



AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI, shown recently on a mural in Tehran, turned Iran into a theocracy.

1979 IRANIAN REVOLUTION

IRAN WAS ONCE ONE OF AMERICA'S CLOSEST ALLIES; NOW IT'S ONE OF PRESIDENT OBAMA'S BIGGEST HEADACHES

BY PETER EDIDIN

During his first television interview from the White House—given not to an American network but to Al-Arabiya, an Arabic-language channel broadcast throughout the Arab world—President Obama addressed one of his biggest foreign-policy challenges: Iran’s suspected nuclear-weapons program and its support of militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

“If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist,” the President said, “they will find an extended hand from us.”

Obama is the sixth American President to face off against Iran’s hard-line Islamic regime; his predecessor, George W. Bush, famously declared Iran part of an “Axis of Evil” (along with North Korea and Iraq), before the start of the war with Iraq in 2003.

Ironically, 30 years ago Iran was one of America’s staunchest Middle East allies, until a revolution in January 1979 toppled Iran’s pro-Western monarchy and brought to power an anti-

American Shiite Muslim cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Less than a year later, 66 Americans were taken hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. It was the first time many Americans had ever heard of *ayatollahs* or *mullahs*, but 30 years later, the 444-day hostage crisis is now seen as the opening chapter in the three-decade battle against radical Islam.

MODERNIZATION, IF NOT DEMOCRACY

The revolution and its implications caught most Americans completely off guard.

The Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, had ruled Iran since inheriting the throne from his father in 1941. During the Cold War between the U.S. and its allies and the Soviet Union, the Shah sided with the West and served as a bulwark against Soviet power and the spread of Communism in the region.

Washington also viewed the Shah as a leader who could show the authoritarian Arab governments of the Middle East the way to modernization, if not democracy. Beginning in the

1960s, he pushed through major reforms that gave more rights to women, improved education and health care, and gave peasants land-ownership rights.

Using Iran’s vast oil wealth and American and Western aid, the Shah brought an ancient but backward nation into the 20th century, creating one of the region’s most advanced economies. Relations with the U.S. were so strong that President Jimmy Carter traveled to Tehran for a New Year’s Eve dinner in 1977, toasting the Shah and his nation as “an island of stability” in the Middle East.

But beneath the surface Iran was smoldering. In a nation

that is 90 percent Shiite Muslim (the second-largest Islamic denomination, after Sunni) the conservative clergy were furious at the nation’s liberalization. Landowners decried the Shah’s efforts to redistribute land to sharecropping farmers, upending centuries of feudalism. And in a pattern that has preceded other revolutions including those in France and Russia, even the urban middle class

the Shah had helped create with his economic reforms began to demand a greater share of power and more political freedoms as their fortunes improved.

To be sure, the Shah had brought some of the ill will on himself. Iran’s economic boom had bred rampant corruption, even within the royal family. And the Shah, with American assistance, had created SAVAK, his secret police, which imprisoned, tortured, or killed thousands of the Shah’s opponents.

America’s role in Iran’s Westernization had also spurred anger. In the years before the revolution, Americans “were everywhere in Iran,” writes Robin Wright, the author of *The Last Great Revolution*. They were “advising its government officials, training its military, building its oil rigs, teaching in its schools, and peddling [American] cars, language, fashions, industrial products, and culture.”

To many Iranians, this was welcome progress, but to many



THE SHAH,
with President
Carter, before
the revolution

TIMELINE: IRAN & THE U.S.



THE SHAH



AYATOLLAH
KHOMEINI

1941

1953

1979

AMERICAN ALLY

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi succeeds his father as Shah of Iran, and supports the Allies during World War II in the fight against Germany. During the Cold War, the Shah lines up with the West against the Soviet Union.

IRAN & THE C.I.A.

After Iran's Prime Minister nationalizes the oil industry, the Shah tries to remove him, but fails and briefly flees the country. With help from the C.I.A., the Shah gets his throne back, and the Prime Minister is removed and arrested.

REVOLUTION

The Shah is overthrown in January. A fundamentalist Islamic regime led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini takes power and turns Iran into a theocracy.

others the American influence came to represent a threat to their ancient Persian culture. (Although Iran is in the Middle East, its people are not Arab.)

That helped the Shiite clergy mobilize opposition to the Shah, spearheaded by Ayatollah Khomeini, who was living in exile in Iraq and later in France. In January 1978, with Khomeini's encouragement, students in Qom, a holy city for Shiites, began street protests against the monarchy. After police opened fire, killing 20, the protests spread throughout Iran and swelled to hundreds of thousands, then millions of people.

At first, Western leaders thought the Shah's grip on power was too strong to be broken. But by September, he was forced to impose martial law and ban protests, which continued anyway, along with widespread strikes and violent confrontations with security forces. By December, 2 million Iranians were on the streets of Tehran, demanding that the Shah abdicate.

