayson, *U.S.-Iranian Relations*, p. 151.

⁸⁹ Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 316.

television that SAVAK also operated in the U.S., investigating activities against his regime by Iranians in America.⁹⁰

The year 1977 was to be a decisive one in American-Iranian relations. When the new U.S. president, Jimmy Carter, entered office in January, his dedication to human rights and arms control was announced in his inaugural address,

Our commitment to human rights must be absolute, our laws fair, our national beauty preserved; the powerful must not persecute the weak, and human dignity must be enhanced.

...We pledge perseverance and wisdom in our efforts to limit the world's armaments to those necessary for each nation's own domestic safety.⁹¹

Carter's administration, and Secretary of State Vance in particular, were aware that the new policies would make the Shah anxious, but they did not estimate the overall effect the changes would have on the internal situation in Iran. According to Vance, "Neither the president nor I, however, believed that the maintenance of a stable relationship with Iran precluded encouragement of improvement in its human rights policy and the development of a practical method of identifying and meeting its military needs."⁹²

⁹⁰ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 188, 180.

⁹¹ Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President. (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p.20.

⁹² Vance, Hard Choices, p. 316.

Response to Unrest

Internal opposition to the Shah remained fragmented until 1977. In the early 1970's modest guerrilla movements, such as the Mojahedin-e Khalq, made up of religious revolutionaries, and the Fadaiyan-e Khalq, a group of Third World Marxists-Leninists, existed in Iran, but these had been severely and brutally repressed by the SAVAK. Many Mosaddeq supporters took academic positions where they were still vulnerable to government pressure. Iranian student organizations abroad were extremely active and visible in their opposition to the Shah, but they were unable to operate effectively within Iran. Mosques operated within narrow confines as well. The most important of the radical Shi'i clergy underground networks was the one established by Khomeini from his base in Iraq.⁹³ This fragmented situation began to change when the Shah permitted increased organizational activity and appeals for support by dissidents.

In response to the Iranian people's growing discontent over economic and social problems, the Shah launched his "liberalization" policy. Although the Shah tried to explain that his program of liberalization was initiated by him in early 1976, independent of any pressure from the U.S., his liberalization actions did not become clear until early 1977, when President Carter took office. Many Iranians assumed his loosening of power was a direct result of American pressure. In

⁹³ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 190-191.

either case, actions began to be taken. In his own words, the Shah, "...allowed the International Red Cross, the International Association of Jurists, and Amnesty International to review our criminal justice system."⁹⁴ In June, the Shah announced measures to increase the rights of defendants in political cases by opening the trials to the press and allowing defendants to use civilian lawyers.⁹⁵

Encouraged by the American president's position on human rights, some Iranian opposition elements believed that the Shah would bow to American concerns for the law and open political participation as he had in 1952 and during the Kennedy administration. The British Ambassador, Anthony Parsons, noted that the Shah's opponents, "took comfort and courage from what they rightly detected as a potential weakening of the absolute support which their enemy had received from Washington for so many years."⁹⁶ In response the opposition began to act. According to Jahangir Amuzegar,

...the old opposition - particularly National Front politicians who had kept their clandestine contacts with the American Embassy in Tehran after Mosaddeq - began to speak out mildly against the regime's alleged wrongdoings: repression, violations of human rights, excessive military expenditures, economic mismanagement. They were later joined by clerical activists and turbaned politicians who complained of the government's growing tendencies toward Western, secular values and away from the norms of Islamic society.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Pahlavi, Answer to History, p. 149.

⁹⁵ Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 110.

⁹⁶ Anthony Parsons, The Pride and the Fall: Iran 1974-1979. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 48.

⁹⁷ Amuzegar, The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution, p. 242.

The initial response of opposition elements was to test the boundaries of the regime's freedom of activity. Several well-known leaders began by writing and sending open letters to the Shah and his government. In May 1977, fifty-four lawyers wrote a letter criticizing the legal system in Iran. In June, National Front leaders, including Dariush Foruhar, Karim Sanjabi, and Shahpour Bakhtiar, issued an open letter calling for adherence to the 1906 Constitution and an end to despotic government.⁹⁸ Old political and professional groups began to reemerge and new groups were organized. Writers, journalists, and men of letters formed the Union of Iranian Writers. Underground newspapers circulated these groups' criticisms throughout Tehran giving them a larger audience.⁹⁹ When no retribution was taken against the authors, the opposition pressed harder, and sermons from the Friday mosques became more strident and overtly hostile.

Meanwhile, the Shah was receiving mixed signals from Washington. There had been no American ambassador in Iran since Richard Helms left at the end of the Ford administration, and it was June before the new ambassador, William Sullivan, arrived in Tehran. Although Sullivan was seen as a supporter of the Shah, the delay in his appointment caused concern for the Shah who was uncertain of how Carter's new policies would affect him and the special

⁹⁸ Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 110.

⁹⁹ Amuzegar, The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution, p. 242.

relationship between Iran and the U.S. The Shah feared that Washington's emphasis on human rights might lead to a lessening of support for his regime. The U.S. arms sales policy, on the other hand, continued to be one of clear support for the Shah. In a meeting with the Shah in May 1977, Secretary of State Vance assured the Shah that the U.S. wanted to continue the military supply relationship with Iran, and planned to go ahead with the pending sale of F-16 fighter aircraft. In addition, Vance noted that the White House would seek congressional approval of the Shah's request for the sophisticated airborne warning and control (AWACS) aircraft. Although this move was intended to convince the Shah that the president was serious about continuing the special security relationship with him, the ensuing battle between the White House and the Congress shook the Shah's confidence in the U.S. as a dependable ally.¹⁰⁰

The Shah's uncertainty began to show in his internal policy. In early August, the Shah appeared to be continuing the new, less oppressive approach to the opposition by shaking up the government. The Shah forced the resignation of Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveida and replaced him with Dr. Jamshid Amuzegar, the Secretary General of the Resurgence Party. Hoveida had been Prime Minister for thirteen years and had come to epitomize a policy of subordinating the authority of the political system to the Shah and allowing the

¹⁰⁰ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 317.

economy to run wild. Amuzegar, on the other hand, was a distinguished technocrat with a reputation for independence who made clear that he would adopt a more austere economic policy. Hoveida was moved to the position of Court Minister to replace Asadollah Alam who had to give up his position due to terminal cancer.¹⁰¹

The Shah's liberalization campaign appealed to the secular opposition and the Shah took more steps to co-opt his moderate critics by promising greater democracy. At the same time, however, Prime Minister Amuzegar took steps that would ultimately alienate the religious faction completely. In mid-1977, payments made to the religious leaders were reduced from an estimated \$80 million to \$30 million. Instead of altering the clergy's political stance, this move intensified the religious leaders opposition to the Shah.¹⁰²

While some moves appealed to the secular opposition, the clergy and the more radical dissidents suspected that the Shah was merely trying to trick his opponents. Their attitude was reinforced by two events. First was the arrest of Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani, one of the most popular and political of Tehran's ayatollahs, on grounds of subversion. In violation of the Shah's judicial reforms, he was secretly tried and sentenced to ten years in prison.¹⁰³ The second event

¹⁰¹ Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall*, p. 51-52.

¹⁰² Ledeen and Lewis, *Debate*, p. 101.

¹⁰³ Zonis, *Majestic Failure*, p. 111.

occurred when squatters were killed while resisting a government attempt to tear down their homes. Thousands of people, including at least two Fadaiyan guerrilla groups, joined in attacking the police until the army was brought in. The violence on both sides indicated a changing environment.¹⁰⁴

In August and September the top leadership in the religious and secular opposition met several times in Iran and Europe. During these gatherings, the Mojahedin and the Fadaiyan agreed to reign in their violence and let the moderate segments pursue the peaceful political provocation. The Fadaiyan therefore had time to rebuild their damaged organization and the moderates of the National Front could try to bring the opposition into some kind of legal relationship with the government. The guerrilla forces were not entirely out of the picture, however, as they served as a security-type wing for the revolutionary movement. This strategy brought the Muslim clergy into the revolutionary movement as part of the consultation process. Even Khomeini's supporters in Iran, Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti and Mahdavi-Kani, were willing to work within the system while seeking to overturn it.¹⁰⁵

Throughout September and October of 1977 this strategy worked and public meetings sponsored by the dissidents grew larger, challenging the

¹⁰⁴ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85-86.

government more overtly and directly. By this time, most of Khomeini's secular allies had organized themselves at home and abroad into the Liberation Movement of Iran. The Liberation Movement developed an organizational capacity with the help of Iranian students and activists.¹⁰⁶ Students across the country staged demonstrations protesting regime practices. In October, students called for the return of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. Meetings in the bazaars demanded the return to constitutional government. Momentum was building.¹⁰⁷

As unrest grew and became more visible in late 1977, the radical clergy began to play a more active and visible role in encouraging it. Since the mid-1970's the radical clergy had been agitating against the regime in mosques and religious schools in Iran using taped sermons prepared by Khomeini in Iraq.¹⁰⁸ The mosque communication network allowed the Liberation Movement to transmit Khomeini's instructions and messages to followers, thus opening up an alternate source of information.¹⁰⁹ The Algiers Treaty between Iran and Iraq contained a proviso that enabled 10,000 Iranian pilgrims to cross the border into Iraq each year and made it possible for Khomeini to maintain a constant flow of couriers from his exile in Najaf into the Shi'ite centers of Iran.¹¹⁰ When

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁰⁷ Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 112.

¹⁰⁸ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 216.

¹⁰⁹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 87.

¹¹⁰ Ledeen and Lewis, Debate, p. 97.

Khomeini's son Mostafa died suddenly in October widespread rumors attributed his death to SAVAK. Khomeini's allies organized heavily attended memorial services in Tehran and many Iranians made pilgrimages to Najaf to offer their condolences. These events demonstrated that Khomeini's name was still widely known and respected in Iran, despite his exile, and encouraged Khomeini to step up his anti-regime activity.¹¹¹ Events in the following year would throw the radical clergy into a position of leadership within the opposition movement.

The Shah's visit to Washington in mid-November provided a chance for the opposition to test its effectiveness. Although the visit was set up to reinforce mutual confidence and understanding between the two governments, the opposition made its presence felt. Outside the White House, 4,000 anti-shah student clashed with 1,500 pro-shah demonstrators. Washington police had to use tear gas to break up the disturbances. The occasion provoked additional student demonstrations within Iran and in November, an open letter was sent by prominent Iranians demanding an end to human rights abuses and the dissolution of SAVAK.¹¹²

At this point, the Shah apparently decided that the trend towards liberalization had gone to far. According to British Ambassador Parsons,

¹¹¹ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 216 and Parsons, The Pride and the Fall, p. 56.

¹¹² Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 200.

Nevertheless, we were conscious in the last few months of the year that the Shah was grossly mishandling the new political situation which he had allowed to develop...the newly active political groups were physically attacked and beaten up by 'spontaneous patriotic elements' and mysterious bomb explosions took place in the offices of people who had dared to criticize the regime.¹¹³

In one key incident, over a thousand dissidents had gathered just outside Tehran to discuss forming a unified antigovernment coalition when their talks were cut short by a group of two hundred club-wielding men who had been bussed to the location. More than one hundred people were injured as the police who had advance notification of the meeting failed to arrive.¹¹⁴

This event and the violence that followed helped destroy the moderate dissident's hope that the U.S. would support a move toward a politically acceptable society. In a final attempt to enlist American assistance, leading liberal and leftist opposition figures prepared a statement in the form of a letter to United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. They sent an advance copy of the letter to President Carter in the hope that the President would recognize that the Iranian dissidents were seeking the same human rights goals as the President and that the U.S. would pressure the Shah to accept a position as constitutional monarch. The dissidents were disappointed, however, as Richard Cottam, an academic specialist on Iran, describes, "the failure of any official to attempt to

¹¹³ Parsons, The Pride and the Fall, p. 53.

¹¹⁴ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 88-89.

communicate in any way with the Iranians involved suggests that none of the officials who had been directly made aware of the letter placed any significance on it, if indeed they even took mental note of it.”¹¹⁵ Yet, Carter’s toast to the Shah during his New Year’s stop in Iran indirectly answered the dissidents letter. By referring to Iran as an “island of stability” and to the Shah as loved by his people, Carter signaled that the U.S. had no intention of applying any real pressure for reform.

Status Quo Versus Stability

President Carter’s assessment of the Shah’s regime at the end of 1977 was not necessarily a case of ignorance of the opposition or a neglect of his adherence to human rights concerns. Rather, the president was responding to the information that had come to him through the U.S. foreign policy establishment. According to Gary Sick, who was the principal White House aide for Iran on the National Security Council staff during that time,

Over a period of many years, virtually every element of the U.S. government that had any influence on the making of foreign policy had acquired a vested interest in the status quo. These are the same entities that were responsible for monitoring developments in Iran - for judging the force of the approaching hurricane. Inevitably, caution prevailed.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Cottam, Iran and the U.S., p. 163. This letter is not mentioned by Carter, Vance, Brzezinski, or Sick.

¹¹⁶ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 40.

If the establishment believed that the Shah or the existing political elite would survive the opposition's challenge, there was very little the U.S. would have to do with regard to changing its policies. If a new regime hostile to the U.S. were to take power then the U.S. would have to overhaul the foundations of its policies with regard to Asia, the START Talks, commercial and financial undertakings, procurement of advanced weapon systems, and international energy markets, to name just a few. At the end of 1977, then, the U.S. found it easier to support the status quo - the Shah - to provide stability rather than facing the possibility of upheaval if the oppositionists came to power.

III. The Opposition Comes to the Forefront

President Carter's visit to Iran marked the end of one phase in Iran's march towards revolution. The next phase, one of increasingly violent internal unrest, was begun one week after Carter's visit. In early January 1988, the semi-official Tehran daily newspaper *Ettela'at* published an article entitled "Iran and the Red and Black Colonialism". While the article suggested that a union of Communist ("red") and clerical ("black") forces were attempting to destroy the country, it also personally attacked Ayatollah Khomeini by accusing him of being a foreigner, an opponent of the Shah's great reform program, an agent of the British, and responsible for the deaths of Iranians by instigating the riots in 1963. The article, which appeared to represent the thinking of the regime, offended and outraged the religious community.¹¹⁷

Clerics and religious students took part in massive demonstrations and protests the next day in the holy city of Qom. The Iranian government, strengthened by perceived American support for the Shah, reacted by sending in police to quell the disturbances. The police opened fire on the crowds, killing as many as two dozen people and wounding more, although the actual numbers are in dispute. This event is often cited as the beginning of the Iranian Revolution.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Ledeen and Lewis, *Debacle*, p. 101-102, and James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 235.

¹¹⁸ Sick, *All Fall Down*, p. 34.

The bloodshed moved the religious opposition into high gear. Ayatollah Shariatmadari, the senior cleric in Qom and perhaps the least political of the religious leaders, wrote an open letter declaring the police action un-Islamic and calling for enforcement of the constitution.¹¹⁹ The news of the events in Qom spread throughout Iran. Violence and opposition escalated as the Shi'i tradition of commemorating the fortieth day of mourning after a death led to larger demonstrations and more clashes with police.

