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Note on Transliteration

In my books I have sought to transliterate Persian words in a way that will sound familiar rather than alien to Iranians, and I have tried (and occasionally failed) to be consistent. Beyond that, in my view, there is room for dispute, but little for any claim to absolute correctness.

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Introduction: *The Hidden Continent of Iran*

In the summer of 2009 the world was watching Iran. Not because of the unresolved question of Iran's nuclear programme, nor Iran's troubled relationship with the United States, nor (at least not primarily) because of human rights abuses. The world and its media-wife were watching Iran because, thirty years after the Islamic revolution of 1979 (and a hundred years after the Constitutional revolution of 1906–11), Iranians were again on the streets of Tehran in hundreds of thousands, demanding free, democratic government and an end to tyranny. Iranians sometimes have an exaggerated sense of their country's importance in the world. But for once it appeared justified. Would the Islamic republic fall? Or might it shift to a more open, freer version of itself that permitted elections to run their course – in contrast to the manipulated process enforced by repression many believed they had suffered after 12 June 2009? If there is a spirit of movement and change in world events, which moves from place to place over time according to crises in human affairs, then that spirit was alive in Tehran in the summer of 2009.

As it turned out, repression seemed to succeed that time. The spirit moved on, after a pause, to other places in the region, to Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, where it was more successful; and to Bahrain and Syria. In Iran, repression has deepened. But the story is not yet over. Iran appeared central then and continues to be of central importance.

This book is about the history of Iran since the beginning of the Islamic revolution of 1978–9. But, as with any historical subject, the roots of events go back long before the events themselves. This is, if possible, all the more so with Iran; a country with a long, complex history that is for the most part unknown to ordinary citizens of Western countries – something that often frustrates and irritates Iranians, who are proud of their history and their contribution to world civilization. The apparent

strangeness of Iranian politics and Iranian behaviour in the last thirty or forty years is only explicable through an understanding of the history of the country. So, although this book is focused on the revolution of 1978–9 and the three decades since then, it is necessary to go back further into the history of the twentieth century, and even beyond (for the history of Shi'ism for example) to explain recent events.

Iran is less a country than a continent, more a civilization than a nation. In the past, countries like the USA, China, Russia and India have supported enough diversity and cultural self-confidence for at least some of their citizens to be able to feel that they were worlds unto themselves – self-sufficient, sometimes arrogant and superior. That they could do without the rest of humanity. As the process of globalization advances, such notions become less tenable, even for those large, imperial-scale countries. But they retain their attitudes to a certain extent. China and India have in addition a sense of ancient depth, of history, that strengthens their sense of self still further.

Iran has this too – albeit often infused with nostalgia, and a sense of loss and decline – but the Iranians tend to measure themselves not against China or India (still less against their Middle Eastern neighbours), but against Europe and North America. Iranians, like the Chinese, have been able to feel that theirs was the original, the oldest civilization. Many Iranians have believed – and deep down, may still believe in some way – that they have the best poetry, the best music, the best philosophy, the best food – or at any rate the best rice – and of course the best religion. However untenable, such notions could not even be thought of without there being at least an element of justification to them. It is great poetry, great music, wonderful food and great rice.

Within Iran, there is, as ever, still a remarkable, continental diversity of ethnicity, language, climate, geography, flora and fauna. And, thanks partly to the lonely path trodden by Iran in its revolutionary, anti-Western politics, Iran maintains that variety and is still less globalized than many other countries. The bazaars, their merchants and their traditions were close to the revolution of 1979, have been among the revolution's prime beneficiaries and are still close to the centre of the country's economic and political life. Iran's bazaars still sell more home-produced goods than are on the market elsewhere and sustain more artisans producing traditional craft items (metalwork, ceramics, printed textiles, rugs and other items) of higher quality than you find elsewhere.

If you go to hotels on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, in Dubai or Qatar for example, you may find that the better-quality souvenirs on sale in the gift shops (with the price marked up enormously), presented as local, were actually made in Iran. The apparent economic self-sufficiency of Iran's bazaars (perhaps something of an illusion) still reinforces the country's sense of cultural self-sufficiency.

