# Iran: An Overview

excerpt from "1979: Iran's Islamic Revolution" by Roger Cohen. The New York Times Upfront http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/index.asp?article=f091806 TP Iran

Tehran, Iran's capital, was in a state of revolt on Jan. 19, 1979. The Shah, Iran's ruler for nearly four decades, had fled the country. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shiite Muslim cleric who had worked for years to overthrow the Shah, was still in exile in Paris, but vowing to return and form an Islamic government. A million people took to the streets to cheer on Khomeini and denounce the Shah. [...]

Within two weeks, Khomeini had returned, replacing Iran's secular government with a theocracy ruled by Islamic religious leaders called mullahs. By year's end, young supporters of Khomeini-angered by America's long support of the Shah-had stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking dozens of hostages. "Death to the Shah!" gave way to "Death to America!" and U.S. officials knew they had a powerful new foe on their hands. [...]

#### The U.S. and the Shah

A quarter century earlier, in 1953, the C.I.A. had secretly helped topple Iran's prime minister and restore the Shah to his throne after he had gone into exile during a power struggle with members of Iran's elected parliament.

Why were American leaders so determined to keep the Shah in power? It was the height of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and Iran was seen as a potential target for the spread of Soviet Communism. American presidents, from Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s to Jimmy Carter in the 1970s, gave the Shah, who was sympathetic to the West, their support.

At home, however, the Shah could be a ruthless leader. Dissent was violently suppressed.

Although a forward-thinking ruler in many respects—he created a modern economy almost from scratch, and with it a growing middle class, and extended suffrage [voting rights] and other basic rights to women—the Shah was seen by many Iranians as a puppet of the West.

At the same time, many of the Shah's reforms, especially those involving women, infuriated conservative Muslims, led by Khomeini, a Shiite scholar.

In 1978, the simmering opposition to the Shah—not only from Khomeini's followers, but also from a middle class that sought greater political freedom—boiled over and brought millions of people onto the streets. The Shah and his wife fled in January 1979, ushering in a brief period of confusion before Khomeini assumed control as Supreme Leader over what became the first Islamic theocratic regime in the modern Middle East.

Khomeini and the mullahs—and a roving army of "spiritual enforcers" known as the Revolutionary Guards—ended up substituting one autocratic regime for another. In doing so, they dashed the hopes of millions of Iranians who thought the revolution would bring more freedom, not less.

Women lost the social gains they had made under the Shah, and were forced to wear head coverings and full-body cloaks called chadors. Opponents were imprisoned and tortured as ruthlessly as under the Shah. A parliamentary democracy existed mostly on paper, with true authority residing with the mullahs.

With the Shah in exile, Khomeini identified the U.S. as "the Great Satan" and an "enemy of Islam." The slogans, eerily familiar today, had deep roots in injured Iranian and Islamic pride. But they also served a practical purpose: Revolutions, Islamic and otherwise, seldom deliver on all their promises, and a clear external enemy can serve as a useful diversion from internal problems.

## The Hostage Crisis

Anger against the U.S. reached a fever pitch when the Shah, suffering from cancer, came to America for treatment in October 1979.

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On November 4, thousands of young Iranians, many of them college students, swarmed the U.S. embassy's 27-acre compound in Tehran, seizing the 66 Americans inside. [...]

The Shah died in July 1980, but the hostages, held for 444 days, were not released until the moment Reagan took the oath of office, on Jan. 20, 1981.

Khomeini's death in 1989 did nothing to ease the enmity between Iran and the U.S., at least on an official level. As Iranians particularly the Westward-looking middle class—grew more frustrated with the oppressiveness of the revolution, they began to view America more favorably. Today, Iran may be the only Mideast nation with a government—now led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (hah-mehn-a-EE) and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (ah-ma-DIH-nee-jahd)—that is more anti-American than its people.

### A Nuclear Iran?

Iran wants a nuclear weapon for several reasons. Above all, the nuclear program, which Iran claims is for civilian energy purposes, represents an assertion of power at a time when surging oil revenues have emboldened Iran's leaders.

Iran stirs up trouble for America wherever it can, most recently through Hezbollah's attacks on Israel. (Ahmadinejad has said that "Israel must be wiped off the map" and that the Holocaust never happened). In Iraq, Iran now has a direct channel to the Shiites who came to power after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Will relations between Iran and the U.S. ever improve? Iran remains a repressive regime built around an anti-Western ideology. Enough pro-Western forces exist in Iran for a reconciliation with the U.S. to be possible sometime in the future. But decades after Iran's Islamic Revolution, anger predominates on both sides and makes such a possibility improbable.

### excerpt from Times Topics: Iran

http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iran/index.html

Iran has had a theocratic Shiite regime since Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was ousted in the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

In recent years, the country's stature in the Middle East has grown. [...]

The country's nuclear power program is another source of international tension, leading the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions after Iran ignored its order to halt the enrichment of uranium. Internally, the hard-line clerics who control the government tightened their hold after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a conservative, succeeded Mohammad Khatami, a moderate, as president in 2005. But despite the spike in oil prices that peaked in the summer of 2008, the country stagnated economically, leading to mounting criticism of Mr. Ahmadinejad.

Mr. Ahmadinejad, who is up for re-election in June 2009, has sought to rally support by defiance of the West and the United States over Iran's nuclear program. [...]

Tensions between Washington and Tehran -- which go back many decades, from Washington's participation in the 1953 coup that installed the shah, to the seizure of American diplomats in 1979 after the shah fell to an Islamic revolution -- also rose in 2007 and 2008 over Iran's involvement in Iraq. American military officials accused elements of Iran's Revolutionary Guard of supplying Shiite militants in Iraq with powerful roadside bombs to use against American forces.

During the 2008 American presidential campaign, Barack Obama broke with rival candidates to say he favored unconditional talks with Iran, though he condemned its nuclear program. In his first interview after taking office, on Al Arabiya television, an Arabic-language channel based in Dubai, Mr. Obama said that "if countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us."

President Ahmadinejad, facing an election battle of his own in June 2009, responded by calling for an apology for decades of American misdeeds, but did not explicitly reject the overture. Less than a week later, on Feb. 3, Iran fired a satellite into orbit. Its first orbital launching coincided with celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution and raised concerns in the United States and other countries about Iran's potential use of long-range missiles to send warheads halfway around the globe.

Mr. Ahmadinejad took up Mr. Obama's invitation for direct talks between the United States and Iran on Feb. 10, 2009. The move signaled the start of a long-delayed war-or-peace drama that may help define the Obama administration's plans to remake America's approach to diplomacy, but could cause problems between the U.S. and Israel.