Forum: Historical United Nations Security Council

Issue: The 1979 Iranian Revolution

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Introduction

The 1979 Iranian Revolution marked a significant turning point in Iran's history, leading to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the establishment of an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The revolution was driven by widespread dissatisfaction with the Shah's authoritarian regime, which was characterized by political repression, economic inequalities, and extensive Western influence, particularly from the United States. The Shah's efforts to modernize and secularize Iran, while beneficial to some, alienated large segments of the population, including religious leaders and the lower and middle classes.

Throughout 1978, anti-Shah protests gained momentum, with demonstrators clashing with security forces in major cities. A crucial turning point came on September 8, 1978, known as Black Friday, when a massive protest in Tehran was violently suppressed, resulting in hundreds of deaths. This brutality further galvanized opposition to the Shah. By January 1979, facing mounting unrest and health issues, the Shah left Iran, leaving his government on the brink of collapse. On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to a hero's welcome from millions of Iranians, marking the definitive end of the Pahlavi monarchy.

With Khomeini's return, the revolution swiftly transitioned to establishing an Islamic Republic. A national referendum in April 1979 confirmed the populace's

overwhelming support for this new form of government. The new regime implemented Islamic laws and purged those associated with the Shah's rule. The revolution had far-reaching consequences, including the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis in November 1979, where 52 American diplomats were held captive for 444 days, and the Iran-Iraq War, which erupted in 1980. These events not only reshaped Iran's internal dynamics but also had significant implications for regional and global geopolitics, fundamentally altering Iran's relationship with the rest of the world.

Definition of Key Terms

1. Pahlavi Dynasty:

The ruling dynasty of Iran from 1925 to 1979, founded by Reza Shah Pahlavi and succeeded by his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The dynasty's reign ended with the 1979 revolution, leading to the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

2. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini:

A prominent Shia cleric and political leader who became the face of the Iranian Revolution. After the revolution, he became the Supreme Leader of Iran, establishing the country as an Islamic Republic governed by Sharia law and guided by the principles of velayat-e faqih (guardianship of the Islamic jurist).

3. SAVAK:

The acronym for Sazman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar, the Iranian secret police, domestic security, and intelligence service established by Mohammad Reza Shah with the help of the CIA. SAVAK was notorious for its brutal tactics in suppressing dissent and political opposition, contributing to widespread public discontent.

4. Black Friday (September 8, 1978):

A pivotal event during the revolution when the Shah's military forces opened fire on protesters in Tehran, resulting in hundreds of deaths. This massacre significantly escalated anti-Shah sentiment and unified various opposition factions against the regime.

5. Islamic Republic:

The form of government established in Iran following the 1979 revolution, is characterized by a theocratic framework where ultimate authority rests with the Supreme Leader, a senior Islamic cleric. The new constitution blends elements of democracy with Islamic law, emphasizing the role of religion in governance and law.

Background Information

The Pahlavi dynasty

The Pahlavi dynasty came to power in the 1920s when Reza Shah Pahlavi overthrew the Qajar dynasty. His reign and that of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, were characterized by efforts at modernization and secularization. These included significant investments in infrastructure, education, and women's rights. However, these reforms often came at the expense of political freedom and were accompanied by authoritarian rule, with the Shah's regime heavily relying on the secret police, SAVAK, to suppress dissent.

Socio-economic conditions

By the 1970s, Iran was experiencing rapid economic growth due to oil revenues. The Shah's White Revolution, a series of economic and social reforms initiated in the 1960s, aimed to transform Iran into a global power. Despite these efforts, the wealth generated from oil was unevenly distributed, leading to widespread economic disparities. The urban middle class and the poor, particularly in rural areas, felt marginalized. Rapid modernization also led to cultural dislocation, as traditional ways of life were disrupted.

Political discontent

Political repression under the Shah grew more intense over time. The monarchy allowed little room for political opposition. Nationalist and leftist groups, as well as religious organizations, found themselves increasingly alienated. The political repression was coupled with a strong alignment with Western powers, particularly the United States, which provided military and economic support to the Shah. This relationship fostered resentment among many Iranians who viewed the Shah as a puppet of foreign interests.

The emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emerged as a prominent opposition figure. Exiled in 1964 for his outspoken criticism of the Shah's regime and its Westernization policies, Khomeini continued to influence Iranian politics from abroad. His messages smuggled into Iran on cassette tapes, resonated with a wide swath of the population, blending religious conservatism with populist rhetoric. Khomeini's vision of an Islamic government appealed to those disillusioned by the secular and repressive nature of the Shah's rule.