Since the second millennium BC and the very beginnings of mankind's recorded past, Iranian history can be seen as a microcosm of human history as a whole: empires, revolutions, invasions, art, architecture, warriors, conquerors, great thinkers, great writers and poets, holy men and lawgivers, charismatic leaders and the blackest villains. A visiting Martian wanting to see the full range of human activity, good and bad, to understand mankind, could well look at Iran as a kind of introductory course.¹ Within this, the history of the last fifty years in Iran is particularly dramatic, eventful and characteristic.

A further reason to look at Iran is that since the time of the Iranian revolution, European and Western attitudes to the rest of the world have been forced to change. Previously we tended still to think in terms of linear development in the Middle East and elsewhere towards a Western economic and social model, a Western idea of modernity, away from the traditional patterns of life of those countries, which were perceived as backward and outdated. Now, we cannot afford to think in that simple way any more. There is for example, a realization that countries like China and India are following their own developmental path and that their economic weight in the globalized world is going to demand respect, if not predominate. The Western model is no longer the only option. This does not mean we should be shy about values like liberalism and representative government – it may mean we have to argue for them with greater urgency, clarity and consistency. The Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Islamic revival in the wider world that followed (triggered by the revolution if not directly led or inspired by it) changed assumptions about the direction of development. The history and culture of the Middle East, and of Iran within that, has taken on a greater importance because we have to accept that it is going to be a formative part of the future of that part of the world, and all parts of the world are closer to us and more intimately involved with us than formerly. After 1979 we can no longer work on the assumption that the history and culture of the Middle East are irrelevant.

There are other good reasons to study Iran, beyond the old reason,

the best reason, for studying other countries and cultures – to understand humanity, and therefore ourselves, better. In a world of intellectual uncertainty, doubt, complexity and ambiguity, where for many in the West the old certainties and the old gods of the past have fallen from their plinths, Iranian intellectual culture has a lot to say. Iranian thinkers have been at home with complexity, paradox, ambiguity and irony for a long time – at least since the era of the great Persian poets, between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, who explored those categories as fully as anyone since.

Some Misconceptions

In the West, we think we know about Iran, but what we think we know is often misleading or simply false. Many people, even otherwise well-educated people, think of the Iranians as Arabs, but they are not. They speak Persian, an ancient language of Indo-European origin, like Latin, modern German and English. It has an elegantly simple grammatical structure much more like that of German or English than that of Arabic. Unlike in many other territories conquered by Islam in the seventh century AD, Arabic did not simply replace the previous speech in Iran, and in many ways Iranians have traditionally defined themselves against the Arab identity of much of the rest of the Middle East region. We are encouraged to think of the Iranians as fanatical Muslims, world-leaders in Islamic fundamentalism. But the fact is that the experience of Islamic government in Iran since 1979 has turned many Iranians against political Islam, and the political attitudes of those Iranians have secularized.

The Iranian Islam of the Islamic republic, rather than being fundamentalist (in the sense of a deliberate return to the style of Islam of earliest times, as advocated for example by the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia), incorporates radical modern innovations that many Shi'a Muslims, let alone Sunnis, regard as dubious. If the term fundamentalist has any solid meaning beyond its use as a boo-word then it is incorrect to label the Iranian revolution and regime as fundamentalist.² And the Iranians are Shi'as, which means that any kind of leadership they could offer the rest of the Islamic world would be questionable at best, given the Sunni/Shi'a schism, the strong antipathy many Sunnis feel toward Shi'as and the fact that the majority of the world's Muslims are Sunni.

We think of images of demonstrations and chanting crowds and assume (encouraged by our news media) that Iranian Shi'ism is a dangerous, uncontrollable, fanatical force. But in truth the religious hierarchy that Iranian Shi'ism has developed means that religious Iranians are more controlled, more subject to religious discipline and the guidance of senior clerics (most of whom are pragmatic and moderate, and many of whom are out of sympathy with the Islamic regime) than Sunni Muslims, who since the dissolution of the Caliphate in the 1920s have lacked that kind of structure. Some experts have pointed to that lack as a factor in the rise of radical, theologically incoherent groups like Al-Qaeda.³ Iran has been historically central to humane and reflective strands of Islamic thought, including the hugely influential Sufi tradition, which inspired some of the most profound and beautiful Persian poetry. An important strand of Iranian Shi'ism is a traditional, quietist principle that commends decent, honest conduct and the patient endurance of adversity.