The first of the forty-day commemorations took place on February 18. Although there were peaceful parades in several cities, Tabriz was an exception. Rioting broke out in the city, and shooting and burning quickly followed. Tabriz had been hit especially hard by the recession and unemployment was high. The U.S. consul in Tabriz, Michael Metrisko, reported that the targets of the violence were mainly symbols of modern secular society such as movie theaters and liquor stores. Gary Sick, a member of the National Security Council (NSC) staff, summarized the incident in a memo to Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Adviser,

...it appears that these were the work of what may be the true threat to the shah's regime - the reactionary Muslim right wing which finds his modernization program too liberal and moving too fast away from the traditional values of Iranian society. This is a serious problem and one that is extremely difficult to

¹¹⁹ Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 327.

control. The word is spread from the pulpits, and the religious hierarchy provides a backbone which is formidable indeed.¹²⁰

As people died, their relatives became more radicalized and joined the growing numbers of people in active opposition to the Shah. The forty day cycle of anti-regime demonstrations that was initiated persisted throughout 1988 and eventually led to the Shah's departure.¹²¹

Student unrest rose to the surface in March when students of Tehran University called for the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran. June 1988 would mark the fifteenth anniversary of Khomeini's arrest and exile. Soon unrest spread to all the major universities and classes were suspended at many schools. As the anniversary approached, police and army units went on full alert and on that day SAVAK forced the closing of the Tehran bazaar. The strong show of government force led to a brief respite in confrontation.¹²²

The responses of the Shah and his government to these activities confused many people. As the opposition stepped up their challenge to the regime, the government did little more than provide riot control for the emerging political problem. Few could understand why the Shah did not immediately move to curtail the unrest. According to former Secretary of State Vance,

¹²⁰ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 35.

¹²¹ Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p. 235-236.

¹²² Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 95.

The shah faced a serious dilemma in trying to maintain control. The more forcefully his police suppressed disorder, the stronger became the mullahs' ability to arouse new protests. The shah concluded that engaging the urban middle class in the political process was the best way to separate the secular social democratic opposition from the religious fundamentalists and the radical leftists whose aims were antithetical to the more moderate nonestablishment politicians. The shah refused either to halt the political liberalization measures he had adopted in 1977 or to crack down ruthlessly on the opposition.¹²³

During the month of May, the Shah made a first tentative effort to explore an agreement with the more moderate religious leaders, namely Shariatmadari, but this effort ended in failure. The ruler then decided to make some high-level personnel changes as a means of hinting his willingness to accommodate the moderate dissidents. The Minister of the Interior was removed and SAVAK chief General Nematollah Nassiri was sent to Pakistan as ambassador. General Moghadam, an officer with good contacts among the dissidents, was appointed head of SAVAK on June 6.¹²⁴ In addition, Prime Minister Amuzegar tried to slow down the economy which was causing the spiraling cost of living, the main economic cause of middle-class discontent.¹²⁵ The relative calm that prevailed in June led many to believe that the crisis was over. Opposition groups, however,

¹²³ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 324.

¹²⁴ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 207.

¹²⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 509.

had established their ability to cause trouble even though they were still far from unified, and they continued to build up their organizational strength.¹²⁶

The events of the spring of 1978 appeared to most observers, foreign and domestic, as the growing pains of a society that was trying to modernize too rapidly. The U.S. Ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, stated, "We felt that the shah was in trouble, we thought that his economic plan and his forced industrialization were wrenching his society in ways that could cause political difficulties, but we did not see the beginnings of a revolution."¹²⁷

Beginnings of Contacts

When Ambassador Sullivan took office in June 1977 he was determined to improve American knowledge of the Iranian political scene which had lagged since the Shah's consolidation of power in the 1960's. A career diplomat, Sullivan had served as ambassador to Laos and to the Philippines before arriving in Iran. Since Sullivan had no experience in the Middle East, he sought out as much guidance as he could obtain from those who knew the country and the issues. Despite his good rapport with the Shah, Sullivan realized that the U.S. did

¹²⁶ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 101-102.

¹²⁷ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 142.

not really understand the intricacies of Iranian politics and attempted to improve American intelligence in Iran.¹²⁸

Sullivan's first attempts at establishing contact with the Iranian opposition were not too successful. According to Sullivan,

...it became clear to me that the political dissidents wanted nothing to do with the American embassy. In the first place, most of them distrusted the embassy, since they considered us to be in close association with SAVAK and with the government to which they were opposed. Second, they were under such close surveillance that they believed an association with the embassy would be detected immediately and would cause retribution against them. Third, they had more or less given up any hope of changing the system through political action and were consequently not willing to demonstrate by contacts with an embassy how thoroughly impotent they really were.¹²⁹

This situation changed in the spring of 1978 when the Shah's liberalization policy permitted dissidents to speak out a little more freely. A few members of the National Front, which was operating more openly than the Liberation Movement, made themselves known to Ambassador Sullivan and indicated that they wished to have contact with the American embassy. Sullivan tried to talk to some of these people, but quickly realized that supporters of the Shah often interfered with such conversations. The U.S. ambassador then decided that it would be better for the embassy to maintain contact with the dissident politicians through officers of the political section rather than his own direct

¹²⁸ Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p. 247.

¹²⁹ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 145.

contact. The officers were able to restore a degree of confidence and confidentiality to American relations with the dissidents that had been missing for some time.¹³⁰

The activities of the former leaders of the National Front did not go undetected by the Shah's regime and by late spring these leaders were often the victims of the muggers and thugs who broke up meetings and looted houses. The embassy, however, continued to expand its network of contacts among the dissidents. Although the embassy was often intellectually sympathetic to the dissidents, the ambassador tried not to encourage their roles of opposition to the Shah. The dissidents, on the other hand, were searching for foreign sympathy and support.¹³¹

In June 1978, Ambassador Sullivan returned to the United States for a three month "home leave" on the assumption that events after the summer might preclude his being able to leave the country again. On his return to the U.S., Sullivan attended an arms policy review in Washington where he informed the State Department that the Shah faced a difficult period ahead, but that he should be able to survive it. Sullivan also indicated to Secretary of State Vance that he was uneasy about the growing power of the clergy and wanted to establish

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 143-145.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 145-146.

contacts with the religious opposition. The imperial court had apparently warned Sullivan against doing this. Secretary Vance acknowledged,

It was vital that we know what was going on, and I told him that he should meet with low-level figures to find out more about the nature of the opposition...Over the summer, the State Department, the CIA, and the Defense Department intensified their analyses of the Iranian situation, and Bill Sullivan vigorously stepped up the embassy's reporting on the opposition.¹³²

The Shah also spent most of the summer out of the limelight at his estate on the Caspian Sea. While he was away, many rumors circulated that he was ill or that he was recovering from an unsuccessful assassination attempt. The U.S. ambassador knew that the Shah had medical problems but did not know their exact nature.¹³³ Despite the increased attention given to Iran by the U.S. intelligence establishment, the U.S. government had no confirmation of the Shah's ongoing battle with lymphomatous cancer until the French, who had been treating the Shah since the mid 70's, informed the U.S. in October 1978.¹³⁴

Renewal of Violence

The temporary calm of June and early July came to an end with two days of bloody rioting in Mashad after a clergyman was killed in a traffic accident on July 23rd. Over the next couple of weeks, violent unrest spread across the

¹³² Vance, Hard Choices, p. 325.

¹³³ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 155.

¹³⁴ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 104.

country. This unrest differed from that which had occurred previously in that it was led mainly by the radical clergy and it was better organized and more deliberate. In addition, the urban poor, especially construction laborers and factory workers, started to join the street demonstrations, changing the class composition of the opposition and transforming the middle-class protest into a joint protest of the middle and working classes.¹³⁵ The Liberation Movement, clerical activists and Islamic guerrillas, including the Fadaïyan-e Islam and the Islamic Nations party, coordinated uprisings in different cities and provoked retaliation by shooting at security forces and carrying out arson and bombings.¹³⁶

Meanwhile, the Shah had decided to continue his political liberalization by suggesting that participation in the political system be opened up to include dissident groups. On August 5, Constitution Day and also the first day of Ramadan, the Shah called for the opposition to participate in the next election and announced changes in the censorship laws and more freedom of assembly. Moderate dissidents welcomed the proposed changes, but did not believe that they would be carried out. When the bills drafted by career civil servants did actually appear, their conservative wording dashed any hope the moderate dissidents had of cooperating with the government.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions, p. 510.

¹³⁶ Gasiorowski, U.S. Foreign Policy, p. 218.

¹³⁷ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 106.

The proposed changes had an additional effect on the people within the government establishment. Many of the people in the bureaucracy had supported the Shah for years and they thought the opening of the electoral process would be dangerous to themselves and to the government. In addition, the Shah's "family code of conduct bill" keeping the royal family out of business activities caused many of the Shah's family to leave the country, increasing the uncertainty of those loyal to the Shah. According to John Stempel, a member of the American embassy, "Under the circumstances, the Shah's efforts to conciliate the dissidents had done more harm than good; he had weakened the morale of his own supporters and in no way appeased the opposition."¹³⁸

The opposition, in fact, seemed to be growing. The National Front and other secular organizations began to discuss various anti-government solutions more openly, gaining more followers from the previously neutral or pro-Shah middle class. The Liberation Movement and the radical religious activists doubled their organizational efforts and established direct links between various factions of the evolving revolutionary coalition, including putting Mojahedin units into contact with local mullahs and other dissidents. Shariatmadari and other moderate religious leaders criticized the regime but did not call for the overthrow of the Shah, while Khomeini urged an overthrow of the monarchy.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Finally, the religious forces, led by the Liberation Movement, concentrated an intensive propaganda campaign on the military to neutralize it or win it over so that it would no longer support the Shah.¹³⁹

This period of growing unrest resulted in a horrible tragedy on August 19, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1953 coup. A suspicious fire in the Rex Theater in the working-class district of Abadan killed over four hundred men, women, and children who were trapped inside. The government accused the opposition of causing the fire, while the opposition claimed SAVAK had arranged the disaster. Although the true circumstances surrounding the fire were never fully revealed, the Abadan tragedy became a symbol for the growing revolutionary tide.¹⁴⁰

In order to stem the growing unrest, the Shah replaced Prime Minister Amuzegar with Jafar Sharif-Emami, a court politician with close family and personal ties to moderate clergymen. The Shah also authorized Sharif-Emami to negotiate with the opposition. The new prime minister took immediate steps to try to win over the religious establishment. His program, however, failed to gain widespread support or credibility.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 108-110.

¹⁴⁰ Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions, p. 513.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 515.

These events occurred while Ambassador Sullivan was on home leave. Upon his return in late August, he received situation briefings from his staff and immediately requested an audience with the Shah. In his talk with Sullivan, the Shah revealed that he viewed the incidents of violence in his country as an assault on his government's authority and on the forces of law and order. The sudden outbreak of opposition activity by students, industrial workers, members of religious factions, Shi'a ulema and merchants of the bazaar showed signs of sophisticated planning to him. Because the Shah felt this level of intrigue was beyond the capabilities of the Soviet KGB, he suspected that the British and the American CIA were turning against him.¹⁴² To Sullivan, the whole idea of the CIA conspiring with the religious forces against the Shah seemed absurd. U.S. intelligence in Iran was focused on the USSR and relied heavily on the Shah's government. In addition, the CIA did not have the kind of contacts within the opposition which would have allowed it to influence events in Iran.¹⁴³

After the audience with the Shah, Ambassador Sullivan relayed the strange encounter to Washington in a cable, recommending that a letter from the president to the Shah, reaffirming U.S. support for the monarch, was immediately in order. Sullivan's cable arrived in Washington at the height of the Camp David

¹⁴² Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 157-158.

¹⁴³ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 346.

activity related to the Arab-Israeli dispute. Although the urgency of the Shah's situation was apparent, the president's preoccupation with Camp David delayed the sending of the presidential message. Events in Iran soon overtook Sullivan's request.¹⁴⁴

Jaleh Square

In the beginning of September, the clergy announced a march to celebrate the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. The holiday demonstrations in Tehran took place peacefully with over 100,000 participants. In the days following, however, crowds continued to assemble despite opposition leaders' calls for restraint and the government's ban of all outdoor meetings. By September 7 the demonstrations in Tehran included over half a million people, making them the largest ever held in Iran. The crowd also began to shout more radical slogans including, for the first time, the call for an Islamic republic, thus superseding the moderate call for a return to the constitution.¹⁴⁵

Faced with the deteriorating situation, the Iranian government declared martial law in Tehran and eleven other cities. Military officers had been debating the wisdom of harsh retaliation against dissident marches, but in view of the increasing anarchy they began to view martial law as the only way to restore

¹⁴⁴ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 158-159.

¹⁴⁵ Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions, p. 515.

order. Martial law was imposed late in the evening of September 7 and not yet fully publicized when 20,000 people gathered at Jaleh Square the following morning to hear religious leaders.¹⁴⁶

The imposition of martial law caused disagreement between the radical and the moderate opposition. The leader of the Liberation Movement, Mehdi Bazargan, remembered the violence in 1963 and wanted to reduce the level of confrontation with the government. The leaders in the National Front did not want confrontation either. In the end, however, radical religious leaders, claiming a mandate from Khomeini to press on, won over the objections of the others.¹⁴⁷

On the morning of Friday, September 8, a day that would later be called Black Friday, a confrontation erupted between the demonstrators and the troops that were brought in to disperse them. What happened next is not entirely clear, but the troops ultimately fired into the crowd. Over two hundred demonstrators were killed for sure and many more were wounded.¹⁴⁸ The exact number of casualties is in dispute but some sources claim the figure is actually between 700 and 2000. In either case, the number was significant enough to change the course of events in Iran.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 115-116.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁴⁸ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 162.

¹⁴⁹ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 214.

The massacre shocked both the oppositionists and the government. The military deployed forces to all the major cities where martial law had been declared. People were arrested, opposition groups were broken up, and the military seemed to be asserting itself. Ambassador Sullivan realized that the U.S. sources of information among the Shi'a hierarchy and in the bazaars, the areas of instigation for the September demonstrations, were wanting and he set in motion an effort to try to improve U.S. sources in this area. American political and intelligence officers seemed unable to develop satisfactory and reliable sources in either area, however. Neither the leaders of the Shi'a clergy nor the leaders of the bazaar wanted to have much contact with the U.S. embassy.¹⁵⁰

The Jaleh Square incident brought the seriousness of the Iranian crisis to the attention of other nations. President Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Begin of Israel were in the United States with President Carter for negotiations on the Camp David Accords. They were informed of the tragic events in Iran and President Sadat placed a telephone call to the Shah to offer his personal assurance of continued support. President Carter also called the Shah to express his concern over the events and his backing for the Shah. In addition, Carter expressed his hope that the movement toward political liberalization in Iran would continue.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 162, 160.

¹⁵¹ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 51.

Carter's call was intended to boost the Shah's lagging psychological state.

As evidence of this, Ambassador Sullivan was told that the call was a substitute for the letter he had recommended.¹⁵² Secretary of State Vance also tried to take the Shah's mental state into account when making decisions during this time,

The shah's failing self-confidence was the main reason I hesitated to recommend that Sullivan get in touch with the most important opposition leaders at this stage. The president and I feared, under the circumstances, that such conversations might further weaken the shah's confidence and feed his fears that we were attempting to position ourselves with a successor regime.

The Shah, on the other hand, seemed to derive little comfort from this call since he acknowledged that Sadat had called him but stated, "I have no way of knowing what he [Sadat] said to President Carter later that night. But I do know that reports widely circulated in the West about a Carter telephone call to me later that night are false. President Carter has never called me..."¹⁵³

Immediately after the Jaleh killings, the opposition blamed the Shah and his government for the incident and tried to spread their view abroad. Liberation Movement and National Front leaders encouraged their followers in Washington to press officials in the Department of State and the National Security Council to disavow the Shah. When news of President Carter's call and a subsequent White House statement appeared which reaffirmed the close relationship between the

¹⁵² Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 163.

¹⁵³ Pahlavi, Answer to History, p. 161.

