

Aim #18: What issues have shaped the Modern Middle East?



Mini Lecture

- There are many complex issues which have shaped the Modern Middle East. These include ethnic/religious tensions & conflicts, fundamentalism in reaction to secularism/modernity, and valuable resources.
- Resources and religion have led to conflicts in the Middle East. The region has the world's largest oil and gas reserves. As a result, it has strategic importance. In 1960, mostly Middle Eastern countries formed an intergovernmental organization, **Organization Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)**, to control most of the world's oil supply. OPEC yields a lot of power which can have major impacts on the world's economy.
- Saudi Arabia** has the world's largest oil reserves and its location of Islam's holy land. **Fundamentalists** have criticized the kingdom's close ties to Western nations, and some opponents have adopted violent tactics that threaten to disrupt the Saudi oil industry.
- Some Middle Eastern countries have adopted **secular**, or non-religious, government and laws. However, many Muslim leaders argue that a renewed commitment to Islamic doctrine is needed. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, women are required to wear **hijab**.
- In 1921, **Reza Khan** declared himself the **Shah** (hereditary ruler) of Iran. He modernized the country and tried to curb the power of the **mullahs** (religious experts). In WWII his son, **Mohammad Reza Pahlavi**, took over. Iranian nationalists viewed the new Shah as a puppet of Western powers (especially U.S.).
- In 1951, under direction from the nationalist prime minister, **Mohammad Mosaddegh**, the Iranian parliament voted to **nationalize** the oil industry (which was controlled by a British-owned company). Reza was forced into exile when it was discovered that he had asked the CIA to replace Mosaddegh in a failed coup.
- In 1953, the U.S. orchestrated the removal of Mosaddegh and put Reza in power. He instituted some progressive reforms such as giving women the right to vote and modernizing the educational system. However, he ran an authoritarian & oppressive regime, making extensive use of secret police. By 1979, he had lost the support of both religious conservatives and advocates for greater democracy.
- In 1979, a revolution (**Iranian Revolution**) toppled the Shah, rejecting his secular worldview. The new government was a **theocracy**, where religion is the supreme authority, with **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini** as the **Supreme Leader**.
- The new government established a **Guardian Council**, a body of civil & religious experts, responsible to interpret the Constitution & ensure all laws complied with **Sharia** (Islamic law). The clergy had the right to approve or disapprove of anyone running for office. Iran's government became strongly anti-Western, particularly anti-U.S. & anti-Israel.
- Iran held 66 American hostages from November 4th, 1979 until January 20, 1981. The U.S. retaliated by placing trade embargoes and **sanctions** on Iran. The conflict between the U.S. & Iran continues until today. In 2015, the U.S. and its allies signed a deal (**Iranian Nuclear Deal**) to restrict Iran's development of nuclear weapons. However, President Trump withdrew from that agreement in 2018.
- Egypt**, the most populous Arab country, is important because it controls the **Suez Canal**. Egypt was the Arab leader in the fight against Israel, but has made peace since.
- Conflicts have plagued **Iraq** for centuries, Iraq's Sunni Arab minority had dominated the country. Iraq's Kurdish minority and Shiite Arab majority were excluded from power.
- In 1979, **Saddam Hussein** took power as a dictator. He fought a prolonged war against neighboring Iran in the 1980s. In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and in response, the U.S. led a coalition that liberated Kuwait and crushed Iraqi forces (the Gulf War).
- Saddam Hussein remained in power and used terror to impose his will. The U.N. worked to keep Saddam Hussein from building biological, nuclear, or chemical weapons called weapons of mass destruction.
- In 2003, the U.S. led a coalition that invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein. In 2005, national elections were held for the first time. However, insurgents and terrorist groups continued to fight against the U.S. occupation and the new Shiite-led government.
- Increasingly, the Middle East has become a training ground and source for terrorism- the use of violence, especially against civilians, to achieve political gains.
- Islamic fundamentalism motivates many of these groups. One important group is **al Qaeda**, whose leader was **Osama bin Laden**. Al Qaeda terrorists were responsible for the September 11 attacks on the U.S.
- In response to 9-11, the U.S. made fighting terrorism a priority. Al Qaeda lived in **Afghanistan** under the **Taliban** government. When the Taliban refused to surrender Al Qaeda terrorists, the U.S. invaded and overthrew the Taliban and have been there since.

Review Questions:

- What are the causes and effects of the Iranian Revolution?
- How does oil, and Islamic Fundamentalism shape the Middle East?

Enduring Issue: Nationalism; Revolution; Modernization

Iranian Revolution (1979)

Causes

- Corrupt Shah
- Anti-Western feelings
- Rise in Islamic Fundamentalism

Effects

- Islamic Fundamentalist Gov't led by Ayatollah Khomeini (Islamic Fundamentalism → movement that opposes Westernization and supports traditional Islam)
- U.S. Hostage Crisis
- Anti-Iraq, Anti-West, Anti-Secular (Secular = non-religious)

What effects did the Iranian Revolution in 1979 have on Iran?

Directions: Read the following excerpts from “1979: Iran’s Islamic Revolution” by Roger Cohen, from the *New York Times Upfront Magazine* and answer the questions.

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. 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.

1. Why did the United States interfere in Iran in the 1950s? What was the result of their interference?
2. Why did some Iranians support the Shah?
3. Why did some oppose the Shah?
4. What was the result of the Iranian Revolution of 1979? Who was removed from power? Who gained power?
5. In the article, Roger Cohen writes, “Revolutions, Islamic and otherwise, seldom deliver on all of their promises, and a clear external enemy can serve as a useful diversion from internal problems.”

Identify at least one other revolution from your study of history that supports Cohen’s claim and explain it is an example.

6. For each of the terms below, check off if it applies to the policies of Shah Reza Pahlavi or Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and explain why you identify the terms with the rulers.

Term	The Shah or Khomeini?	Explanation
modern	<input type="checkbox"/> Shah <input type="checkbox"/> Khomeini	
traditional	<input type="checkbox"/> Shah <input type="checkbox"/> Khomeini	
secular	<input type="checkbox"/> Shah <input type="checkbox"/> Khomeini	
religious	<input type="checkbox"/> Shah <input type="checkbox"/> Khomeini	
theocratic	<input type="checkbox"/> Shah <input type="checkbox"/> Khomeini	
western	<input type="checkbox"/> Shah <input type="checkbox"/> Khomeini	