Iran is often depicted as an aggressive power, but it has not waged serious aggressive war since the time of Nader Shah, in the mid-eighteenth century, and its defence spending today is moderate to low for a state that size, not faintly comparable with that of militaristic states like the Soviet Union during the Cold War, for example. Since the eighteenth century Iran has fought wars, but normally defensive ones – notably the long, devastating Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s. In that war the US and other Western powers supported Saddam Hussein in Iraq against Iran, in the belief that it was necessary to contain Iranian religious extremism. For similar reasons, the US later funded the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, to prevent pro-Iranian groups taking control after the Russians left. In both Iraq and Afghanistan the US eventually had to intervene against the monsters that their policy of containment had helped to create. The Iranians helped the coalition powers to set up new democratic structures in both countries, though this has often gone unacknowledged. Instead, Iran has perversely been blamed for the fact that the removal of these enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan has enhanced Iran's regional influence.

None of this should permit a whitewash of the current regime ruling Iran. It is a repressive, autocratic regime run in the interests of a narrow clique that systematically denies political freedoms and natural rights to the Iranian people. The defects of the regime have only become more apparent since the crisis that followed the presidential elections of June

2009. The regime continues to be responsible for systematic, serious abuses of human rights. But because of its (largely self-imposed) isolation and its opposition to the West, and the inflammatory rhetoric of figures like Ahmadinejad, more opprobrium has been heaped on Iran more indiscriminately than is justified by the facts, and (even after the Arab spring-cleaning, unfortunately) there are other regimes in the region that in many respects are as bad, or worse. If we are to find solutions to the problems of the Middle East it is essential to see Iran and the region as they really are, in their true form.

It is normal in Western countries for people not to have very much reliable information about Iran, and yet for certain aspects of Iran to be familiar. There are things about Iran that are striking and memorable; useful for news media programming because they make an immediate, strong visual impression. This often means a mullah, with a beard, in a turban and robes, talking into a microphone, and an agitated crowd chanting something. Then perhaps a graph showing the latest movement in the price of oil, which affects everybody. But how did a cleric get into a position of such authority? Why has Iran, under the Islamic republic, followed such a different path? This book tries, by describing the events of recent Iranian history, to answer some of those questions.

In doing so, I have written a book that is necessarily history in summary and overview rather than one that attempts to evaluate every item within the huge quantity of available source material on every event or episode. In addition, while explaining events as they unfolded, I have tended to focus on moments and episodes that have been turning-points, which have been important in determining the shape of what followed, rather than try to chronicle every month and year as of equal weight. This is why, for example, the book devotes attention to the origins of the revolution of 1979, and a long chapter to the Iran–Iraq War, which left such a deep mark on contemporary Iran. To illuminate the narrative it also presents the words of ordinary Iranians and other observers, giving an immediate sense of events, opinions and motivations.

Again and again, the usual kind of reporting and comment in the West stresses how strange, how alien, how irrational and how disturbing Iran and Iranian politics are. One of my tasks in this book is to show that Iranian concerns, values, problems, actions and reactions are wholly explicable and rational when seen in their own proper context, in the round; quite open to sympathy, and even familiar.

Prologue: 'Ten Days of Dawn' (*Daheh-ye Fajr*)

On 1 February 1979, just after 9.30 a.m., an Air France 747 airliner landed at Mehrabad airport on the western outskirts of Tehran, and a member of the crew, with others in attendance, helped an elderly, bearded man down the steps to the ground. This was no ordinary flight. As the aircraft had entered Iranian airspace, many on board had feared it might be shot down. As it landed, several million Iranians were waiting on the streets to welcome the bearded man in clerical robes, and every move he made was shadowed by crowds of minders, reporters, photographers and hangers-on of all kinds. The special passenger for whom the aircraft had been chartered was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, returning from exile, and the photographs and film of his descent from the aircraft became some of the defining images of the Iranian revolution.