U.S. and the Shah, it confirmed the negative suspicions the radical clerics, the Mojahedin, and the left had of the U.S. Some Iranians believed that the United States supported or even ordered the shootings. For the first time, moderate dissidents began warning their foreign contacts in Tehran that the events of Jaleh Square meant the monarch had to go.¹⁵⁴

The U.S. Position

U.S. decisions during this time were affected by the fact that the American foreign policy establishment was badly divided over the Iranian situation. Few organizations could agree about the nature of the revolution and the solutions for its resolution. The biggest conflict was between the U.S. Department of State, directed by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and the National Security Council, headed by Adviser for National Security Affairs Zbigniew Brzezinski, but many other actors played a role.¹⁵⁵

In the State Department, Cyrus Vance was deeply preoccupied by the Camp David negotiations and the strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) with the Soviet Union and had little time to devote to Iranian events. He relied heavily on his major assistants who were cautious individuals like himself. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David

¹⁵⁴ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 117.

¹⁵⁵ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 243.

Newsom, and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Harold Saunders often filled in for Vance on important Iran meetings. At first, these individuals believed in the stability of the Pahlavi regime, but over time they began to realize that the Shah was in deep trouble. Midlevel Iran specialists in the State Department consistently sought the advice of American scholars on contemporary Iran.¹⁵⁶ The State Department hoped for an accommodation with the demands of the Shah's political opposition, usually seen as the National Front. Overall, the State Department advocated human rights and the further liberalization of the Pahlavi system.¹⁵⁷

The National Security adviser, Brzezinski had a completely different stance. Brzezinski consistently argued that only a hard-line policy from the Shah could restore order. Brzezinski reasoned that the U.S. would be deliberately weakening the Shah by pressuring him for further concessions to his opponents which would in turn enhance instability and eventually produce complete chaos.¹⁵⁸ Brzezinski's deputy, David Aaron, and his aide for Iran, Gary Sick, supported their superior's belief that tough action by the Shah's military forces would scatter the opposition.¹⁵⁹ Brzezinski's policy was that the U.S. had to

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 244-246.

¹⁵⁷ Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 245.

¹⁵⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), p. 355.

¹⁵⁹ Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p. 249.

support the Shah of Iran to the end since any abandonment of the Shah would send a negative message to American allies. The U.S. could not afford an erosion of support among its allies, especially Saudi Arabia, since it could lead to accommodation with the enemies of the United States.¹⁶⁰ According to Brzezinski, "The Iranian disaster shattered the strategic pivot of a protected tier shielding the crucial oil-rich region of the Persian Gulf from possible Soviet intrusion."¹⁶¹

Adding to the American foreign policy confusion was the fact that Ambassador Sullivan came to be viewed as "Vance's man" by the National Security Council and the White House, and was no longer trusted to support their methods of dealing with the evolving Iranian crisis.¹⁶² According to Brzezinski,

By and large, during this Iranian crisis, our policy reflected on the rhetorical level more my approach and concerns, although State remained publicly more ambiguous. But the policy was interpreted to the Shah by the U.S. Ambassador in Tehran, and perhaps to the Ambassador by the State Department, in vaguer, more diluted formulas. The Shah was never explicitly urged to be tough; U.S. assurances of support were watered down by simultaneous reminders of the need to do more about progress toward genuine democracy; coalition with the opposition was mentioned always as a desirable objective.¹⁶³

Those who believed it was possible and appropriate for the Shah to crush his opposition began to work around the ambassador instead of through him. Even

¹⁶⁰ Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 244.

¹⁶¹ Brzezinski, Power and Principle, p. 356.

¹⁶² Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 245.

¹⁶³ Brzezinski, Power and Principle, p. 356.

before the Jaleh massacre, Brzezinski arranged a dinner with the Iranian Ambassador, Ardeshir Zahedi, in order to establish his own source of information on the situation in Iran, independent of the U.S. ambassador and the State Department. Zahedi confirmed the National Security adviser's suspicions that the situation in Iran was rapidly deteriorating due in part to the Shah's unwillingness to take decisive action.¹⁶⁴

Khomeini's role

The events of the summer made it more clear to Washington that the antiregime demonstrations were being organized by the fundamentalist wing of the clerics, whose dominant figure was the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini.

According to Secretary Vance,

So rapidly was his stature growing that even nationalist politicians who deeply opposed the idea of an obscurantist Islamic republic were drawn increasingly into the orbit of his influence. Many, including middle-of-the-road clerics who disliked the extremism of Khomeini, and who would have been content with a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy, were forced to echo Khomeini's demand for the abolition of the Pahlavi dynasty in order to maintain their credibility as opponents of the autocracy.¹⁶⁵

Several days after the Jaleh Square incident, Gary Sick, the naval officer responsible for Iran on the NSC staff, was contacted about a meeting with a representative of Khomeini in the United States. Professor Cottam, an academic

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 359.

¹⁶⁵ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 325.

specialist on Iran at the University of Pittsburgh, maintained close contact with Iranian opposition figures and was willing to arrange a discreet meeting with Dr. Ibrahim Yazdi who was a key figure in organizing and directing the anti-Shah activities of Iranian students in the U.S. Although Sick thought it was important to get a better understanding of the Iranian opposition forces' motives and objectives, he believed a meeting between opposition figures and anyone in the NSC could be subjected to misunderstanding and propaganda abuse. Sick therefore suggested that Cottam get in touch with the State Department to arrange a meeting.¹⁶⁶

According to Sick, however, senior people at the State Department learned of the planned meeting with Yazdi and vetoed meetings with opposition members at any level at that time in order to avoid the appearance of consorting with the opposition. Cottam, who argued that Khomeini's positions - other than his absolute opposition to the Shah - were relatively moderate, saw this refusal by the State Department as a sign that the U.S. did not want to communicate with the opposition.¹⁶⁷

Yazdi and a number of other Western-educated revolutionaries, such as Sadeq Qotbzadeh and Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, served as "interpreters" of

¹⁶⁶ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 54.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

Khomeini's position by spreading Khomeini's message in words that appealed to a Western audience. In particular, Khomeini's supporters tried to suggest that that the Shah's repressive regime would be replaced by a more humane government made up of liberal, secular leaders backed by the religious leadership.¹⁶⁸

Khomeini's uncompromising position against dealing with the Shah convinced the Iranian government that something had to be done. Sharif-Emami prevailed upon the Iraqis to expel the Ayatollah from Najaf. The Iraqi government, tired of the Ayatollah's agitation and worried about his effect on their own Shi'a population, surrounded his home on September 23 and cut off access to him. Shortly afterward, the Iraqi government formally asked Khomeini to leave the country. The Ayatollah first attempted to enter Kuwait where he was refused entry. Khomeini then returned to Baghdad where he boarded a plane for Paris on October 6.¹⁶⁹ The French government, after consulting with the Shah, permitted him to enter. According to the Shah, "It is true the French government asked me at the time whether I had any objections to Khomeini's change of venue. I did not, believing that he could do as much damage from Hamburg or Zurich as he could from Paris..."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 124.

¹⁷⁰ Pahlavi, Answer to History, p. 163.

Khomeini quickly became the center of Western media attention, with access to far better communications than he had in Iraq. His followers in Iran were only a phone call away. According to Rubin, the United States tried to take advantage of the greater access to the Ayatollah,

On his arrival in France, the CIA rented a villa near his home. American Embassy political officers began to meet occasionally with one of his advisors, Ibrahim Yazdi, though these encounters generally consisted of Yazdi's monologues on his group's moderation. Other embassy officials stayed up late into the night translating for their counterparts in Tehran the dozens of speeches and interviews given by Khomeini and his entourage each day.¹⁷¹

Khomeini's willingness to talk, however, did not signify a willingness to negotiate. The Ayatollah was still firm in his belief that the Shah had to be ousted. Khomeini's principal aides in Paris, including Yazdi, Qotbzadeh, and Bani- Sadr developed plans for the Shah's ouster that were favorably received by the Ayatollah. Their relationships with Khomeini gave them an advantage over opposition leaders in Iran.¹⁷²

The leaders of the Liberation Movement and the National Front were not as eager as Khomeini's aides to take a violent confrontational approach to the Shah's removal. According to Stempel, "In September the Liberation Movement outlined rough plans for a transitional government that included the establishment of a regency council to rule in the absence of the Shah, as provided for in the

¹⁷¹ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 220.

¹⁷² Cottam, Iran and the U.S., p. 167.

constitution of 1906.” This plan was meant to satisfy Khomeini’s requirement that the Shah leave as soon as possible without the need for a revolutionary overthrow.¹⁷³

The following month, the Liberation Movement contacted the U.S. embassy to propose this type of transitional regime, hoping that the U.S. would abandon the Shah and guarantee that there would be no harsh military reaction to the plan. According to the opposition official that spoke with Stempel, “For two years we have tried to keep nationalist activity non-violent. Events are now reaching a certain point where the masses are leaving us for violent activity.” The Liberation Movement was unrealistically ignoring Khomeini’s anti-American statements while trying to appeal to the U.S. desire to retain its long-range goals of consistent stability in the Persian Gulf area. Their message went unheard, however, as Washington never reacted to the idea despite Ambassador Sullivan’s prodding of the State Department.¹⁷⁴

The moderate opposition’s attempts at forming transition plans for the replacement of the Shah’s regime came up against the hard wall of Khomeini’s disapproval. A delegation made up of Mehdi Bazargan, leader of the Liberation Movement, Karim Sanjabi, the most prominent of the National Front leaders, and

¹⁷³ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 128.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

Nasser Minatchi, the director of the Iranian Committee for Human Rights and Liberty went to Paris in late October to persuade Khomeini to allow them to cooperate with the Shah to form a transitional government. Khomeini refused to support any compromise with the Shah and Sanjabi's statement on November 3 that he would not cooperate in a Shah-appointed government seemed to align the National Front with Khomeini's insistence that the Shah had to go. On November 6, 1978, Khomeini called for the establishment of an Islamic government.¹⁷⁵

Doubts Surface

Meanwhile, the situation in Iran continued to deteriorate. The military were given orders to refrain from firing at demonstrators and belatedly tried to develop riot control tactics. Opposition forces' actions became bolder as they realized they could act without fear of deadly reprisal. Frustrated military leaders began to debate whether they should countermand their orders. Strikes erupted in private and state owned companies and gangs of young men would assemble in assault groups, tipping over cars and setting fires. Sharif-Emami's concessions to the opposition only fueled their desire for further concessions. His newly permitted freedoms for the media encouraged criticism of the Shah and the government. Violent and increasingly revolutionary demonstrations took place in

¹⁷⁵ Cottam, Iran and the U.S., p. 179, and Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 12p.

cities throughout Iran. The government found itself unable to cope with the growing disorder and chaos.

Ambassador Sullivan anticipated that Sharif-Emami's days were numbered and thought that the Shah would have no other choice than to install a military government. When he relayed these feelings to Washington he received a clear reply that the U.S. government felt that the political survival of the Shah was very important and the Shah should take whatever measures necessary to preserve his position. This policy seemed to shift from what Sullivan had received before. Unbeknownst to Sullivan, the NSC adviser had called together a meeting of the Special Coordination Committee (SCC). Brzezinski soon called Sullivan to state that he had already called the Shah and conveyed to him the U.S. president's strong support for any needed actions. When the Iranian Ambassador to the U.S., Ardeshir Zahedi, returned to Iran shortly afterwards, he summed up the situation for Sullivan by telling him that "Brzezinski has taken over Iran policy."¹⁷⁶

On November 3 and 4, extensive riots took place as opposition groups at the University of Tehran, ranging from the Mojahedin on the right to the Tudeh party on the left, united to challenge the security forces and several students were killed. When Sharif-Emami threatened to discipline the military people involved,

¹⁷⁶ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 171.

military leaders decided to withdraw their forces and not interfere with the rampaging demonstrations.¹⁷⁷ Arson squads attacked the city and burned movie theaters, banks, and the British Embassy. After the “burning of Tehran”, U.S. Ambassador Sullivan and British Ambassador Parsons were called to the Shah’s office and informed that a military government would be temporarily installed.¹⁷⁸

The new prime minister General Gholam Reza Azhari moved to restore law and order, but his actions were not always effective. To appease the opposition, many former government officials, including former Prime Minister Hoveida and former SAVAK chief Nassiri, were arrested. These arrests, however, destroyed morale among Shah supporters in the establishment. Azhari also directed all strikers to go back to work, especially those in the oil fields, and many did so for a short time. The armed Fadaiyan and Mojahedin even briefly retreated, until they found out that the troops still had orders to fire into the air around demonstrators. The opposition was soon back on the streets challenging the Azhari government. Most Iranians expected the Shah to direct Azhari to use force to reestablish order, but when the Shah failed to do so people began shifting their allegiance to the opposition.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p.130.

¹⁷⁸ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 176-180.

¹⁷⁹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p.135.

As revolutionary activity persisted, the internal situation continued to disintegrate. Strikes and shortages of basic goods became apparent. The airlines were crowded with people making departures from Iran. The military also saw a rise in the number of conscripts deserting. In response, the Shah began to seriously explore transition plans, although there were few oppositionists willing to cooperate with him. The Shah met with former Prime Minister Ali Amini and with National Front statesman Dr. Gholam Hossein Sadiqi, but neither of the two could get the necessary support of Khomeini and the oppositionists.¹⁸⁰

The U.S. struggled to find out more about the deteriorating situation. Ambassador Sullivan sent a cable entitled "Thinking the Unthinkable" to encourage Washington decision-makers to explore options if the Shah were forced to leave. Brzezinski, dissatisfied with the intelligence he was receiving, sent an American businessman with CIA connections to Iran to get an up-to-date assessment. Later, Secretary of the Treasury Blumenthal met with the Shah to discuss stability in oil pricing and Senate majority leader, Robert Byrd, was sent to visit the shah to gain insight into the situation. Ambassador Zahedi was also asked to discuss the state of affairs in Iran. All reflected that the Shah's will power seemed to be vacillating.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Cottam, Iran and the U.S., p. 181.

¹⁸¹ Brzezinski, Power and Principles, p. 367-370.

Late in November, the U.S. received a message from Soviet premier Brezhnev which clearly recognized the disintegrating political stability of Iran and warned the U.S. not to interfere in Iranian affairs. The U.S. foreign policy establishment drafted a response reaffirming American support for Iran and the Shah, subtly warning the Soviets from interfering as well.¹⁸² This firm statement of support for the Shah was weakened, however, when President Carter told the press in early December that although the U.S. preferred that the Shah maintain power, it was a decision the Iranian people had to make. Although the U.S. president later emphasized that the U.S. backed the monarch, the damage had already been done.¹⁸³

The United States had stood solidly behind their ally the Shah and Iran for many years. The Shah represented progress, modernization, and most of all stability in a region of the world that was considered vital to U.S. interests. In January 1978, U.S. policymakers had complete faith in the Shah's Iran. By the beginning of December 1978, however, the American foreign policy establishment was trying to determine how to save Iran without the Shah.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 369 - 370.

¹⁸³ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p.230.

IV. The Fall of the Iranian Monarchy

The violence in Iran at the end of November 1978 was a prelude to the violence that would only worsen in December and lead to the departure of the Shah. Street violence increased and spread to once peaceful cities. Islamic militants seemed to gain power as they took over the holy cities of Qom and Mashad. Khomeini's calls for workers' strikes shut down public services and slowed oil production.¹⁸⁴

American public attention became focused on Iran when news of President Carter's criticism of U.S. intelligence gathering in Iran surfaced on November 23. After Ambassador Sullivan's "Thinking the Unthinkable" cable suggested the Shah may not survive the current crisis, it suddenly appeared as if the U.S. had been caught by surprise by the violent events in Iran. Policymakers in Washington scrambled to make defensive moves to protect themselves from being blamed for any "mistakes" in policy toward Iran.

