

Dossier on Iran

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April 13, 2020

Iran is a country with a long and proud heritage as the home of the Persian Empire, but by the early 1900s when oil was discovered, it was more or less a backwater, a pawn of Britain and Russia. Those two countries fought each other over oil rights, and they used local political rivalries to keep Iran divided and weak. However, after World War I, an amazing man of energy rose from obscurity to become one of the greatest leaders that Persia had ever had – Reza Khan, who became Reza Shah Pahlavi the Great. Like Peter the Great in Russia and Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, Reza prodded into action his often backward and lazy country that had long been dominated by reactionary and semiliterate mullahs who studied the Quran and little else, but who nevertheless had long dictated policy for all aspects of government and society. Reza Shah had no patience for this; he installed a meritocracy, replaced the Islamic Sharia-based judicial system, improved the military, nationalized the oil fields, modernized economic and financial institutions, reformed education, and pioneered the emancipation of women. He even changed the country's name from "Persia" to "Iran" in 1935 as a symbol of its break with the past and his love of Germany and their ideas of racial supremacy (Iran means "Aryan" in Farsi). Reza Shah also lived very lavishly like an oriental potentate of the past and dealt harshly with dissent, setting a pattern for future rulers. These actions generated fierce opposition from the entrenched Islamic mullahs whom he had sidelined, but it was many years before they could stage a comeback.

Iran's two major foreign adversaries were Britain and Russia, and the Shah tried to distance himself from them by making Germany Iran's largest foreign trading partner. In the 1920s and 30s both adversaries became distracted with other issues, but unfortunately for the Shah, the growing power of Germany caused Britain and Russia to form an alliance. The allies were especially concerned about German access to Iranian oil, which was a necessary resource for the German *Wehrmacht*; therefore, they invaded Iran and deposed the Shah in 1941. For the sake of stability, however, they allowed his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, to rule in his place. Because the son was weaker and more vacillating than his father, other political groups, sensing vulnerability, moved to attack him. The Russian-backed communists tried unsuccessfully to assassinate him in 1949 which led him to form the Savak, an internal security and intelligence force similar to the KGB in Russia, that ruthlessly suppressed dissent. He also sought foreign support from the United States.

These actions further alienated the opposition, and in 1953 for a short time his prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, seized power. The Shah immediately fled to America, but with the aid of the British MI5 and the American CIA, Mossadeq was overthrown and Mohammad Reza Shah was put back on the throne. But the Shah's vulnerability, along

with his liberal policies of emancipating women; allowing alcohol, gambling and pre-marital sex; and restricting the influence of Islamic clerics, eventually led to the Iranian revolution of 1979 in which he was deposed and the mullahs finally regained power. The leader of the Islamic opposition was the Ayatollah Khomeini who had long been a thorn in the Shah's side. The Shah had exiled him years before, but immediately prior to the revolution the Ayatollah moved to Paris where he was supported by the French government in the hopes of establishing a French presence in Iran and suppressing American and British influence.

Khomeini immediately reinstated Islamic Sharia law, took away most of the rights that had been granted to women, enforced strict dress codes, created a morality police, and continued the Shah's policy of harsh repression toward dissenters. In many ways the country returned to its pre-World War I ways of rule by mullahs, and this, in turn, generated much popular resentment from those who had been supporters of the Shahs. Khomeini died in 1989, and since then the country had been vacillating between secular and religious rule.

In 1997 Mohammad Khatami was elected president. He was a moderate who attempted to reach out to other countries and roll back some of the policies of Khomeini. But this proved hard to achieve because prior to his death, Khomeini had modified the Iranian constitution to create the offices of a Supreme Leader and a Guardian Council. These positions are by law reserved for Islamic clerics, who were thus assigned many of the powers that in other countries would normally be vested in elected officials. Therefore, Khatami clashed repeatedly with the Iranian clerics, and was not able to achieve many of the reforms he sought.

In 2005, after most of the other candidates for office were disqualified by the Guardian Council, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an Islamic militant and the former mayor of Tehran, was elected president. Ahmadinejad was the hand-picked candidate of the Iran's Supreme Leader and has made many hostile statements about the immanent destruction of Israel. He has also who has pushed nuclear development and has cultivated a close relationship with the increasingly totalitarian regime of Vladimir Putin in Russia.