Protests and escalation

Protests against the Shah began to escalate in 1977, initially led by secular groups but soon joined by religious factions. These protests were often brutally suppressed by the regime, which only fueled further unrest. The turning point came in January 1978, when the government published an article defaming Khomeini, sparking massive protests in the city of Qom. The government's violent response led to a cycle of mourning and protests that spread across the country.

Revolutionary momentum

By late 1978, Iran was in a state of turmoil. Strikes, particularly in the oil sector, crippled the economy, and massive demonstrations paralyzed cities. The Shah's attempts at conciliation, including promises of political liberalization and the appointment of a military government, failed to quell the unrest. His departure from Iran in January 1979 marked the collapse of the monarchy's authority.

Khomeini's return

Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran on February 1, 1979, to a tumultuous welcome by millions of Iranians. His return marked the final phase of the revolution. The Shah's remaining loyalists were quickly overpowered by revolutionary forces, and on February 11, 1979, the Pahlavi regime officially collapsed.

Consolidation of power

In the aftermath, Khomeini and his supporters moved swiftly to consolidate power. A referendum in March 1979 resulted in an overwhelming vote in favor of establishing an Islamic Republic. Over the next few months, secular and leftist factions within the revolutionary coalition were sidelined or eliminated. Khomeini established the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to safeguard the revolution and enforce the new regime's policies.

Creation of a theocratic state

The new government drafted a constitution that enshrined the principles of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which gave Khomeini supreme authority. This theocratic framework combined elements of democracy with Islamic jurisprudence, fundamentally altering the governance of Iran. The U.S. embassy hostage crisis later that year further cemented the new regime's anti-Western stance and solidified Khomeini's position.

Domestic changes

The revolution brought about significant social changes. Women's rights were rolled back, with compulsory veiling and restrictions on personal freedoms. The legal system was overhauled to reflect Islamic law. Economically, the state took control of major industries, leading to a more centralized economy.

International repercussions

Internationally, the revolution inspired Islamic movements across the Middle East and altered geopolitical dynamics. Iran's relations with the West, particularly the United States, deteriorated sharply, leading to decades of hostility. The revolution also exacerbated sectarian tensions, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities, influencing conflicts in the region.

Continuing influence

The 1979 Iranian Revolution remains a defining moment in modern Middle Eastern history. It transformed Iran into a republic governed by Islamic principles and reshaped its national identity. The revolution's ideals and outcomes continue to influence Iranian politics and society, as well as the broader region's geopolitical landscape.

In summary, the Iranian Revolution was the result of a complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors. It marked the overthrow of a secular, authoritarian regime and the establishment of a theocratic state that profoundly changed Iran and had lasting global implications.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

1. The National Front (Jebhe Melli)

The National Front was a secular nationalist political party originally founded in the 1940s by Mohammad Mossadegh, who became a symbol of resistance against foreign influence after his nationalization of the Iranian oil industry and subsequent overthrow in the 1953 coup orchestrated by the CIA and MI6. During the revolution, the National Front aimed to restore democratic governance and reduce foreign influence in Iran. They participated in protests and opposed the Shah's autocratic rule, advocating for a secular republic. However, their influence waned as the revolution progressed, overshadowed by the rise of more radical and religious factions.

2. The Tudeh Party

The Tudeh Party was Iran's communist party, established in 1941. It had a strong base among intellectuals, workers, and members of the military. The party faced significant repression under the Shah's regime but maintained an underground presence. The Tudeh Party supported the revolution with hopes of establishing a socialist government. They participated in organizing strikes and protests, particularly within the industrial workforce. Despite their initial cooperation with Khomeini's followers, the Tudeh Party was soon marginalized and eventually banned after the revolution, as the new regime sought to eliminate communist influence.

3. The People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK)

The MEK was founded in 1965 as an Islamic socialist organization. It combined Marxist and Islamic ideologies, advocating for the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of a government that blended socialism with Islam. The MEK actively participated in armed struggle against the Shah's regime and played a significant role in mobilizing the urban poor and students. They contributed to the widespread protests and revolutionary activities. However, after the revolution, their relationship with Khomeini's faction deteriorated, leading to violent clashes and their eventual suppression by the new Islamic Republic.

4. Freedom Movement of Iran (Nehzat-e Azadi)

The Freedom Movement of Iran was a moderate Islamic liberal-democratic party founded in 1961 by Mehdi Bazargan, a prominent political figure and advocate for constitutional democracy within an Islamic framework. The Freedom Movement supported the revolution and sought to establish a democratic government rooted in Islamic principles. Bazargan became the head of the interim government after the revolution. However, their moderate stance and emphasis on democratic principles

led to conflicts with Khomeini's vision of an Islamic theocracy, resulting in their marginalization and Bazargan's resignation in November 1979.