Khomeini had been away from the country since the autumn of 1964; initially in Turkey and Iraq, later (briefly) in Paris. The Shah, whose government had exiled Khomeini, had left Iran from the same airport fourteen days before, on 16 January, after a year-long crescendo of mass protest against his rule. Newspapers that had carried the headline 'Shah raft' ('The Shah Is Gone') now printed 'Emam amad' ('The Emam Has Come').

Many people had waited up all night to witness Khomeini's arrival. The crowds cried 'Allahu Akbar!' and 'Khomeini, O Emam!' In the airport building he made a short speech thanking the students, clergy and bazaar merchants for their sacrifices in the demonstrations over the previous year and exhorted them to remain united to defeat the remnants of the Shah's regime. At one point the hubbub was such that he had to be carried outside.¹ There was some tension between the clerics welcoming Khomeini and those who had accompanied him from Paris.

As Khomeini arrived, the Shah's last prime minister, Shapur Bakhtiar,

was still attempting to hold his government together. He seems to have contacted Khomeini in Paris after the Shah's departure and offered to resign, but Khomeini ignored the message.² Bakhtiar was next to powerless before the mass movement of Iranians that had united itself behind Khomeini. The behaviour of the armed forces was crucial; two days earlier troops had killed thirty demonstrators on the streets near the university and injured hundreds more. Bakhtiar had been forced to give the troops his backing, saying that they had acted in self-defence; but the incident discredited him further, linking him in the minds of the pro-Khomeini populace with the actions of the Shah's regime against demonstrators in previous months.

From the airport Khomeini was driven through the packed streets towards the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery on the south side of the city. Mohsen Rafiqdust drove the car – no simple task, because more than once it was mobbed and almost overwhelmed by the crowd. Rafiqdust later said that he nearly lost control several times. Several of Khomeini's followers rode on the outside of the vehicle (a white four-wheel-drive) to fend off the people, and Rafiqdust drove bumper-to-bumper behind a Mercedes bus some of the way so that the bus could force a way through (and to prevent people jumping on the front of the car or going under the wheels).³ Khomeini's son Ahmad accompanied him – as they went along, Ahmad had to explain to his father where they were, because building over the previous fifteen years had transformed this part of the city. Eventually the crowds in the streets became so thick that a helicopter had to take him the last part of the way.⁴

At Behesht-e Zahra Khomeini spoke again, denouncing Mohammad Reza Shah and the remnants of his government under Bakhtiar:

[The Shah] destroyed our country and filled our cemeteries. He ruined our country's economy. Even the projects he carried out in the name of progress pushed the country towards decadence. He suppressed our culture, annihilated people and destroyed all our manpower resources. We are saying this man, his government, his Majlis are all illegal. If they were to continue to stay in power, we would treat them as criminals and would try them as criminals. I shall appoint my own government. I shall slap this government in the mouth.⁵

He urged the armed forces to join the people, to realize their independence, and to throw off the influence of foreign advisers. (The most

senior US military adviser, General Huyser, left on 3 February;⁶ there was a mass departure of Americans and other foreigners in these weeks.) He also said that from now on the people would take charge of their own destiny.

Some time in early November 1978 an initially secret Council of the Islamic Revolution had been formed at Khomeini's behest to coordinate action against the Shah's government.⁷ Now Khomeini and the Council set up their base at the Refah school, near the parliament building in the centre of the city. The school had been founded in 1968 to educate girls according to Islamic principles; several personalities associated with the school were significant in the revolutionary movement. Khomeini gave a press conference there on 3 February, again urging the military not to use their weapons against the people.⁸ The Council had already made contact with some of the leaders of the armed forces, and with the US ambassador, William H. Sullivan, but their first priority was to set up a provisional government to supplant that of Shapur Bakhtiar.