Brzezinski's concern about Iran led him to seek outside help. When Secretary of the Treasury Michael Blumenthal returned from Iran, he suggested to Brzezinski that the U.S. needed a comprehensive review of what was happening in that country in order to translate U.S. support of the Shah into a long term program. Blumenthal recommended former Undersecretary of State George Ball

¹⁸⁴ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 142-143.

as a good candidate for this policy review. Brzezinski agreed and secured President Carter's approval.¹⁸⁵

Brzezinski later regretted bringing in Ball because his findings were so contrary to what the National Security Adviser wanted to hear. Ball presented his report to the cabinet members of the Special Coordinating Committee (SCC) on December 13. In the report, Ball concluded that the Shah had been irreparably damaged by recent events. He suggested that the U.S. support a transfer of power in a constitutional framework and advocate that a Council of Notables be placed between the Shah and the new government. Brzezinski disagreed with this proposal because he viewed it as asking the Shah to hand over power to the opposition. President Carter did not fully accept Ball's recommendations either. Ball's intervention, therefore, did not significantly shift U.S. policy, but he was successful at convincing President Carter not to send Brzezinski to Tehran.¹⁸⁶

While Washington was searching for a policy to follow, Americans in Iran were threatened with violence against them if they did not leave the country. These threats sparked immediate controversy between Ambassador Sullivan, the State Department, and Brzezinski about whether the withdrawal of Americans would have negative political consequences for the Shah. Various departments

¹⁸⁵ Brzezinski, Power and Principle, p. 370.

¹⁸⁶ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 116.

finally worked out a compromise, and the voluntary evacuation of American dependents finally began in early December.¹⁸⁷

The withdrawal of Americans became a crucial issue in December because of the beginning of the Islamic holy month of Moharram. During Moharram, Shi'ite Muslims mourn the death of Hussein, the martyred grandson of the prophet Mohammed.¹⁸⁸ Khomeini and his principle supporters within Iran, namely Ayatollah Beheshti, Ayatollah Moussavi, and Ayatollah Lahouti, were preparing their followers to confront the government during this month and especially on the holy days of Tasu'a and Ashura, December 10 and 11.

Although the government banned processions during the holy month and a curfew was still in place, large numbers of people showed up at the mosques each evening. The crowds would leave the mosques in religious fervor after speakers had preached against the "godless Shah" and would take to the streets and rooftops. The sounds of automatic-gun fire and shouts of "*Allah-u-akbar*" could be heard throughout Tehran.¹⁸⁹

The holy day of Tasu'a and Ashura turned out relatively peacefully, however, as negotiations had taken place between the military and the representatives of the various revolutionary groups. The formidable outpouring

¹⁸⁷ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 144-145.

¹⁸⁸ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 208.

¹⁸⁹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 145.

of people into the streets, estimated between 400,000 and 2 million participants, demonstrated the impressive organizational capability of the revolutionary movement.¹⁹⁰ According to the British Ambassador, the opposition had united during the Ashura demonstrations as never before,

The immediate consequences of the Ashura marches were drastic. The Tehran mullahs who had organized the marches so successfully had strengthened their position in relation to the more moderate mullahs of Qom and Mashhad. The political (as opposed to religious) opposition groups...had secured some of the mass support which they had hitherto lacked. Most crucially, the military government could no longer even pretend to be in control of the country...¹⁹¹

The military, in particular, were affected by the strength shown by the opposition groups. Military commanders were well aware of the increasing desertion rates among their ranks and began to question their own positions. Divisions within the commanding elements began to grow. While the top leadership remained loyal to the Shah, junior officers began to see other options. The opposition took advantage of these feelings and soon officers began to question the reliability of their troops. The strength of the police also suffered as some members sided with the revolution and others simply did not actively work against the unrest.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 210.

¹⁹¹ Parsons, The Pride and the Fall, p. 112.

¹⁹² Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 153.

As the prospects of a return to law and order seemed to dim towards the end of Moharram, Ambassador Sullivan was called to visit Prime Minister Azhari. When Sullivan arrived at the prime minister's office, he discovered that Azhari had suffered a heart attack. In this weakened condition, the prime minister was concerned about the morale of the troops since they had been administering martial law for several months, yet were unable to respond to the abuse they suffered because their orders permitted them only to fire in the air. Azhari then made of point of telling the U.S. Ambassador, "You must know this and you must tell it to your government. This country is lost because the king cannot make up his mind."¹⁹³

The Eliot Mission

As a result of this interview, Sullivan was determined to follow through on the suggestions that he had recommended in his "Thinking the Unthinkable" cable. Since the military government had failed to restore law and order, Sullivan set out to begin talks with the opposition and the armed forces designed to help them reach an agreement that would prevent the disintegration of the military. Sullivan also recommended that Washington undertake similar actions in Paris with Khomeini's entourage. Sullivan passed word of these expanding contacts to

¹⁹³ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 212.

the Shah through Hushang Ansari, the head of the National Iranian Oil Company. According to Sullivan, the Shah never indicated any concern about these actions and even, "used to ask me with some curiosity what we were hearing from 'your friends the mullahs'"'.¹⁹⁴

By the end of December, members of the Liberation Movement made it clear that they wished to preserve the armed forces, but some of the senior military officers were unacceptable to them. The embassy was given a list of over a hundred senior military officers who would be expected to leave the country when the Shah left. Sullivan was unsure if this view coincided with Khomeini's view and recommended that the U.S. government send a senior emissary to Paris to discuss this matter with Khomeini. Secretary of State Vance accepted this proposal and selected Theodore Eliot, the inspector general of the Foreign Service, to lead this mission.¹⁹⁵

The proposal for direct contact with Khomeini was brought to the White House's attention on January 3, the eve of the president's departure for the Guadeloupe Summit in the Caribbean with the leaders of France, Germany, and Japan. Brzezinski insisted that Sullivan seek the views of the Shah on the proposal, before he would consider it.¹⁹⁶ Sullivan quickly met with the Shah to

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 212-215.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 221-223.

¹⁹⁶ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 133.

lay out the action, and the Shah, "listened gravely and without enthusiasm. However, he voiced no opposition whatsoever, asking merely that he be kept informed of the results of the mission."¹⁹⁷ When Vance called President Carter again to relate the Shah's approval, the President openly doubted the wisdom of such an approach and consulted Brzezinski. Stalling, Brzezinski suggested that the matter be postponed until after the summit. Eliot's planned January 6 trip was canceled¹⁹⁸ and when the matter was brought up again on January 10, the President decided that the U.S. would ask the French to initiate discreet contacts with Khomeini on America's behalf.¹⁹⁹ When the Shah later asked Sullivan how the U.S. expected to influence "these" people if it would not talk to them, Sullivan had no answer.²⁰⁰

Forming a New Government

After the Ashura demonstrations, the Shah resumed his efforts to create a coalition government. While political discussions took place, however, public order continued to deteriorate. Food prices soared and long lines formed at stores as shortages of basic goods were felt. Violence also continued to escalate. An American oil executive was killed on his way to work and a mob burned an

¹⁹⁷ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, p. 223.

¹⁹⁸ Sick, *All Fall Down*, p. 133.

¹⁹⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p.381.

²⁰⁰ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, p. 226.

official U.S. vehicle outside the gates of the U.S. embassy. These incidents illustrated the ineffectiveness of the government.

The Shah had considerable difficulty trying to find an opposition figure who would cooperate with him. To confuse matters, Ambassador Zahedi was urging the Shah to be strong and was advocating a military crack-down with the implied understanding that he was acting with the authority of Brzezinski. The Shah, however, did not believe that Zahedi truly understood what was happening.²⁰¹ Despite this pressure, the Shah maintained that, "...a sovereign may not save his throne by shedding his countrymen's blood."²⁰²

Towards the end of December, the Shah turned to a well-known opposition figure, National Front spokesman Shapour Bakhtiar. French-educated, Bakhtiar believed in parliamentary democracy along the European model and had become very ill at ease with the manner in which religious fundamentalists dominated the revolutionary movement. The American Embassy had occasional contact with Bakhtiar and assessed that he did not have the ability to act as an effective political leader since he did not have a popular following.²⁰³ On December 29, however, Bakhtiar was appointed Prime Minister by the Shah.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 193.

²⁰² Pahlavi, Answer to History, p. 167.

²⁰³ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 213.

²⁰⁴ DOS cable, Tehran 12715, 12/29/78 cited in Hooglund (ed.), Iran: Making of U.S. Policy, p. 60.

Bakhtiar immediately set about trying to form a broad-based coalition government and approached his colleagues in the National Front on December 30 to convince them to go along with him. They rejected his overtures, however, and expelled him from the National Front. Bakhtiar continued to talk privately with politicians and various dissidents. He announced that the Shah had agreed to leave the country within a month after Bakhtiar took office and would place the affairs of state in the hands of a regency council.²⁰⁵

The most critical aspect of Bakhtiar's discussions between the Shah and the opposition centered on who would be commander-in-chief of the armed forces. On January 2, 1979, Bakhtiar announced that his choice for War Minister was Fereidoun Jam, a man admired by all opposition leaders for his resignation after refusing to adopt harsh tactics against dissidents in the 1960's. Jam, however, would not take the job unless he had complete control over major appointments, and this was something the Shah would not allow. General Gharabaghi was brought in instead. Bakhtiar's failure to bring Jam into his cabinet was seen as evidence that the new government was only a front for the Shah and ended any hope Bakhtiar had of collaborating with the moderate opposition.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 157.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

The Shah also seemed to be delaying his plans for leaving the country by not announcing a departure date. The monarch preferred to wait for the Bakhtiar government to restore law and order, but he was also expecting Bakhtiar to fail in trying to do so. Ambassador Sullivan warned Washington that the Shah's procrastination could be fatal to Bakhtiar's efforts to establish a civilian government and Sullivan recommended that the U.S. urge the Shah to leave immediately.²⁰⁷ President Carter, on the other hand, stated, "I rejected this recommendation because the Shah, Bakhtiar, and the Iranian military leaders needed consistent American support."²⁰⁸ Instead, the U.S. announced that it would support the Bakhtiar administration whether the Shah remained in Iran or not.²⁰⁹

Huyser Mission

The opposition groups had been trying to involve the United States in their efforts to remove the Shah since November 1978. According to Stempel,

In private discussions with embassy officers, moderate dissidents had urged Washington to pressure the Shah into naming a government acceptable to the opposition as early as the change of government on November 6, when General Azhari took over. In early December the Committee for the Defense of Human

²⁰⁷ Vance, Hard Choices, p.334-335.

²⁰⁸ Carter, Keeping Faith, p. 443.

²⁰⁹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 159 and Rubin , Paved With Good Intentions, p. 368.

Rights made overtures to the U.S. and Britain, requesting that the ambassadors from the two countries present the proposal for a regency council to the Shah.²¹⁰

But the United States had refused to become involved in specific issues until January, 1979.

After Washington announced that it backed Bakhtiar's efforts to form a government, it took steps that indicated that the U.S. was not just a casual observer of events in Iran. On January 4, General Robert Huyser, Deputy Commander of U.S. Forces in Europe, was sent to Tehran. General Huyser had been identified in late December as one of two senior military leaders that already knew the Shah and his senior military advisers personally, and had an intimate knowledge of U.S. programs in Iran.²¹¹ Huyser's mission, which he originally anticipated would last only three days, turned out to be a month long. Views of what the purpose of his mission was varied. In his memoirs, President Carter relates why Huyser was originally sent,

Because Sullivan seemed unable to provide us with adequate reports from the military, which was a crucial source of information and advice, Secretary [of Defense] Brown and I concluded that we needed a strong and competent American representative in Tehran to keep me informed about the military's needs. One of his responsibilities would be to strengthen the resolve of the military leaders and encourage them to remain in Iran in order to maintain stability even if the Shah should decide to leave.²¹²

²¹⁰ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 159.

²¹¹ Robert E. Huyser, Mission to Tehran. (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 13-14.

²¹² Carter, Keeping Faith, p. 443.

Later, Huyser came to see that his mission also included recommending that the military took action if the Bakhtiar government collapsed.

Huyser accepted the mission because he believed that the military would be the key to holding Iran together should the Shah leave. Huyser admits, however, that if he had known about Ambassador Sullivan's plan to work with the opposition, he might not have made the same decision. Huyser was asked several times during the weeks he was in Iran why the U.S. did not do anything to silence Khomeini. According to Huyser, "It was essential to know where Khomeini stood; this was the key issue for all of us on the Iranian end of the chain...My contacts were strictly on the other side of the fence, and I had no relations with the opposition forces."²¹³

The relationship between General Huyser and Ambassador Sullivan reflected the differences in political thinking in Washington, especially with regard to the Iranian military. Huyser was continually fed instructions to support the Bakhtiar government and he reported that the Iranian military leaders still supported the Shah. President Carter acknowledged that, "Sullivan's reports about the military's attitude were often at variance with those of General Huyser...Over time, however, I came to trust Huyser's judgment."²¹⁴

²¹³ Huyser, Mission to Tehran, p. 17, 31, 80.

²¹⁴ Carter, Keeping Faith, p. 444.

Sullivan, on the other hand, saw the Shah's collapse as inevitable and pressed for an accommodation between the armed forces and the Islamic forces to avoid an explosion. Sullivan felt the military was deeply split and would fall apart in the upcoming crisis.²¹⁵ When Sullivan complained about the lack of U.S. contact with Khomeini, Carter became convinced that Sullivan was carrying out his directives half-heartedly, if at all, and told Secretary of State Vance, "to get Sullivan out of Iran". Secretary Vance insisted that it would be a mistake to replace Sullivan during the current crisis and the President reluctantly allowed the ambassador to stay.²¹⁶

The Shah Leaves

On January 4, Ambassador Sullivan received instructions to see the Shah and inform him that the U.S. government concurred with his intention to leave Iran for a "well-deserved" rest and that he was welcome in the U.S.²¹⁷ Khomeini and his entourage in Paris had been anticipating the Shah's departure and already planned on Khomeini's return to Iran. On January 10, Khomeini issued a statement saying that Iran could have good relations with the U.S. and Western European countries if they stopped supporting the Shah and he would feel no

²¹⁵ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, p. 225.

²¹⁶ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 446.

²¹⁷ DOS White Paper, "Huyser Mission and Shah's Entry to the U.S.", 1/29/80 cited in Hooglund (ed.), *Iran: Making of U.S. Policy*, p. 62.

hostility to any country that gave the Shah political asylum. The Shah had not yet told Sullivan of his definite plans, but soon afterward Sullivan and Huyser met with the Shah and were informed that the Shah planned to leave for the United States after the Bakhtiar government was approved by the *Majlis*. Shortly before his intended departure on January 16, however, the Shah accepted an invitation by Egypt to pass through Aswan on his way to the United States.²¹⁸

The Shah's plans to depart immediately made the military leadership nervous. Khomeini had adopted a new approach to the military in which, "the public was duty-bound to show brotherly love and kindness towards members of the security and armed forces, who were equally duty-bound to act in the same spirit towards the public." The new strategy meant that the military leadership had to work fast to hold the military together. Huyser had been working with the military to develop plans for taking control of basic services in the country if the Bakhtiar government failed, but the capability of these plans was still only marginal. The military was more concerned about what would happen when Khomeini returned to Iran.²¹⁹

On January 13 Khomeini had announced the establishment of a Revolutionary Islamic Council to serve as a shadow cabinet to the Bakhtiar

²¹⁸ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, p. 232.