5. The Fedayeen-e Khalq

The Fedayeen-e Khalq was a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla organization formed in the early 1970s. They aimed to overthrow the Shah through armed struggle and establish a Marxist state in Iran. The Fedayeen-e Khalq engaged in armed resistance against the Shah's regime, including attacks on government installations and officials. They played a significant role in the revolutionary upheaval, advocating for a Marxist agenda. After the revolution, like other leftist groups, they were suppressed by Khomeini's regime, which sought to eliminate leftist influences.

6. The Clergy and Religious Groups

The clergy and religious groups, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, were the most influential force in the revolution. They represented a broad spectrum of traditionalist and Islamist views. The clergy, under Khomeini's leadership, became the unifying force of the revolution. Khomeini's calls for the overthrow of the Shah resonated deeply with the Iranian populace, particularly the rural poor and the urban lower middle class. Religious groups organized mass protests, strikes, and disseminated Khomeini's messages. After the revolution, they quickly consolidated power, establishing an Islamic Republic with Khomeini as its supreme leader.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
7 January 1978	An article published in the newspaper Ettela'at insulting Ayatollah Khomeini sparked protests in the holy city of Qom. The government's violent response resulted in several deaths, igniting widespread anger and further protests across the country.
19 August 1978	The Cinema Rex in Abadan was set on fire, resulting in the death of around 400 people. The incident, blamed on SAVAK (the Shah's secret police) by the opposition, intensified anti-Shah sentiment and fueled conspiracy theories about government involvement.
8 September 1978	The Shah's regime declared martial law and ordered troops to fire on protesters in Tehran's Jaleh Square, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of demonstrators. This event marked a turning point, eroding any remaining support for the Shah and escalating the revolution.

24 October 1978	Workers, particularly in the oil industry, began a general strike that paralyzed the economy. The strike demonstrated the widespread discontent with the Shah's regime and significantly weakened its ability to govern.
10-11 December 1978	During the holy month of Muharram, millions of Iranians took to the streets in nationwide protests against the Shah. The massive scale of these demonstrations highlighted the regime's inability to suppress the opposition and the growing influence of Khomeini.
16 January 1979	Facing intense pressure and unrest, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left Iran, ostensibly for a vacation but in reality never to return. His departure marked the collapse of the monarchy's authority.
1 February 1979	Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile in France to a hero's welcome by millions of supporters. His return galvanized the revolutionaries

	and set the stage for the final overthrow of the Shah's regime.
11 February 1979	Revolutionary forces overwhelmed the remnants of the Shah's military and took control of key installations in Tehran. The Pahlavi regime officially collapsed, and Iran was declared an Islamic Republic shortly thereafter.

Relevant UN Resolutions and Other Documents

- UN Security Council Resolution 598 (1987)

    This resolution called for a ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq War, which began in 1980 partly due to the regional instability following the Iranian Revolution. The resolution aimed to end hostilities and establish peace through direct negotiations and mediation.

- UN General Assembly Resolutions on Human Rights in Iran

    Various resolutions have been passed by the UN General Assembly expressing concern over human rights violations in Iran post-revolution. These resolutions typically urge Iran to improve its human rights record, addressing issues such as political repression, treatment of dissidents, and freedoms of expression and assembly.

- The Algiers Accords (1981)

    An agreement mediated by Algeria between the United States and Iran to resolve the Iran hostage crisis, where 52 American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days. The accords led to the hostages' release on January 20, 1981, and included commitments on both sides regarding the non-interference in each other's internal affairs and the unfreezing of Iranian assets.

- Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

    While Iran had signed the NPT in 1968, the post-revolutionary government's nuclear activities have been the subject of intense international scrutiny and numerous negotiations. The NPT aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and promote peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Iran's compliance with the treaty has been a point of contention, leading to various diplomatic and economic measures against it.

- Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (2015)

    An agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) concerning Iran's nuclear program. It aimed to ensure Iran's nuclear program would be exclusively peaceful in exchange for lifting economic sanctions. This agreement was a critical development in addressing the long-standing international concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions post-revolution.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

1. Diplomatic Negotiations and Hostage Crisis Resolution (1979-1981)

-The Algiers Accords (1981): The Algiers Accords were brokered by Algeria to resolve the Iran hostage crisis, where 52 American diplomats and citizens were held hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran for 444 days. The agreement led to the release of the hostages and included commitments from both the United States and Iran regarding non-interference in each other's internal affairs and the unfreezing of Iranian assets. This resolution was a crucial early attempt to stabilize relations between the two nations following the revolution.