On 5 February Khomeini announced the appointment of Mehdi Bazargan as prime minister of the provisional government. Bazargan agreed to this only after a day or more of reflection, and after warning Khomeini of his continuing commitment to democratic, moderate principles.

There were some striking similarities in the political backgrounds of Bakhtiar and Bazargan – also in the political predicaments in which they found themselves. Both had a lifelong commitment to liberal, democratic, nationalist principles – the principles of the revolution of 1905–11 and the constitution of 1906. Both had been educated in France at the end of the 1930s, and while there both had volunteered to fight with the French against the Nazis. Bakhtiar had served in the nationalist government of Mohammad Mossadeq in the early 1950s as deputy minister of labour; Bazargan had been the first head of the nationalized oil company (the National Iranian Oil Company) at the same time. There were differences; Bakhtiar came from a privileged position as a member of one of the leading families of the Bakhtiari tribe, had studied politics in Paris and had a more secular outlook, reflecting also the influence of Mossadeq and his membership of Mossadeq's National Front. Bazargan came from a more traditional Islamic family background, had trained as an engineer and was a member of the Freedom

Movement – which had nonetheless normally been closely aligned to the National Front. Both were wooed into accepting the post of prime minister; neither was wholly in sympathy with those who had chosen them. It was a tribute to the strength of the constitutionalist, democratic tradition in Iran that both the Shah and Khomeini had felt the need for such men at this time of crisis – but also a sign of its weakness, that such men were not able to take power in their own right.

So, on his return, as he sought to consolidate his position, avoid repression from the military and move toward the establishment of an Islamic republic, Khomeini's first act was to form an alliance not with the leftist Tudeh Party, nor the more radical paramilitary leftist groups, but with the liberal constitutionalists. And this surely reflected the aspirations and expectations of most of the Iranians who had been demonstrating over the previous year. They had been protesting both against the autocracy of the Shah and political repression and for a return to representative government. There were economic grievances also; there had been nationalist, radical leftist, anti-American and anti-British elements in the mix. The whole had been given form by the appeal to Islam as the underlying, authentic focus of the people's identity, and by Khomeini's own simple, direct, charismatic leadership. None of this was strange or entirely new, at least not to Iranians – in 1906 senior clerical figures had led a revolution in Iran that had combined similar ingredients. The history of that revolution was well known, and according to that template many middle-class liberals and leftists, more or less secular-minded, expected this time also to take over the popular movement, and for Khomeini and the clergy to recede into the background. But Khomeini knew the history too. It is unlikely that he had at the outset any precise blueprint for the eventual outcome, but he was not going to let religious authority be sidelined.

When Khomeini announced Bazargan as prime minister on 5 February he presented himself before the press and other news media with his close adviser and companion Hashemi Rafsanjani, as well as Bazargan. Rafsanjani spoke first, setting out a programme for the establishment of a new revolutionary state. There would be a referendum to establish popular support for an Islamic republic. Then a Constituent Assembly would be set up to agree a new constitution. That being done, elections would be held and a new *Majles* (parliament) would be elected.

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After Rafsanjani, Bazargan spoke self-deprecatingly of his suitability for the responsibilities now thrust upon him, but Khomeini, speaking last, had a message that was firm, sombre and austere:

through the guardianship that I have from the holy lawgiver [i.e. the Prophet Mohammad] I hereby pronounce Bazargan as the Ruler, and since I have appointed him, he must be obeyed. The nation must obey him. This is not an ordinary government. It is a government based on the shari'a. Opposing this government means opposing the shari'a of Islam and revolting against the shari'a, and revolt against the government of the shari'a has its punishment in our law . . . it is a heavy punishment in Islamic jurisprudence. Revolt against God's government is a revolt against God. Revolt against God is blasphemy.⁹