²¹⁹ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 117, 121.

administration until it could nominate a cabinet to replace Bakhtiar's "illegal" one.²²⁰ The Ayatollah's intention to return to Iran was clear. To buy some time, the U.S. president authorized a meeting between Warren Zimmerman, the political counselor at the U.S. embassy in Paris, and Ibrahim Yazdi to try to facilitate an understanding between Khomeini and the military. When the Shah left Iran on January 16, Zimmerman emphasized to Yazdi that Khomeini's sudden return could provoke a confrontation with the military and Yazdi implied that this was something the Ayatollah wished to avoid.²²¹

The Shah's departure from Iran was done quietly, but the reaction to his departure was far from quiet. As Ambassador Sullivan described it, "...a pandemonium of delirium broke out in the city of Tehran. Automobiles roared through the streets with demonstrators hanging out the windows...Horns blew everywhere, and the shouting and celebrating lasted for three or four hours." A thirty-eight year reign came to an end and the government was left to Bakhtiar.²²²

Bakhtiar's Short Term of Office

Khomeini's call for the resignation of Prime Minister Bakhtiar and the government immediately followed the Shah's departure. Khomeini reportedly

²²⁰ DOS cable, Washington 010711, 1/13/79 cited in Hooglund (ed.), Iran: Making of U.S. Policy, p. 62

²²¹ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 338.

²²² Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 234.

said, "It [the departure] is not the final victory, but the preface to our victory." He urged his followers to keep the pressure on the government by continuing the strikes and trying to win over the armed forces. Massive demonstrations were organized for January 19, the fortieth day after Ashura. On January 20, Khomeini announced that he would return to Iran "within a few days."²²³

American Ambassador Sullivan believed that Bakhtiar's government would be swept aside once the Ayatollah returned to the country. Although it was the U.S. government's official position to support Bakhtiar, Sullivan reasoned that he had never been told to stop his efforts to arrange an accommodation between the armed forces and the leaders of the impending revolution. Sullivan therefore arranged to meet with Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Moussavi. Bazargan assured Sullivan that the Liberation Front and the religious elements of the revolution wanted the armed forces to remain intact and to work with the new government. Sullivan was encouraged by this meeting and intended to persuade the new chief of staff of the armed forces, General Gharabaghi, to enter into discussions with Bazargan and "his people".²²⁴ Meanwhile, Huyser also urged General Gharabaghi to contact the religious leaders in order to ensure the fortieth day demonstrations would pass peacefully.²²⁵

²²³ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 163, 168.

²²⁴ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*, p. 236-238.

²²⁵ Huyser, *Mission to Tehran*, p. 138.

Despite Huyser's optimism about the strength of the military, signs of weakness began to show in it when Khomeini announced that he was about to return to Iran. Bakhtiar responded by stating that he would either be successful against Khomeini or turn the country over to the military. In response, the chief of staff, General Gharabaghi, indicated that he would rather turn in his resignation than be party to a military takeover. Although the general was later convinced to remain in office, it was apparent that the general, after he had held several meetings with the religious opposition, was having doubts about a direct confrontation with Khomeini's forces.²²⁶

The situation began to worsen for the Bakhtiar government. The chairman of the Regency council had resigned. A group of 800 Air Force warrant officers (*homafars*) declared themselves loyal to Khomeini. Daily demonstrations continued. The military temporarily closed Mehrabad airport and blocked the runways to prevent Khomeini's arrival. The Shah announced that he would not be heading on to the U.S. but would stay closer to Iran, in Morocco. Threats against Americans increased and the embassy declared phase II of its emergency evacuation plan.²²⁷ Ambassador Sullivan was also preparing for the worst by bringing in Eric von Marbod, a Pentagon official, to work out a program for the

²²⁶ Sick, *All Fall Down*, p. 146.

²²⁷ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 168.

orderly liquidation of the six billion dollars worth of contracts the U.S. had to deliver military equipment to Iran.²²⁸

Negotiating continued between Bakhtiar's representatives and the religious leaders represented by Bazargan and Ayatollah Beheshti. Bakhtiar offered to fly to Paris to discuss possible solutions, but Khomeini refused to accept him unless he resigned. When Khomeini aides gave vague assurances that the Ayatollah would not proclaim an Islamic government and to end further bloodshed, Bakhtiar finally announced, on January 29, that the airports would be opened to permit Khomeini to return. General Gharabaghi and General Moghaddam of the SAVAK had made arrangements with the Liberation Movement so that the military would stand back and avoid a confrontation, but they had also impressed on Bazargan that the military would continue to give their full support to Bakhtiar.²²⁹ Bakhtiar thought that he might be able to negotiate with the Revolutionary Council. If the Council tried to seize power, however, "pandemonium" would ensue.²³⁰

Khomeini Returns From Exile

²²⁸ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 245.

²²⁹ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 148 and Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 171-172.

²³⁰ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 148.

On February 1, Ayatollah Khomeini, with an extensive entourage, returned to Iran aboard a chartered Air France 747 as it had been agreed to by the government, the military, and the religious opposition. He was greeted by ecstatic mobs made up of millions of people at the airport. The Mojahedin, in its first formal introduction to the political process, controlled the airport and the area running to Shahyad Monument. The military and SAVAK guarded the route from there to Tehran's main cemetery, where Khomeini traveled to pay his respects to revolutionary martyrs. His every action was carried on national television. Khomeini then took up residence in a small religious school in southern Tehran.²³¹

Ambassador Sullivan was informed that U.S. policy was to continue support for constitutional processes and to keep close consultation with the Bakhtiar government. He was not to have any dealings with the Revolutionary Council, but he was not precluded from maintaining contact with members of the opposition with whom he already consulted. These lines became blurred, however, when Khomeini rejected compromise proposals with Bakhtiar and announced that Bakhtiar had to go. Khomeini announced the formation of his

²³¹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 174 and Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 245.

own provisional government, with the leader of the Liberation Movement, Mehdi Bazargan, as its prime minister.²³²

The significant policy differences between the Department of State and the National Security Council in the U.S. were again highlighted when Huyser returned to the U.S. and gave his account of the situation in Tehran to the president. Huyser said that he differed with Ambassador Sullivan regarding their analyses of Iran's military capabilities and the desirability of military action. Huyser confirmed that he thought the military should and could execute a coup d'etat if signaled from Washington as Brzezinski wanted. Sullivan felt that Iran's military was unreliable. This assessment fueled the president's anger regarding the State Department's lack of support for U.S. policy. When a news report later revealed that State Department officials expected that Bakhtiar would only last two or three more days, the president exploded.²³³ He called in the Iranian desk officers and other mid-level State Department officials and he told them, "if they could not support what I decided, their only alternative was to resign."²³⁴

Within Iran, support for the Bakhtiar government was eroding. The *Majlis* ceased to function. The Islamic movement appointed revolutionary committees (*komitehs*) to take over the governmental functions and large areas of the bazaar

²³² Sick, *All Fall Down*, p. 150-151.

²³³ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 385, 389.

²³⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 449.

fell under committee control. The army was disintegrating, with thousands of deserters and the police force was falling apart as agents were either murdered or fled their positions. Demonstrations and strikes continued, however. Mojahedin and Islamic groups began to take over responsibility for law and order. With increased responsibility, the revolutionary elements gained more authority. Bakhtiar tried to distance himself from the U.S. by pulling out of CENTO and canceling American arms supply contracts, but this had no effect on the revolutionary tide.²³⁵

As the revolutionary elements gained more authority, the role of the military became more critical. Negotiations continued between Bazargan's people and Gharabaghi and others who believed in accommodation with the Islamic movement. Some military leaders still wished to crush the revolutionaries, but they could not come to agreement.²³⁶

Events came to a head on February 9 when *homafars* and cadets at Farahabad and Doshen Tappeh air bases in Tehran began to demonstrate in favor of Khomeini. The Imperial Guard's Javidan Brigade ("The Immortals") moved to break up the demonstrations and firing ensued. Fighting eventually died down at Farahabad, but Mojahedin and Fadaiyan units were rushed to Doshen Tappeh to

²³⁵ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 176 and Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 250.

²³⁶ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 177.

assist the rebels. The base armory was broken into and weapons indiscriminately handed out. On February 10, the fighting continued at Doshen Tappeh and spread to other areas of Tehran including the area where U.S. military offices were located. Mojahedin and Fadaiyan units continued to assault government installations still under Bakhtiar on February 11. American personnel were trapped within the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) headquarters until embassy political officers contacted Ibrahim Yazdi and Ayatollah Beheshti who arrived on the scene and arranged the safe extraction of the U.S. personnel.²³⁷

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces met on February 11 to decide what they should do. Although some officers wanted to destroy the guerrillas, other argued that political leaders were going to settle matters. The final decision was for the military to withdraw to barracks and declare itself “neutral”, thus ending any hope for the survival of the Bakhtiar government. Bakhtiar resigned and went into hiding. He later surfaced in Paris.²³⁸

Bazargan's Provisional Government

Bazargan's provisional government began operating in the office of the prime minister on February 12 and gradually began extending control over the

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 177-180 and Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 251-253..

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 180.

chaotic situation. He named several moderates to key positions within the government, including Yazdi as deputy prime minister for revolutionary affairs, Entezam as deputy prime minister for public affairs, and Sanjabi as foreign minister. Bazargan indicated that the provisional government desired to continue relations with the U.S. and it became apparent that Brzezinski's military option was no longer viable. President Carter stated in a press conference that same day that the U.S. was ready to cooperate with Iran's new government.²³⁹ The U.S. was now concerned with preventing sensitive military equipment from falling into unfriendly hands and the safety of American citizens.²⁴⁰

Ambassador Sullivan became particularly concerned about American safety when the Iranian military unit that had been protecting the U.S. compound received orders to return to its barracks. Sullivan anticipated an attack on the compound by a street mob similar to the December attack, only the mob would have weapons this time. Vance noted that the revolutionary coalition seemed to be breaking up and that, "...in the increasingly open struggle between the Mojahedin, a neo-Marxist Islamic faction, and the Marxist Fadaian, there was danger that one or both would attack the embassy in an effort to provoke a confrontation that would undermine the Bazargan government."²⁴¹ Sullivan

²³⁹ Carter press conference, 2/12/79 cited in Hooglund (ed.), Iran: Making of U.S. Policy, p. 71.

²⁴⁰ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 342.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

received assurances from Bazargan and Entezam that the American embassy would be assisted in case of attack, but the details were disturbingly vague for the ambassador.²⁴²

The ambassador needed these assurances of support on February 14 when a Fadaiyan unit opened fire on the embassy. American Marine guards were ordered by Sullivan to retreat behind a wall of tear gas, but the unfriendly forces continued to move forward and captured the small remaining embassy staff. Even though the assault happened quickly, the communications staff had enough time to destroy classified files and communications equipment. The timely arrival of Yazdi with a group of forces, put an end to the takeover. A security force, made up of Air Force enlisted personnel and Mojahedin, was arranged for the protection of the embassy.²⁴³

The seizure of the U.S. embassy compound illustrated the shakiness of the provisional government's control over the political situation. The U.S. Embassy announced that it could no longer protect American lives, and strongly recommended that all Americans leave the country. The embassy staff was reduced and British, German, and Israeli citizens also made arrangements to evacuate. Among the last group of official Americans to leave were 21 U.S. Air

²⁴² Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 255-257.

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 258-265.

Force personnel who had been held hostage at their electronic listening post by local employees who would not let them go until they were paid. Once the American air attaché made arrangements to deliver their payroll, the employees let the Americans go.²⁴⁴

The American consulates in Tabriz, Isfahan, and Shiraz were also closed as a result of the revolutionary takeover. Michael Metrisko, the American consul in Tabriz, had almost been hanged by the radical Mojahedin faction that attacked his post, while the consul in Isfahan was beaten as he attempted to rescue a fellow American from a mob. The chaos that existed in Iran made it especially difficult to work out the problem of American future relations with Iran.²⁴⁵

Sullivan met several times with Prime Minister Bazargan and members of his government since they had stated that they wanted to continue friendly relations with the United States, but the ambassador described the Bazargan government as being, "buried somewhere in the middle of this chaos." The *komitehs*, that in principle reported to the Islamic Revolutionary Council, were in fact loyal to various causes including Mojahedin, Fadaïyan, Tudeh, and even the *homafars*. Groups of young men of various religious, political, and ideological persuasions openly fought each other for control of Tehran, and since they were

²⁴⁴ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 189.

²⁴⁵ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 271-272.

armed, this led to constant firefights on the streets. Other groups were vying for political control of the movement. The armed forces were in disarray and unable to exert control over the competing factions. Kangaroo courts were set up, and executions became a daily affair. Bazargan threatened to resign over arrests and executions, which were ordered outside of formal government channels.²⁴⁶

Looting was rampant, and most services came to a halt. In addition to the chaos, according to Sullivan, "We were largely cut off from meeting with unofficial Iranians, since any contact with us was likely to contaminate them and cause their arrest with great risk to their lives."²⁴⁷

Meanwhile, the Shah's stay in Morocco made it appear as if he were waiting to return to Iran. This raised problems between the new Islamic government and the United States. Although the U.S. had originally invited the Shah to come to America, his coming after the revolution would cause the perception that the U.S. was moving to assist him in returning to the throne. Khomeini also began demanding the return of the Shah to face revolutionary justice. It was feared that if the Shah came to the United States it would endanger the Americans that were still in Iran and would harm American relations with the

²⁴⁶ Nicholas M. Nikazmerad, "A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution", Iranian Studies. Vol. XIII, Nos. 1-4, pp. 327-367 cited in Hooglund (ed.), Iran: Making of U.S. Policy, p. 72.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 273-276.

new Iranian government. On March 17, the Shah was informed that the American president had decided it would not be appropriate for him to come to the United States. Arrangements were made for him to find temporary safe haven in the Bahamas and later he moved to Mexico. The Shah's friends in America, however, continued to apply pressure to the administration to allow the Shah to enter the United States.²⁴⁸

When U.S. Ambassador Sullivan left Iran on April 6, 1979, the Bazargan government was nominally in control, but on shaky ground. U.S.-Iranian relations were continuing at a very low level with Charge d'Affaires Charles Naas in Tehran. The U.S. was unsure of how to proceed since friendly overtures to the new government were viewed with suspicion and were often used as a propaganda tool against the United States. The United States desired stability, but was unsure of how to attain it now that the Shah was gone. The disparate opposition groups had been united by the common cause of overthrowing the Shah. Once that goal had been accomplished, the groups began jockeying for position in the post-revolutionary Iran. Khomeini focused on the opposition's fear of a counter coup supported by the United States as a means of consolidating his power and focusing the energies of the warring factions. In the confusion, the

²⁴⁸ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 344.