'GOD'S GOVERNMENT'

On Jan. 16, 1979, a teary Shah—with a box of Iranian soil in his pocket—flew to Rome and began his troubled exile. On January 31, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from Paris to Tehran, where he was greeted by a crowd of 3 million people.

With the monarchy now history, moderate opposition leaders tried to turn Iran into a modern parliamentary democracy, but within a month Khomeini had seized power and declared the establishment of "God's government": an Islamic theocracy, ruled by clerics acting in accordance with *Sharia*, or Islamic law. The new constitution provided for an elected legislature and President, but the real power lay with a small and secretive group of clerics (or mullahs) called the Council of Guardians, headed by Khomeini, the Supreme Leader.

Khomeini loathed the United States, which he called "the Great Satan" and "an enemy of Islam." Iranian anger at the U.S. reached a fever pitch that October when President

Carter allowed the Shah, who was suffering from cancer, to come to the U.S. for treatment.

On November 4, thousands of young Iranians, many of them college students, swarmed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, seizing 66 Americans inside. (Thirteen were released after a couple of weeks and one was released months later due to illness.)

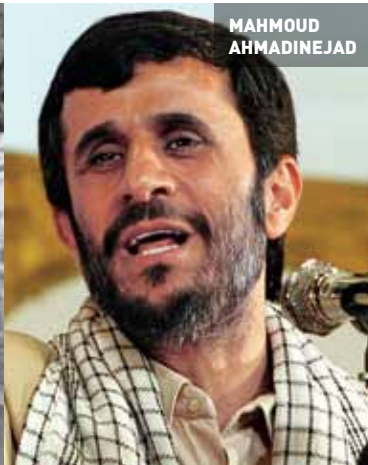
"They seemed to be kids about 20 years old . . . kids from small towns with rather strict upbringings," one hostage, John Limbert, recalled. "Many of them had never seen an American before."

In the U.S., vigils were held and yellow ribbons displayed to signify concern for the hostages. Iran demanded the return of the Shah for their release, but Washington refused.

The hostage crisis riveted the nation for more than a year. Americans were unaccustomed to, and embarrassed by, feeling so powerless. As the nation's frustration grew, President Carter ordered a rescue operation in April 1980, but it failed when a U.S. helicopter and military plane collided



AMERICAN HOSTAGES AT THE U.S. EMBASSY IN TEHRAN



MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD



PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

1979

HOSTAGE CRISIS

In November, 66 Americans are taken hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran; the hostages are held for 444 days. President Jimmy Carter's response contributes to his loss to Ronald Reagan in 1980.

1985

IRAN-CONTRA

The convoluted "Iran Contra affair" mars President Ronald Reagan's second term: The U.S. secretly sells arms to Iran in exchange for the release of Americans being held by Iranian-backed militants in Lebanon, with the money going to anti-Communist "Contra" rebels in Nicaragua.

2002

'AXIS OF EVIL'

President George W. Bush includes Iran in his "Axis of Evil," along with North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

2005

AHMADINEJAD

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad becomes Iran's President. He declares that Israel, one of America's closest allies in the Middle East, should be "wiped off the map."

2008

GOING NUCLEAR

With the U.S. and its allies warning Iran to halt its suspected nuclear weapons program, the International Atomic Energy Agency concludes that Iran has produced enough nuclear material to make an atom bomb.

2009

OBAMA'S OFFER

President Obama offers an "extended hand" from the U.S. if Iran is willing to "unclench its fist."

in the Iranian desert, killing eight American servicemen.

At home, the hostage crisis, along with the struggling U.S. economy, helped Ronald Reagan defeat Carter's bid for a second term in the 1980 presidential election.

The Shah, who later sought refuge in Egypt, 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.

RADICAL ISLAM VS. THE WEST

The hostage crisis, Khomeini would later say, helped the revolution to solidify its hold on Iran. But if the Islamic Revolution succeeded, it failed the many Iranians who hoped it might lead to democracy.

The Shah's efforts at Westernization were reversed. Women were ordered to wear head coverings and full body cloaks called *chadors*; gangs of religious zealots roamed the streets enforcing the mullahs' moral edicts; political opponents were imprisoned and tortured as ruthlessly as under the Shah.

Khomeini's death in 1989 did nothing to ease the enmity between Iran and the U.S. Today, America accuses Iran, now led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, of developing nuclear weapons in secret and supporting Islamic militant groups that the U.S. considers terrorist organizations, like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza (see "And in the Rest of the World," p. 10).

Beyond that, the revolution and hostage crisis helped set the stage for a radical Islamic movement that turned to terrorism in its battle against the West, leading to the 9/11 attacks against America.

"The capture of the U.S. embassy in Tehran was a glimpse of something new and bewildering," according to Mark Bowen, author of *Guests of the Ayatollah*. "It was the first battle in America's war against militant Islam, a conflict that would eventually engage much of the world. Iran's revolution wasn't just a localized power struggle; it had tapped a subterranean ocean of Islamist outrage." ●

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