That press conference, within four days of Khomeini's return to Iran, combined in this way the two cardinal elements of the revolution and of Iran's constitution ever since – Islam and democracy. But the two elements were in tension from the start. Khomeini's speech showed that his vision was of a government blessed and legitimated by God, first and above all. But the programme of the provisional government, endorsed by him and presented as a decree from him, though read at the press conference by Rafsanjani, showed an almost equally strong, indeed almost pedantic, attachment to an idea of popular sovereignty – of government according to the will of the people. The tension between these two principles could be, and was, glossed over in revolutionary rhetoric; and much of the time they might genuinely work in parallel. Khomeini no doubt believed that they would harmonize, reflecting his understanding of the nature of God and of divine agency in the world. Rousseau once wrote that the voice of the people was the voice of God; seldom can that idea have been given more precise expression than by the crowds that welcomed Khomeini in February 1979 and later voted in a referendum overwhelmingly for an Islamic republic. Khomeini may also have expected that his involvement in government could be relatively light. Once the Islamic system was set up, politicians like Bazargan could run things from day to day. But politics, and especially revolutions, tend to be messier than that.

Two obstacles remained between the revolutionary movement and the achievement of complete dominance – Bakhtiar's government and

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the armed forces. But neither was as impressive as it seemed. After a year of conflict with the demonstrators the armed forces were uncertain and divided – both the rank and file and the leadership. Many officers and some units, notably the Imperial Guard, which had been specially favoured with pay, prestige and promotion by the previous regime,¹⁰ were still devoted to the Shah. But recruitment to the armed forces was based on conscription, and many ordinary servicemen were as enthusiastic about the revolutionary movement and the return of Khomeini as other, ordinary citizens. The Shah himself had put rival officers and even mutual enemies into senior positions in the armed forces, in order to reduce the chance of their combining against him and plotting a coup.¹¹ But this meant that when the Shah had gone – ‘with no forwarding address’¹² – those senior officers found themselves at odds with each other and unable to agree upon concerted action. Even when the Shah had still been in place, there had been much disagreement about how best to deal with the demonstrations, with the Shah himself exerting a restraining influence, and some officers favouring much harsher measures.

Disaffection among the military increased after the Shah’s departure, and, although there has been disagreement over estimates of the level of desertions,¹³ it seems plain that these increased to perhaps 1,200 per day by the second week of February. The revolutionaries encouraged the disaffection, not just by propaganda and planting flowers in the muzzles of carbines during demonstrations, but also by setting up centres to provide deserters with civilian clothes and expenses to cover their journey home by bus.¹⁴ Many officers had resigned after 16 January, and several senior figures defected after Khomeini’s return. And many, retired or otherwise, were offering their services to Bazargan or his colleagues (or to anyone who would listen) after 5 February.

Significantly for what was to follow, 800 air force technicians from the aircraft servicing organization known as the Homafaran had defected together to the revolutionary movement in the second half of January. Attempts to discipline them were lost in the general chaos, and they became an important militant element in the revolutionary movement, comparable with the Kronstadt sailors in the February and October revolutions of 1917 in Russia. Most of them were non-commissioned officers, specialists with a grievance because, although

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technically qualified, they felt their promotion within the service was blocked by a structure that favoured socially and politically privileged officers trained in cadet college – in its way a situation that echoed the wider disposition of socially insecure petit-bourgeois classes toward the revolutionary movement.¹⁵ But a number of air force officers and cadets joined them too.

After 5 February, with two rival governments in the country, the leaders of the armed forces were in an awkward position. Many of the senior officers knew that some of their number were negotiating with Bazargan and/or clerics close to Khomeini, like Ayatollah Beheshti; as were the Americans, through their embassy. General Huyser, who had wanted to keep open the option of a military coup, had left the country. It seems that, although the account of this episode in his own memoirs is quite vague,¹⁶ General Hosein Fardust, head of the supervisory Special Intelligence Bureau under the Shah, may have been instrumental between 5 and 9 February in steering other generals away from action against Bazargan's nascent government. Having been a childhood friend of the Shah, Fardust seems to have sided with the Islamic regime in 1979 and controversially, afterwards helped the new SAVAMA, later renamed the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (VEVAK), the ugly phoenix that rose out of the remnants of the Shah's infamous secret police, SAVAK.