U.S. decided to back the group that it could identify with the most, the moderates of Bazargan's government.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

V. The Developing Islamic Government and the Hostage Crisis

American policymakers were shaken and confused by the events of the revolution in Iran. Brzezinski and the NSC staff were discredited by their support of the Shah, the Bakhtiar government, and the military and were forced to back down on future policymaking on Iran. The State Department and the intelligence community attempted to develop a new policy toward Iran, but several factors made this especially difficult. The U.S. did not know much about the players or the dynamics of the revolution and the political scene was constantly changing as the factions all competed for control. The situation was especially sensitive because anti-Americanism ran deep throughout revolutionary Iran. The past history of U.S. support for the Shah, however, meant that several groups sought to depict the revolution in the worst possible light.²⁵⁰

For the first few months after the revolution, Bazargan and the moderates dominated the provisional government. Bazargan's cabinet, made up of many individuals that had close ties with the Liberation Movement, took over existing ministries and tried to get the pre-existing bureaucracy back to work. The government's authority was undermined, however, by the religious radicals that dominated Khomeini's Revolutionary Council. A parallel administrative network had been set up that reached into the cities through the *komitehs*. The *komitehs*

²⁵⁰ Bill, Eagle and Lion, p. 276-277.

pushed aside police and civil servants as they rounded up suspected members of the old regime and confiscated the property of people who had fled. The Revolutionary Council was responsible for the numerous executions that took place immediately after the takeover.²⁵¹

Khomeini's Revolutionary Council, in essence, began to act as a separate government. The membership of the Revolutionary Council was never officially announced, but sources claimed that there were from six to thirteen members. The Council was thought to include Ayatollah Moussavi Ardebeli, Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Muhammad Beheshti, Hojjat al-Islam Muhammad Javad Bahonar, Ayatollah Mehdi Ali Mahdavi Kani, Hojjat al-Islam Muhammad Ali Khamenehi, Ali Akhbar Mo'infar, Sadeq Qotbzadeh, Hojjat al-Islam Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Ezzatollah Sahabi. Although Khomeini remained above the Council, a number of its members were former Khomeini students and several had played key roles in organizing and propagandizing the revolution in 1978. Bazargan and Sahabi were leaders in the Liberation Movement, but their voices were drowned out by the increasing number of radical clerics that joined the Council.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 198-199.

²⁵² Rubin, All Fall Down, p. 283-284.

The United States made the fundamental decision to stay in Iran. Iran's strategic importance made it important for the U.S. to maintain a presence there. The number of official Americans was reduced and the Embassy was strengthened physically. The U.S. judged that it would be best to maintain an American presence through the formative stages of the new government and to try to build a continuing American presence.²⁵³

The United States continued to hope that the moderates in the provisional government could stabilize the situation in Iran. According to President Carter, "Despite the turmoil within Iran, I was reasonably pleased with the attitude of the Iranian government under Bazargan." The United States had many reasons for favoring the moderates. Most of the moderate leaders spoke English and had been educated in the U.S. or Europe. American political philosophy coincided more with the liberal views of the moderates than with Khomeini's fiery rhetoric. The moderates did not verbally attack the U.S. They were well-known for being part of the opposition to the Shah, yet the U.S. had already established direct contact with many of these individuals through meetings with them late in 1978.²⁵⁴

²⁵³ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Iran's Seizure of the United States Embassy, February-March 1981 Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Affairs. 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, p. 4.

²⁵⁴ Bill, Eagle and Lion, p. 278-279.

The U.S. also put faith in the moderates because the religious elements were unknowns. The Shi'i religious establishment had largely resisted meeting with official Americans except for the occasional contacts in early 1979 when Ambassador Sullivan and others met with Ayatollah Beheshti. These contacts dried up during the spring and, according to Henry Precut, the Iran desk officer at the State Department, American officials were unable to renew contacts with the clergy. American Iran scholars reinforced the American position on the moderates by arguing that the Shi'i religious leaders were unlikely to become directly involved in the day-to-day business of government.²⁵⁵

The mission of the moderate provisional government was to hold a referendum on the monarchy and to prepare for the formation of an Islamic Republic. On March 30 and 31, the formation of an Islamic Republic was approved by 97 percent of the electorate.²⁵⁶ The referendum was marred by boycotts in the Kurdish and Turkoman areas and by the refusal of a dozen groups to participate because of the lack of freedom in choosing another option.²⁵⁷ To "protect" the revolution, the Revolutionary Council then ordered the Islamic

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 210.

²⁵⁷ DOS cable, Tehran 03543, 4/479 cited in Hooglund (ed.), *Iran: Making of U.S. Policy*, p. 74.

militia and the most loyal members of the Mojahedin to be formed into a new military organization called the Revolutionary Guards.²⁵⁸

Cracks in the revolutionary coalition grew during the spring. Khomeini loyalists merged with the Mojahedin to form the Islamic Republican Party (IRP). The Mojahedin continued fighting with the Fadaiyan. The Tudeh played both sides of the fence. Foreign Minister Karim Sanjabi resigned from the provisional government over its inability to halt the indiscriminate executions. The lawyers and writers grouped around Matin-Daftari to form the National Democratic Front. The Islamic Peoples' Republican Party was established with the concurrence of Ayatollah Shariatmadari to compete with the Islamic Republican Party. An organization known as the Forghan Group emerged as an Islamic offshoot that used assassinations as a means to affect change.²⁵⁹

Upheavals in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, the assassination of some Khomeinist leaders by the Forghan Group, and clashes between the Mojahedin and the Fadaiyan during April contributed to increasing disorder. Khomeini blamed the disunity on the United States and its agents. The disorder, therefore, fed anti-Americanism and strengthened the radical Khomeini followers.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 200.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 200-205.

²⁶⁰ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 287.

Tensions grew between the U.S. and Iran in May 1979 when the U.S. protested the executions within Iran. Previous protests were often regarded as proof of American complicity in the crimes of the defendants.²⁶¹ The execution of wealthy Jewish businessman Habib Elghanian and several others allegedly for corruption marked the first executions of private individuals rather than former government officials of the Shah's regime.²⁶² According to Secretary of State Vance, "The brutal treatment of officials of the former regime had been extended to ethnic and religious minorities. We strongly protested these acts and tried to expedite the emigration of Iranian Jews and others from Iran."²⁶³

This activity triggered the U.S. Senate to pass the Javits Resolution on May 17 which condemned the killings. At the same time the Senate approved the nomination of Walter Cutler, to be America's first ambassador to Iran since the revolutionary takeover. When Khomeini heard of the Javits Resolution, he accused the U.S. of interference in Iranian internal affairs and viewed the resolution as evidence of U.S. resistance to the revolution. The Revolutionary Council directed Bazargan to cancel its decision to accept Cutler as ambassador. The situation also caused 3 days of demonstrations to erupt in front of the U.S.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 289.

²⁶² DOS cable, Washington 000001, 5/17/79 cited in Hooglund (ed.), Iran: Making of U.S. Policy, p. 77

²⁶³ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 345.

Embassy in Tehran.²⁶⁴ Bruce Laingen was sent to Tehran on June 16, 1979 as Charge d'Affaires for "only four to six weeks" while Washington decided whether to try to accredit someone else as ambassador or not.²⁶⁵

The Javits Resolution had other unintentional repercussions as well. Throughout April and May 1979, Charge d'Affaires Charles Naas had been following Sullivan's lead by communicating with Washington about setting up a meeting with Khomeini. The attempted meeting, which supposedly had been approved by Bazargan and apparently by Khomeini as well, had been agreed to by Washington, but the strong Iranian reaction to the Javits Resolution forced its cancellation. Naas left Iran and returned to the United States in June without meeting Khomeini.²⁶⁶

Khomeini's antagonism towards the United States was not necessarily shared by the more moderate members of his coalition. Yazdi called for calm and explained that Iran was going through a struggle similar to the American Revolution. Ayatollah Shariatmadari, whose followers in Azerbaijan were already demonstrating against Khomeini's policies, feared Soviet intervention and also called for calm. Liberation Movement leaders and National Front members

²⁶⁴ Stempel, *Paved With Good Intentions*, p. 216-217.

²⁶⁵ Bruce Laingen, *Yellow Ribbon: The Secret Journal of Bruce Laingen*. (Washington: Brassey's (US), Inc., 1992), p. 1-2.

²⁶⁶ Interview with Charles Naas cited in Bill, *Eagle and Lion*, p. 281, 285.

recognized the Western contribution to Iran's development and wanted to continue trade. Moderates continued discussions with the U.S. embassy staff, as Deputy Prime Minister Entezam met with Charge d'Affaires Bruce Laingen to work at normalizing relations.²⁶⁷

Differences between the various revolutionary leaders in Iran emerged again during the deliberations on a constitution. Moderates and liberals sought a Western-style constitution in which secular leaders would run the country while the clergy would take care of the nation's spiritual needs. Mullahs, on the other hand, insisted on following Khomeini's teachings that religion be placed above politics in the constitution in the form of the *velayat-e-faqih*, or "guardianship of the jurists". In June, leftists led rallies to protest the religious orientation of the proposed constitution. Moderates, including Ayatollah Shariatmadari's Islamic Peoples' Republican Party, challenged the political superiority of the Khomeini wing of Shi'ism. In July, the moderates forwarded a draft constitution embodying the concepts of an elected president and appointed prime minister to Khomeini, but it was rejected on the advice of the Islamic Republican Party. The non-radical clergy and the secular leaders found themselves shoved to the periphery

²⁶⁷ Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 290-291.

while Ayatollah Beheshti, the chairman of the IRP, and his colleagues increased their influence and manipulated the constitutional process.²⁶⁸

The Revolutionary Council called for the election of a constitutional assembly that would write the constitution, and balloting was scheduled for August 3. Bazargan threatened to quit over the differences between the provisional government and the Revolutionary Council, but a solution was worked out whereby five cabinet members would sit on the Revolutionary Council and five men from the council would become ministers or deputy ministers in the cabinet. Although this change strengthened the government it increased the influence of the pro-Khomeini clergy prior to the constitutional assembly elections. Islamic hard-liners rigged the elections by forcing opponents off the ballot and intimidating voters. Members of the National Front, the National Democratic Front, and the Islamic Peoples' Republican Party were among twenty groups that boycotted the polls because of the blatant tampering.²⁶⁹

In the midst of Iran's domestic battle for control, American support for the moderates led to increased contacts with the Bazargan government. The State Department and other U.S. agencies began to send in more people in the middle

²⁶⁸ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 210-211.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 211-212 and DOS cable, Tehran 07719, 7/23/79 cited in Hooglund (ed.), *Iran: Making U.S. Policy*, p. 82.

of the summer and this new group of officials were determined to get in touch with as many Iranians as possible.²⁷⁰ According to Laingen,

The mullahs were centered in the Revolutionary Council, which had real political power, but they operated largely behind the scenes, and we would rarely reach this group...The ministers of the provisional government, including Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, however, were always accessible, over endless cups of tea.²⁷¹

The increased contact between U.S. officials and Western-educated liberals did not go unnoticed. Internal instability intensified the fear that the U.S. was plotting against Iran. Radio broadcasts and press accounts launched a large anti-American propaganda campaign. For top U.S. officials who might have been unaware of the speeches against the U.S. and distortions in the media, though, there were reasons for continued optimism.²⁷² Laingen noted,

Most visibly, security gradually seemed to improve in the city, especially along the streets outside the residence...We encouraged American businessmen to return at least long enough to determine the outlook for settling their claims, and a good many did. Officers of the embassy traveled to Tabriz and Shiraz to test the outlook for reopening consular offices in those cities.²⁷³

The revolutionary forces that had been "protecting" the embassy were removed from inside the compound and the more reliable Revolutionary Guards were

²⁷⁰ Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 280.

²⁷¹ Laingen, Yellow Ribbon, p. 6-7.

²⁷² Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 293-295.

²⁷³ Laingen, Yellow Ribbon, p. 7.

posted outside the embassy walls. Within the compound, the Marine unit resumed full control.

American officials were anxious to establish relationships with the new regime and agreed to Amir Entezam's suggestion that the U.S. provide Iran with information on external threats. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) briefing officers flew into Tehran twice, once in August and again in October, to provide intelligence briefings to a small group in Bazargan's government. The CIA also tried to develop a liaison with Abol Hassan Bani- Sadr, a member of the Revolutionary Council. Bani- Sadr was originally contacted in January in Paris, but he later had three meetings in Tehran with a businessman named Guy Rutherford in late August and early September. Rutherford was actually Vernon Cassin, an experienced CIA agent. Cassin noted that Bani- Sadr was a valuable contact and that the U.S. should continue trying to obtain his cooperation.²⁷⁴

Despite these contacts, the U.S. was not able to establish meaningful contacts with major religious leaders. Leading members of the ulema would not see U.S. officials until they met with Khomeini. The White House persistently refused to meet with the leader of the revolution since America considered him a

²⁷⁴ Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 286-288; Christos P. Ioannides, America's Iran: Injury and Catharsis. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), p. 65-66; and Gunter Neuberger and Michael Opperskalski, CIA im Iran: Die Geheimdokumente aus der Teheraner US-Botschaft. (Bornheim-Merten, Germany: Lamuv Verlag, 1982), p. 129, 137.

fanatic. American officials were also concerned with U.S. public reaction to such a meeting and with any adverse affects that it might have on the moderates in the government.²⁷⁵

Meanwhile, Laingen worked at trying to restore trust between the U.S. and Iran. The arms supply issue was a particularly difficult one. Iran badly needed spare parts that were already bought and paid for, but were stored in the U.S. A limited amount were finally shipped in August. Iranian officials were also concerned about the lack of an ambassador.²⁷⁶ Laingen returned to Washington in September for consultations on whether he should become the new ambassador to Iran. Laingen did not agree with this “retreading” of a charge into an ambassador, and in October the suggestion was dropped because it “would not be the right signal” at that point. Conditions seemed to improve, however. A visa-issuing facility was opened in Tehran and Vance met with Iranian Foreign Minister Yazdi at the United Nations.²⁷⁷

While American policymakers tried to rebuild friendly relations with Iran, Shah supporters continued to press the U.S. government to give him asylum. Secretary Vance continued to advise against the Shah’s admission, while

²⁷⁵ Bill, Eagle and Lion, p. 281-282 and DOS memo, Saunders to Vance, Washington, 9/5/79 cited in Hooglund (ed.), Iran: Making of U.S. Policy, p. 87.

²⁷⁶ DOS cable, Tehran 08970, 8/11/79, in Hooglund (ed.), Iran: Making of U.S. Policy, p. 84.

²⁷⁷ Laingen, Yellow Ribbon, p. 9.

Brzezinski argued for it. In July, Vance considered admitting the Shah, but consulted Bruce Laingen first. Laingen advised against the admission of the Shah since it was unsafe for the embassy for it to be done at that time and the Shah's admission could also be used by anti-Western forces as a lever to gain control of Iran. On October 18, however, the State Department was told that the Shah's serious health condition was worsening and his illness could not be properly diagnosed and treated in Mexico. President Carter then made the decision to admit the shah for humanitarian reasons.²⁷⁸

Laingen was told to inform the prime minister of Iran that the Shah was being admitted into the U.S. for medical treatment and to obtain the regime's understanding and assurance of security for the embassy.²⁷⁹ The Shah was allowed to come to the U.S. on October 23 and at first it appeared that the Iranian government could maintain control of the situation. There were large demonstrations on November 1 in front of the embassy and Khomeini demanded the return of the Shah's fortune, but embassy protection was good. Hard-liners, however, charged that the Shah's illness was only a pretext. A simultaneous incident added fuel to the fire.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 370-371.

²⁷⁹ Laingen, Yellow Ribbon, p. 9.

²⁸⁰ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 372.

On November 1, Bazargan and Yazdi were at the independence celebrations in Algiers and met with Brzezinski. Laingen had actively encouraged a high-level dialogue, but in Tehran it became a red flag for the radical clerics who were determined to undermine Bazargan's government because they sensed it was growing too close to the United States.²⁸¹ Qotbzadeh ordered Iranian television to broadcast pictures of the encounter. The combination of the Shah's admittance to the U.S. and the Algiers meeting sparked more demonstrations, and on November 4, 1979, a group of pro-Khomeini students seized the American embassy.²⁸²

The Hostage Crisis

For some analysts, the capture of the American embassy and its occupants signaled the end of the Iranian's first revolution and the beginning of their second.²⁸³ The seizure of the American embassy by students calling themselves the "Followers of the Imam's Line" became the focus of the Iranian domestic power struggle between moderates and fundamentalists in the building of an Islamic society. Although the move seemed spontaneous, there are accounts that the seizure was well planned in order to increase the strength of the

²⁸¹ Laingen, Yellow Ribbon, p. 10.