2. Iran-Iraq War Resolution (1980-1988)

-UN Security Council Resolution 598 (1987): During the protracted Iran-Iraq War, the United Nations stepped in to mediate peace. Resolution 598 called for an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of forces to internationally recognized boundaries, and the establishment of a UN observer force. The resolution was instrumental in eventually bringing the war to an end in 1988, although compliance and peace took further negotiations and on-ground diplomacy.

3. Human Rights and Political Repression

-UN General Assembly Resolutions: Since the revolution, numerous resolutions have been passed by the UN General Assembly addressing Iran's human rights record. These resolutions have called on Iran to improve its human rights practices, including the treatment of political dissidents, freedom of expression, and judicial processes. While these resolutions have highlighted global concerns, they have often been met with resistance from Iran, which views them as interference in its internal affairs.

4. Nuclear Program and Sanctions

-UN Security Council Resolutions (2006-2010): A series of resolutions were passed imposing sanctions on Iran due to concerns over its nuclear program. These included resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, and 1929, which aimed to halt uranium enrichment and ensure Iran's compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The sanctions targeted Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, financial sectors, and entities involved in proliferation-sensitive activities.

-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (2015): The JCPOA was a landmark agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany) that sought to ensure Iran's nuclear program would remain exclusively peaceful. In exchange for limiting its nuclear activities and allowing extensive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran received relief from international sanctions. This agreement was seen as a major diplomatic breakthrough, though its effectiveness and longevity have been challenged by political changes, notably the U.S. withdrawal from the deal in 2018 under President Donald Trump and subsequent efforts to renegotiate under President Joe Biden.

5. Economic and Diplomatic Isolation

-Sanctions Regimes: Various countries, particularly the United States and European Union, have imposed economic and trade sanctions on Iran. These measures have aimed to pressure Iran into complying with international norms regarding human rights and its nuclear program. Sanctions have included restrictions on banking, oil exports, and other key economic sectors.

6. Regional Stability Initiatives

      -Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Efforts: Neighboring Gulf states have engaged in diplomatic efforts to manage the regional instability caused by Iran's revolutionary activities and its support for proxy groups in the Middle East. The GCC has often acted as a mediator in regional conflicts and sought to counterbalance Iran's influence through diplomatic and, at times, military means.

7. Internal Reform Movements

      -Green Movement (2009): Domestically, the Iranian Green Movement arose from the controversial 2009 presidential election, which saw mass protests and calls for political reform and greater freedoms. While the movement was suppressed by the Iranian government, it highlighted significant internal dissent and the desire for change among a substantial portion of the Iranian population.

Possible Solutions

1. Revitalizing Diplomatic Engagement

      -Renewed JCPOA Negotiations:
          Re-engaging Iran and the P5+1 to renegotiate and potentially revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) can help ensure Iran's nuclear program remains peaceful while providing economic relief through the lifting of sanctions.

      -Establishing a Regional Security Framework:
          Creating a regional dialogue platform involving Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Iran, Iraq, and other stakeholders to address security concerns and foster cooperation.

2. Economic and Humanitarian Measures

-Gradual Sanctions Relief with Compliance Benchmarks:
Implementing a phased approach to lifting economic sanctions in exchange for verifiable steps by Iran to comply with international agreements on its nuclear program and human rights.

-Economic Development and Cooperation Initiatives:
Promoting economic cooperation and investment in Iran through international partnerships focused on infrastructure, healthcare, and education.

3. Human Rights and Political Reforms

-International Human Rights Dialogue:
Establishing a continuous dialogue between Iran and international human rights organizations to address human rights violations and promote reforms.

-Support for Civil Society and Political Pluralism:
Encouraging and supporting the development of civil society organizations, free press, and political pluralism within Iran through international cooperation and non-governmental organizations.

4. Conflict Resolution and Mediation

-Mediation in Regional Conflicts:

Engaging neutral parties or international organizations to mediate conflicts where Iran has significant involvement, such as in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.

-Confidence-Building Measures:

Implementing confidence-building measures such as military de-escalation agreements, transparency in military activities, and joint humanitarian projects.

5. Strengthening International Legal Frameworks

-Enhancing Compliance with International Law:

Working with international bodies to ensure Iran's adherence to international legal frameworks regarding nuclear non-proliferation, human rights, and terrorism.

-Capacity Building for Legal and Institutional Reforms:

Providing technical assistance and support for legal and institutional reforms in Iran to enhance governance and rule of law.

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