On 8 February a large number of air force cadets, Homafaran technicians and others went to the Refah school in uniform and declared their loyalty to Khomeini and the new provisional government. A photograph of them doing so was published in the newspaper *Kayhan* the following day. The following evening (Friday), possibly fired up by the screening on state television of footage of Khomeini's return eight days before, the radicalized air force personnel at Doshan Tappeh air base formed up as a body to salute the Emam. Provoked by this, a detachment of Imperial Guard troops (200-strong or less) stationed at the base attacked them, and serious fighting ensued, continuing on the morning of 10 February. Both sides called for help, but whereas the air force commander authorized distribution of weapons to his men, the Imperial Guard commander went over to the revolutionaries on 10 February and did his best to prevent reinforcements being sent to his former comrades. Armed radicals of the Fedayan-e Khalq and Mojahedin-e Khalq

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organizations (the latter known as the MKO) moved in to support the cadets and Homafaran, and large crowds of revolutionary demonstrators formed across the whole area, leading to what turned out to be the decisive confrontation.

Two columns of tanks were sent to Doshan Tappeh by hardline military commanders. The BBC reporter John Simpson, who had arrived on the same flight with Khomeini on 1 February, saw twenty-six Chieftain tanks pass by the InterContinental Hotel, breaking through an improvised barricade there:

The lead tank, finding only an upturned Buick and some skips filled with rubble in its path, scarcely checked its speed at all. It struck the Buick's roof with a grinding sound and flipped it aside as if it were made of tinfoil. The Buick crumpled up and lay in the middle of the road, twitching now and then as another Chieftain struck it in passing.¹⁷

But the tanks eventually faltered amid the crowds and roadblocks. Some were captured, others were set alight by Molotov cocktails, and some of their crews defected with their vehicles to the revolutionaries. Other commanders recalled troops to their bases, and the fighting spread. Armed revolutionaries and crowds broke into police stations and other places where weapons could be found. With the situation rapidly running away from him, Bakhtiar ordered a dusk-to-dawn curfew for the night of 10/11 February and urged the army and police commanders to enforce the curfew strictly, but Khomeini told his followers to ignore the order, and cars with loudspeakers drove through the streets announcing his instruction, calling forth further large crowds. Bazargan was with Khomeini at the Refah school:¹⁸

Most of our time we were in Refah school and that particular night, we stayed in the same place. Since we could hear the sound of much shooting, and there was news on the possibility of an attack on the school, we went to a house nearby and spent the rest of the night there. When we got up the next morning, we realized that the whole situation had been turned on its head and the nation had achieved victory, praise be to God.

The following morning, 11 February, twenty-seven generals and other senior military commanders met at 10.20 a.m. to discuss whether they could continue to support Bakhtiar. Even those most loyal to the Shah were by now despondent. Field Marshal Qarabaghi did his

best to get an overview of the situation by collating the views of those present and presenting himself further reports that he had received by telephone:

We ordered them all together that morning to attend a meeting . . . Lieutenant General Sanei had telephoned earlier from ground forces headquarters to say: 'General . . . you can no longer count on the ground forces . . .' I told him: 'I do not understand. If I am not going to count on the ground forces, what am I going to count on?' He replied: 'This is it. There is nothing we can do.' I said: 'This is highly regrettable.' . . . I proposed . . . to summon . . . a council of commanders and find out what is happening. During that meeting, each commander described the situation of his own units. The ground force commander said that there was nothing he could do. The air force commander said the same thing . . . I presented the reports, which I had received, to the council. We had a lengthy discussion. Some of the commanders were in favour of declaring solidarity [with the revolution], whereas others were in favour of neutrality.

Qarabaghi reminded the commanders that the Shah had ordered them to keep the army intact, in order to safeguard the country's independence. He urged them that they had to make a unanimous decision: 'The discussion continued and eventually the minority, who were in favour of declaring solidarity, agreed that we should declare neutrality.'

It was agreed that Qarabaghi would inform Bakhtiar of the decision, and that it would be announced on Tehran Radio. Bakhtiar had been expecting to see Qarabaghi at his office at 8.30 a.m.:

I was in my office at eight-thirty the next morning, but he [Qarabaghi] did not turn up. I waited until nine o'clock, but there was still no sign of him . . . I became suspicious as to why he had not turned up. I telephoned his office several times, and each time I was told that he was in a very important meeting. I went to the balcony, where I could hear the sound of sporadic machine-gun fire.