²⁸² Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 298.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

fundamentalists.²⁸⁴ On November 4, a group of about 500 young men and women were parading by the embassy compound when they suddenly rushed the embassy's main gate. The Revolutionary Guards that were supposed to be protecting the gate stepped aside and allowed the students to occupy the grounds and besiege the buildings. In all, about 150 captives were taken. Of these, only sixty-three were Americans. Charge d'Affaires Bruce Laingen, political counselor Victor Tomseth, and security officer, Michael Howland, were not at the embassy at the time, but were on an official call at the foreign ministry. The three men were to stay there for over a year, until they joined the other hostages at the embassy. Although they did not know it, the hostages' ordeal was to last 444 days.²⁸⁵

No one thought that the affair would be anything more than a symbolic occupation that would soon be terminated, similar to the February incident. Laingen was the senior American in direct contact with the revolutionary government. He immediately requested security assistance to remove the demonstrators but none was to come. At first, the members of the provisional government were unavailable. When Yazdi arrived at the foreign ministry, Laingen again requested action. Yazdi did not go directly to the compound to

²⁸⁴ Ioannides, *America's Iran*, p. 114-116.

²⁸⁵ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 222-225.

oversee its return to U.S. hands as he had in February, however. According to Laingen, "Then, only recently arrived from Paris with the Ayatollah and named a deputy prime minister, he [Yazdi] could act with confidence. Now, though foreign minister, he was keenly conscious of new and contending centers of power - above all that of the ascendant clerical forces."²⁸⁶

Although the students originally envisioned a temporary takeover to demonstrate their strong opposition to the Bazargan government's ties to the U.S., they soon had massive support from important quarters. They were not only supported by the masses on the streets, but also by key figures within the Revolutionary Council.²⁸⁷ Ayatollah Khomeini at first quietly expressed disapproval of the takeover but became a strong supporter of it when he realized the extreme popularity of the move among the Iranian masses.²⁸⁸ The Department of State contacted Ayatollah Beheshti, but he was taking his cue from Khomeini, and also supported the militants.²⁸⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini's son, Ahmad, visited the compound on the following day and endorsed the capture of the "nest of spies" in his father's name. He also warned the Bazargan government that it would be opposing the will of the Iranian people if it protested the seizure.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Laingen, Yellow Ribbon, p. 13-14.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p.15.

²⁸⁸ Bill, Eagle and Lion, p. 295.

²⁸⁹ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 375.

²⁹⁰ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 225.

Secretary Vance later informed Yazdi that Laingen would be available to meet with Ahmad Khomeini to, “facilitate communications looking toward the prompt release of our personnel and the restoration of the compound to our control.”²⁹¹

Bazargan quickly issued a statement stating that his government would fulfill its responsibilities under international law, but it became apparent that the fundamentalists and the militants who had more authority would not allow Bazargan to hand over the hostages. Bazargan, who had become discredited because of his meeting with Brzezinski, resigned on November 6. Yazdi was also removed from office. The moderates, upset at the taking of diplomatic hostages, became powerless and were left on the sidelines. Khomeini immediately ordered the Revolutionary Council to assume supreme authority and prepare for a presidential election. Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr temporarily replaced Yazdi as the foreign minister and became a spokesman by default since there was no new prime minister.²⁹²

The State Department felt that Khomeini alone had the power to free the hostages, and recommended that Carter send an emissary to Khomeini. Ramsey Clark, a former attorney general who was thought to have good contacts among the religious leaders, including Khomeini, and William Miller, a Persian-speaking

²⁹¹ Laingen, Yellow Ribbon, p. 15.

²⁹² Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 226.

ex-Foreign Service Officer were selected to go to Tehran to obtain the release of the hostages. They left on November 6 and got as far as Turkey when Khomeini vetoed the aircraft landing rights and meetings that Laingen had arranged through the Foreign Ministry. The announcement that Clark and Miller were official emissaries of the U.S. president may have affected Khomeini's decision.²⁹³

The hostages soon became pawns in the Iranian power struggle. The clerics of the Revolutionary Council debated whether they should hold out for the militants' original terms of returning the Shah to Iran or use the crisis to consolidate their authority in the country. The council decided to use the crisis to further their aims. This decision was complicated by the fact that the group controlling the hostages quickly established themselves as a separate bargaining force capable of taking an independent line from the radical clergy.²⁹⁴ The students were divided into two main ideological tendencies. Although both trends shares Islam as a common factor, one trend was influenced by socialism while the other adhered to fundamentalism.²⁹⁵ The factions agreed, however, that they, not the government, would maintain control over the hostages.

The U.S. quickly tried to develop a response to the situation. Although a military rescue was considered, its feasibility was questionable because of the

²⁹³ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 376.

²⁹⁴ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 227.

²⁹⁵ Ioannides, America's Iran, p. 110-111.

embassy's location, and the United States decided to initiate a dual-track strategy for obtaining the release of the hostages. All possible channels of communication were to be opened with the Iranian authorities to ascertain the hostages condition and to negotiate for their freedom. The U.S. would also try to build intense political, economic and legal pressure on Iran to increase Iran's isolation from the world community.²⁹⁶ Actions began immediately. President Carter ordered a review of all Iranian visas and deportation of those individuals who had violated the legal terms of their stay. Iranian demonstrations on federal property were forbidden. The U.S. halted its oil trade with Iran and other countries were encouraged to do the same. Iranian money and gold on deposit in the U.S. was also frozen to prevent its transfer back to Iran.²⁹⁷

Among the first intermediaries that approached Khomeini on the hostages' behalf was the Pope. The Ayatollah received the Pope's emissary but his message was rebuffed. The Palestine Liberation Organization offered to send a delegation to Khomeini and these discussions produced better results. Despite the students refusal to accept negotiations, Khomeini's discussions with the PLO resulted in the release of thirteen women and blacks who were not suspected of espionage and they arrived back in the U.S. on Thanksgiving Day.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 377.

²⁹⁷ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 228.

²⁹⁸ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 224.

On November 20, after the release of this small group of hostages, Khomeini threatened to try the other hostages if Carter did not return the Shah to Iran. Immediately after this, the Great Mosque in Mecca was occupied by a group of armed Islamic fanatics. Rumors that the assault was the work of Israel with the assistance of the U.S. inspired a mob to invade the U.S. embassy in Pakistan and to kill two Americans. The Carter administration met for a policy review after these events. A message was then sent privately to Iran warning that any trial of U.S. personnel in Iran would result in the interruption of Iranian commerce and that any harm to any hostage would result in direct retaliatory action.

Meanwhile, the U.S. endorsed the call on November 25 of the United Nations (U.N.) secretary-general for a meeting of the Security Council. Foreign Minister Bani-Sadr wanted to go to New York since he had been quietly working on an agreement with the U.S. about the hostages, but he was over-ruled by the Revolutionary Council. He was removed from his post and replaced by Sadeq Qotbzadeh. Qotbzadeh refused to participate in the U.N. debate and the U.N. ended up passing Security Council Resolution 457, calling for release of the hostages and a peaceful resolution of the differences between the U.S. and Iran. The U.S. also filed suit with the International Court of Justice in The Hague, charging Iran with violations of international law. The court ruled in favor of the

U.S. in December, but again the government of Iran failed to respond to pressure to release the hostages.²⁹⁹

Amongst the many issues that the United States was juggling at the end of November was the impending release of the Shah from the hospital. The administration had decided to wait until after the Ashura demonstrations to announce that the Shah was ready to travel when it was informed that Mexico was refusing to renew the Shah's visa. While the Shah recuperated for two weeks in San Antonio, the U.S. approached several countries in order to find him a place to go. After many countries refused to admit the Shah, American negotiations with Panama paid off and the Shah flew there on December 15.³⁰⁰

In Iran, the Islamic fundamentalists had been able to force the Constitutional Assembly to draft a strict Islamic constitution in the wake of the embassy seizure. Voting on the constitution took place in the beginning of December, and once again the results were favorable. The Islamic Peoples' Republican Party, the National Front, and the National Democratic Front, following their previous example, did not participate in the vote. The new constitution confirmed that Khomeini would be the all-powerful Religious Guardian.³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 229-230.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 231.

The United States continued to have some contacts within Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Qotbzadeh kept in touch with Professor Richard Cottam and informed him that the Revolutionary Council was anxious to find a way out of the hostage dilemma. Qotbzadeh also contacted a lawyer acquaintance of his in Paris, Francois Cheron, and asked him to establish contact with U.S. officials. Cheron called Pierre Salinger the ABC bureau chief in Paris, who made arrangements for U.S. diplomat Warren Zimmerman to become involved once again.³⁰² Two other Iranians who claimed to have direct contact with the Revolutionary Council also contacted the American government. Islamic statesmen and several Islamic heads of state had a number of independent initiatives to arrange visits for the hostages' behalf. According to Gary Sick,

During the month of December, Washington maintained contact with more than twenty different individuals and organizations, each of which had some degree of proven access and credibility with those in and around the Revolutionary Council. There was no doubt whatever that many of those in the Revolutionary Council were anxious to end the crisis and were engaged actively in efforts to seek a solution.³⁰³

American efforts to apply political and economic pressure to Iran continued even after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December. U.S. Secretary-General Waldheim traveled to Tehran in January 1980 to see if he could

³⁰² See Pierre Salinger, America Held Hostage: The Secret Negotiations. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981).

³⁰³ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 240.

break the stalemate, but he was physically threatened and treated badly and he returned unsuccessfully. The Soviet Union vetoed a U.N. vote on sanctions and the U.S. decided to impose sanctions itself, but decided to wait until after the Iranian presidential elections. Bani-Sadr was later elected the Islamic Republic's first president.³⁰⁴

In January 1980, a new channel of communication to Tehran opened centering on an U.N. international hearing linked to the release of the hostages. French lawyer, Christian Bourget, and Argentinean businessman, Hector Villalon, claimed close associations with the Revolutionary Council and were willing to work out a release scenario for the hostages. The plan was supposedly agreed to by Khomeini, but it soon appeared as if Khomeini would hold the hostages until all the main institutions of an Islamic state were in place, namely the *Majlis*, the prime minister, and the cabinet. The militants also refused to allow the visiting commission to see the hostages, another part of the agreed to arrangement. When the Iranian government declared its intention to take custody of the Americans, a tense moment arose. The key question was whether Khomeini would side with the government or with the militants. When Khomeini supported the militants, the U.N. commission returned to New York, and tried to make changes to keep the plan alive. The plan's chances were slim, however, and the Shah's departure

³⁰⁴ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 398 - 400.

from Panama to Egypt, instigated by his fear of extradition, further reduced its chances. When the plan broke down once again, it had a profound impact on President Carter and he began to think of other options.³⁰⁵

On March 31, the U.S. administration got word from Qotbzadeh that Bani-Sadr would make a statement through the Swiss embassy about transferring the hostages away from the students. The administration anxiously waited for the desired message and when it came, Carter gave the pre-arranged response. Later, however, Bani-Sadr said the U.S. response was inadequate. Hope for a diplomatic solution seemed to slip away and Carter decided to complete previous tentative plans for a rescue mission, assemble the equipment, and prepare the team that might be sent to Iran.³⁰⁶

The U.S. president decided in April, "...to move ahead on additional economic sanctions, an embargo against the shipment of any goods to Iran except food and medicines, breaking off diplomatic relations and the expulsion of all Iranian diplomats, and a census of all financial claims against Iran."³⁰⁷ Secretary of State Vance began an intensive effort to persuade U.S. allies to join in these actions and stressed that American patience was wearing thin. Vance took a break for a long weekend on April 10, however, and in his absence the U.S.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 401-407.

³⁰⁶ Carter, Keeping Faith, p. 502-504.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 505.

president called a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC). The council decided to launch the rescue mission on April 24. When Vance returned, he objected to the decision for fear of the great risks it posed for the hostages and U.S. national interests. He pointed this out to the NSC, but no one supported his position. Vance later resigned over this decision, keeping his resignation secret until after the rescue operation.³⁰⁸

The rescue operation, code named Eagle Claw, failed in its first stage. Helicopters sent to a landing strip southeast of Tehran were rendered inoperable by a sand storm and one of the helicopters collided with a C-130 transport plane, setting both on fire and killing eight servicemen.³⁰⁹ The Iranians at first refused to believe that the American military had penetrated their borders. When the wreckage was found, however, the reaction was exultation mixed with relief.³¹⁰ Khomeini had warned the Iranians that the Americans intended to attack Iran and the failed rescue attempt added to Khomeini's credibility.³¹¹

After the fiasco, some of the hostages were moved to other locations in an effort to prevent another rescue attempt. The U.S. turned back to the diplomatic option under the new Secretary of State Edmund Muskie. By mid-May the U.S.

³⁰⁸ Vance, Hard Choices, p. 408-411.

³⁰⁹ Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 301.

³¹⁰ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 245.

³¹¹ Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 302.

had successfully convinced its European allies and Japan to join in an economic boycott of Iran. Within Iran, fierce squabbling was taking place between President Bani-Sadr and the Islamic fundamentalists that dominated the new parliament. The hostage issue was put aside until the assembly could agree on a prime minister.³¹²

Iraq, fearful of the spread of Shi'ite fundamentalism, attacked Iran on September 22 before the new prime minister, Mohammad Rajai, could put a hard-line cabinet together. The Iraqis wanted to regain land that they had ceded to Iran in the 1975 Algiers Accord. The Iranians were taken completely by surprise. In the interest of national defense, Bani-Sadr was allowed to operate a little more freely. Military setbacks along with a badly damaged economy reversed the fundamentalist attitudes about holding onto the American hostages. The radical clergy for the first time made an earnest effort to settle the hostage crisis in order to get needed U.S. spare parts for military equipment, especially aircraft.³¹³

In mid-October the Iranian prime minister met with several Algerian officials while in New York to present Iran's case against Iraq at the United Nations. Rajai was faced with the fact that the U.N. was much more interested in the hostage situation than in the war between Iran and Iraq. The Algerians, acting

³¹² Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 242.

³¹³ Ibid., p. 243.

in an intermediary role, tried to persuade Rajai that the termination of the hostage crisis would be in the best interest of Iran.³¹⁴

Fundamentalist clerics were convinced that President Carter would consent to anything in order to get the hostages back and, two days before the American presidential election, pronounced a list of four unrealistic conditions for the return of hostages. Iran's ultimatum, so close to election day, destroyed Carter's reelection chances. Islamic fundamentalists were stunned by the results, particularly when President-elect Reagan made it clear that he intended to take a hard line against the Iranians. A series of diplomatic notes were then exchanged between the U.S. and Iran through Algeria. Iran finally settled for the return of \$8 billion as the estimated sum of frozen assets and money that belonged to the Shah and agreed to pay off all its outstanding loans to U.S. banks. On January 20 1981, Inauguration Day for Ronald Reagan, the first transfer of Iranian assets went into the Bank of England and the American hostages boarded an Algerian jet for the trip back home.

Effects of the Embassy Take-over on Contacts

The militants that took over the American embassy were convinced that the facility was a "nest of spies" (*lanah-yi jasusi*). They were able to seize and

³¹⁴ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 315.

subsequently publicly release thousands of pages of classified documents and official correspondence. Even the shredded documents were pieced together and analyzed. Evidence that American diplomats and intelligence agents were in direct contact with postrevolutionary leaders seemed to confirm the militants' suspicions that the United States was interfering in Iran's internal affairs.

The militants began to use the captured American documents for internal political purposes shortly after the seizure of the embassy. According to Bill, "They [the militants] also used the documents to discredit and defeat such moderates as the members of the LM [Liberation Movement], whom they showed had been in constant contact with American officials."³¹⁵ The documents continued to be used in the long term to complete what many call Iran's Second Revolution. According to one observer, "For three years following the Embassy seizure, the carefully orchestrated publication of screened documents served as an extremely effective weapon in the extremists' drive to discredit the moderates and neutralize their political influence in the country."³¹⁶

The American desire for stability in Iran had led to increased contacts with the moderates prior to November 4, 1979. When the Shah's fall from power became inevitable, the U.S. abandoned its status quo support for the monarch and

³¹⁵ Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 298.

³¹⁶ Ioannides, America's Iran, p. 129.

switched allegiance to the familiar group of moderates. America's embrace of the moderates played a large part in weakening the moderates' power and added to the internal conflict in Iran. Although the United States desired stability, its actions only fueled the instability within Iran.

Conclusion

The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent fall of the Shah from power gave rise to a flurry of accusations and studies over the issue of whether or not the American intelligence community could have accurately predicted the result of the unrest if it had handled the situation differently. This debate started in November 1978 when President Carter sent letters to Secretary of State Vance, National Security adviser Brzezinski, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, and CIA chief Admiral Stansfield Turner stating that he was dissatisfied with the quality of the intelligence reporting in Iran, particularly since it had not predicted the Shah's growing problems. Since the CIA in Iran concentrated primarily on external intelligence and received most of its information from SAVAK, one of the key elements to emerge in this debate was and is the question of American diplomats maintaining contacts with elements of the opposition.³¹⁷

The alleged breakdown in American intelligence on Iran is often blamed on the failure of Americans to stay in touch with the opposition in Iran. According to James Bill, a noted American scholar on Iran, Americans in Iran had lived in an atmosphere of isolation throughout the 1970's which prevented them from understanding Iran. Bill noted,

³¹⁷ See Herz (ed.), Contacts With the Opposition; Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p. 379-424; and U.S. Congress, U.S. Policy Toward Iran, January 1979, p. 31-36, 57-62

American officials maintained contact with a tiny educated English-speaking elite that gravitated to the embassy and its officials. They had little contact with the lower middle class or lower class that constituted the bulk of Iranian society. Americans were not in serious touch with religious leaders, workers, or Persian-speaking professionals and students.³¹⁸

Bill credits many factors for continuing this system of limited Iranian contact, including the American weakness in language and area training, the embassy system of "passing along contacts", the power of internal Iranian employees over invitation and contact lists, and the presence of Pro-Pahlavi diplomats in key embassy positions.³¹⁹

While Professor Bill concentrates on the lack of American contact with the "common" man in Iran, American officials often were concerned with the opposition as characterized by the people who were "out" of power as opposed to those "in" power. According to Armin H. Meyer, ambassador to Iran from 1965-1969,

The point is that in the Third World the maintaining of contact with outs as well as ins can have a more positive value than being able to predict revolutions. It can serve usefully in the lessening of hostility between opposing political forces.³²⁰

As Richard Helms, the U.S. ambassador to Iran from 1973 to 1976, put it,

What *was* the opposition in Iran during the period in question? When the two political parties (Iran Novin and Mardom) were disbanded and a one-party system

³¹⁸ Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, p. 390.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 392.

³²⁰ Herz (ed.), Contacts With the Opposition, p. 25.

was set up (Rastakhiz), it was even more difficult to find any grouping which was in opposition to the government.³²¹

The fundamental difference in perception, illustrated between Bill and the former ambassadors to Iran, as to what constituted the "opposition" is key to the events that occurred leading up to January 1979. The American government in the 1970's was defining the "opposition" as organized political groups, while the true heart of support for the revolution that eventually overthrew the Shah resided in the masses of people in Iran. Richard Helms acknowledges that the U.S. embassy knew that there was unrest in Iran, but never credited this unrest with the power to overthrow the government. Helms admits,

...the Embassy had a good general idea of the dissatisfaction and disaffection of various elements of Iranian society, covering the spectrum from the rich who found fault with corruption and governmental management, through the middle classes squeezed by inflation, to the poor whose unhappiness increased with rising expectations. But no man (or woman), Persian or foreigner, came forward or even secretly indicated that these elements were strong enough to destroy the government and end the monarchy.³²²

The American tendency of identifying the opposition as political groups that were "out" of power was reinforced by the Shah's sensitivity to American relations with groups that wanted to remove him from power. In 1965, for example, the Iranian ambassador to the U.S. complained to the Undersecretary of State about American Ambassador Armin Meyer's behavior because he allegedly

³²¹ Ibid., p. 22.

³²² Ibid., p. 23.

had requested a meeting with a former prime minister. Meyer later tried to explain to the Shah that contacts with the opposition could be useful in defusing explosive forces within the country. The Shah was unimpressed with this explanation, however, and implied that Iran had a different culture, one in which opposition elements assessed amicable treatment as a sign of weakness.³²³ Since the U.S. recognized that it had good relations with the Shah and prized those relations, the U.S. gradually ceased efforts to contact opposition groups in order to avoid offending the Shah and upsetting the relationship.³²⁴

The trend of downsizing the embassy's contacts with opposition groups was reversed in 1977 as the political pace began to quicken. American ambassador William Sullivan became aware of the absence of embassy contact with political dissidents when he arrived in Iran in June 1977. When he first tried to correct this deficit he found that the political dissidents wanted nothing to do with the embassy because of America's association with the Shah and fear of reprisal by the Shah's government. In the spring of 1978, the Shah's liberalization program allowed the opposition to emerge more openly and Sullivan encouraged the embassy's political officers to cultivate the organizers of

³²³ Ibid., p. 26.

³²⁴ Sick, "Washington's Encounter", in Keddie (ed.), The Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic, p. 127-128.

the growing dissident activity.³²⁵ According to John Stempel, chief of the embassy's political section in 1978,

The embassy diversified its sources, and by September 1978 Farsi-speaking officers knew personally at least one leader of all the dissident groups except the communists behind the Tudeh Party and the most radical Fedayeen faction. By mid-1978 even the Shah understood the merit of this policy.³²⁶

Once again, the embassy relied heavily on contacts with leaders of organizations rather than on contacts with the participants in the activities.

The number of American contacts with the opposition, as defined by the American government, therefore, actually increased between 1977 and 1979. The type of contacts was also expanded, although the embassy still had some bare spots in coverage. The range of contacts did not encompass increased reporting on the various segments of the population, nor did it cover the religious arena adequately. Perhaps the embassy did not consider the role of religion as political, since there is a clear division between church and state in the United States. In Iran, however, religion has played a significant role in politics. According to Jahangir Amuzegar,

...politics and religion have never been totally apart in Iran...In all popular uprisings in the last hundred years of Iranian history, the ulama's (learned clergy) crucial role has been based not so much on their religious or spiritual leadership as it has on their advocacy of certain popular causes and aspirations.

³²⁵ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 145.

³²⁶ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 287.

The clergy reflected the public's longing for freedom, justice, and independence.³²⁷

The embassy tried to correct this deficit of contact with the religious sphere by arranging meetings between embassy officials and religious leaders. The opposition's leadership had been secured by the clerics by January of 1978, but their main demand, until September 1978, was only for a stricter observance of the 1906 Constitution. Initiating contact with the clerics was difficult, however, because they did not want to deal with a foreign power. By the time the embassy was finally able to arrange face-to-face encounters with Ayatollah Beheshti and Ayatollah Moussavi in January 1979, the contact occurred too late to assist the Shah, but it did help to enlighten the U.S. on the goals of the new revolutionary government.³²⁸

Most of the information on the opposition movement in early 1978 came from the leaders of the National Front, academics, and Iranian exiles. The leader of the National Front, Karim Sanjabi, was convinced that it was possible to work with Khomeini and the mullahs to achieve a democratic republic. These contacts soon convinced the senior staff of the embassy in Tehran and other members of the Washington bureaucracy that the U.S. could live with the "moderate"

³²⁷ Amuzegar, *Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution*, p. 25-26.

³²⁸ Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, p. 287.

religious component of the revolution and the religious extremists like Khomeini would take no active role in the post-Shah government.³²⁹

The contacts that were established with the opposition leaders in 1977 and 1978 were negatively affected by conflict within the American foreign policy-making community. American policy-makers were often concerned with problems that appeared much more important to them at the time, namely the SALT II negotiations, the Egyptian-Israeli peace talks at Camp David, and the normalization of relations with China. In addition, the State Department, the National Security Council, the CIA, and the Pentagon had differing views on human rights, arms sales, and regional security that frequently clashed, especially when applied to Iran.³³⁰

As the revolution progressed through 1978, Secretary of State Vance and NSC adviser Brzezinski differed bitterly on how to deal with it. Both were concerned about maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf, but they could not agree on the best way of doing so. The State Department hoped for accommodation with the Shah's opponents, perceived as the National Front, and Brzezinski felt that the U.S. had to maintain the status quo and support the Shah no matter what because of the threat of Soviet expansionism. Ambassador

³²⁹ Ledeen and Lewis, Debate, p. 128-129.

³³⁰ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 284.

Sullivan was viewed as siding with the State Department and wanting accommodation with the Shah's opponents, so Shah supporters in the U.S. soon went around him and created their own channels of communication.³³¹ Sullivan, perceiving a lack of direction from Washington, continued to encourage contacts with the known opposition.

Ultimately, the Carter administration was viewed as vacillating in its support for the Shah. On the one hand, the American president emphasized the importance of human rights in Iran and pushed the Shah for reform, but on the other hand, Carter continued to bolster the Shah by exchanging official visits.³³² According to Stempel,

Reduced to its essentials, President Carter decided to leave the crisis to the Shah to handle...Having decided that "the Shah knows best," the administration drifted into a "minimalist" strategy of as little direct involvement as possible.³³³

This position aggravated the strained relationship between the Department of State and the NSC. Vance's moves in contacting the opposition were never officially sanctioned by the White House³³⁴, and Brzezinski's messages to Iranian Ambassador Zahedi and other emissaries, intended to bolster the Shah, carried no

³³¹ Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 245.

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 240-243.

³³³ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 285.

³³⁴ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 132-134.

weight official weight.³³⁵ Unfortunately, Carter did not realize that these conflicts created uncertainty for the Shah.

The Shah continually turned to the U.S. to receive an indication of how he should act. His experience during the overthrow of Mosaddeq in 1953 led to the expectation that the U.S. would take action when it deemed necessary. The United States of 1979, however, was not in the same position as the U.S. government of 1953. The Carter administration was not prepared to tell the Shah what to do in his time of crisis. The Shah's attempts to gain direction from Washington were actually viewed negatively by the administration, "There was general consensus that the Shah seemed to be attempting to persuade the United States to take decisions and responsibility that he was unwilling to take for himself."³³⁶

While the Shah apparently desired U.S. direction, the U.S., not knowing of the Shah's illness and uncertainty, expected the Shah to act in his own best interest. The U.S. government realized the Shah needed some support in September 1978 after the crackdown on the Jaleh Square demonstrations. President Carter's phone call to the Shah after the massacre was meant to assure the Shah of continuing U.S. support despite the crackdown, but the Shah may

³³⁵ Zonis, Majestic Failure, p. 246.

³³⁶ Sick, All Fall Down, p. 96.

have interpreted the call as a sign that the U.S. supported the Shah's decision to avoid further loss of life. Soon afterwards, the Shah told Ambassador Sullivan that he had evaluated his options and had, "considered the use of the military option and rejected it."³³⁷

The Jaleh Square incident signaled an important turning point for American relations with the opposition. The opposition interpreted Carter's phone call after the incident as support for the crackdown, and this fueled the intense anti-Americanism that was present in the streets of Tehran.³³⁸ The opposition changed its demands and began to insist that the Shah had to go.³³⁹ As the opposition forces realized that they could resume their demonstrations without fear of mortal consequences they became bolder. The number and variety of the oppositionists multiplied.³⁴⁰

A second major error in U.S. contacts with the opposition occurred in January 1979 with the beginning of the Huyser mission. The communist threat played an important part in the American government's decision to send General Huyser to Iran to bolster the Iranian military in the event that the Shah left the country. According to Huyser, "The paramount factor must be the maintenance

³³⁷ Sullivan, Mission to Iran, p. 167.

³³⁸ Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 241 and Rubin, Paved With Good Intentions, p. 215.

³³⁹ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 117.

³⁴⁰ Rubin, All Fall Down, p. 168-169.

of stable US-Iranian relations, come what might; and the key to this was clearly the Iranian military relationship.³⁴¹ The opposition forces, however, viewed Huyser's mission as an obvious attempt to intervene in Iran's internal affairs in an effort to save the Pahlavi regime. The sending of a military representative instead of a civilian diplomat hurt the secular moderate opposition and contributed to the extremist climate at the time.³⁴²

Finally, the U.S. imposed its own limit on contact with the most powerful of the opposition leaders, Ayatollah Khomeini.³⁴³ Although Khomeini may not have been America's ideal choice for the leader of Iran, refusing to have contact with him put the American government in an extremely difficult position after the Shah left Iran and the hostages were taken. The last opportunity to speak with Khomeini from a position of power was lost when the Eliot mission scheduled for January 6, 1979 was canceled. When the Shah left Iran on January 16, Iranian relations with the U.S. became more of a detriment to political leaders than an asset.

Throughout the time leading to the revolution, American officials believed that they were in touch with the opposition.³⁴⁴ They were in contact with the

³⁴¹ Huyser, Mission to Tehran, p. 13.

³⁴² Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 256.

³⁴³ Stempel, Inside the Iranian Revolution, p. 288 and Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 281.

³⁴⁴ Bill, Eagle and the Lion, p. 439.

leaders of the major dissident groups which constituted the "opposition" to them. But Hans Morgenthau of the New School for Social Research has noted that, "Any observer of the diplomatic scene can testify to the almost instinctive American preference for politically safe contacts favorable to the social and political status quo."³⁴⁵ American officials had little contact with the masses of people that supported the revolution. Even if they had contact with the masses, American officials may not have been able to translate the people's dissatisfaction into a format that could be labeled "opposition". American officials instead determined that, to maintain the stability of Iran, they would support the status quo political system, rather than prepare for the complete overthrow of the secular government.

In the aftermath of the Shah's fall, the U.S. came to rely on the contacts it had with the moderate elements of the revolution. The moderates were disturbed, however, by the lack of concrete support the new government received from the U.S. The lack of concrete support weakened the moderates' position with respect to the extremists. The American government did not have any meaningful relationships with extremist religious leaders, and contacts with the extremists became increasingly important in 1979 as the internal struggle began between the moderates and the extremists to create a new Islamic society. The American's

³⁴⁵ Herz, Contacts With the Opposition, p. 4.

lack of contact with the emerging power in Iran became glaringly obvious with the takeover of the U.S. embassy. The U.S. simply did not have the contacts to survive the transition to an Islamic Republic.

After the hostage crisis ended, the problem of U.S.-Iranian relations remained. The formation of the Islamic Republic promised a "third way" of living that was "neither East nor West".³⁴⁶ Iranian domestic politics would not allow the country to be responsive to any American initiatives.³⁴⁷ The American government had failed to realize that, despite its previous relationship with Iran, the new government wanted to cut U.S. ties.

The U.S. is still searching for an effective policy of dealing with the Islamic Republic. Some scholars and businessmen have urged the renewal of unofficial contacts through institutions such as the U.S. and universities. The U.S. government, however, is officially unwilling to travel down that same route again. The relationship that had begun with such high hopes of friendship has now ended with each of the two countries considering the other an enemy.

³⁴⁶ Amuzegar, Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution, p. 35-36.

³⁴⁷ Rubin, All Fall Down, p. 335.

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