Finally, Qarabaghi telephoned.

I asked him: 'General, what happened? Where were you?' He replied: 'Your Excellency, Prime Minister, the army has just now declared its neutrality.' As soon as I heard that, I went to a different world. I told him: 'Neutrality between who and who? Is it neutrality between law and anarchy? Is it

neutrality between Iran and Iran's enemies? . . . Thank you, General. Thank you very much.' I then put the phone down.

Tehran Radio broadcast the commanders' announcement at 1.15 p.m.:

In view of the recent developments in the country, the Supreme Council of the armed forces met at ten-twenty hours this morning, 22 Bahman 1357. It unanimously decided that, in order to prevent further chaos and bloodshed, it declares its neutrality, and military units have been ordered to return to barracks.

Bazargan and the other revolutionaries welcomed the announcement, which was what they had been working towards in previous contacts with army commanders. Bazargan believed the US embassy had been exerting itself to the same end:

Yes, we were in favour of the army's neutrality. This was achieved by the arrangements and promises secured through General Moqaddam. The other side of the coin was that the Americans wanted the army not to become involved in the affairs. I am not fully aware of the details, but they wanted the Iranian revolution to take place without bloodshed and without catastrophe. Well, we also wanted the same thing.

Bakhtiar was left powerless to affect events:

I waited until one-thirty in the afternoon, before deciding that there was no alternative left to me. I could see that when the people realized that the military men had decided to withdraw, no other force could stop the others. I ordered a helicopter to land in the grounds of the cadet training college. The helicopter arrived at about two o'clock in the afternoon. I picked up a few of my personal belongings and went downstairs . . . As I came through the doorway, there was one captain, two NCOs and four soldiers . . . One of them said: 'We are almost totally surrounded now.' . . . I got into the helicopter, and it took off. I said: 'How amazing! We want to give these people freedom and democracy, and they do not want it.' What could we possibly do? I do not know, but, despite the sadness, I experienced relief. Believe me, it seemed as if a huge burden, as heavy as Damavand Mountain, had been lifted from my shoulders. I felt as if I were flying with my own wings.

It had been arranged previously that Bakhtiar, Bazargan, Qarabaghi and others would meet that afternoon at Kazem Jafrudi's house in

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North Tehran. Jafrudi had been a member of the Majles under the Shah and was a friend of both Bakhtiar and Bazargan. But as the time of the meeting drew closer Jafrudi advised Bakhtiar by telephone that he should not come after all:

The prime minister had arranged to come straight from his office with Dr Abbasqoli Bakhtiar. After taking off in the helicopter from the cadet training college, he had landed at Aqdassiyeh. From there, he went in a Peykan car to a previously arranged hiding place. Before going, he telephoned me from Aqdassiyeh, and I informed him that my house was crowded with people and it was impossible for him to come there and also quite dangerous. As a result, these gentlemen proceeded to their hiding place.

Jafrudi then telephoned General Qarabaghi and advised him not to wear uniform to the meeting:

at about five minutes past four, he [Jafrudi] telephoned me again to say that the gentlemen had arrived and were waiting for me. He also asked me not to go there in my uniform. I asked: 'What has uniform got to do with the meeting?' He said that he would explain later, but insisted that for my own safety I should go in civilian clothes. I was very distressed and hung up. Lieutenant General Hatam, who was sitting next to me, asked me what had happened, and when I told him I was supposed to attend the meeting in civilian clothes, he said: 'Well, General, does it matter so much?' I said that I had no civilian clothes with me. He said: 'Then send someone to fetch your civilian clothes.' After one hour they arrived with my civilian clothes, and I went to a room and changed. My civilian clothes saved my life. I left for Mr Jafrudi's house. He opened the gates himself and let me in. He led me to a room first and said: 'General, I wanted to make a request before taking you into the meeting room.' . . . He told me that Prime Minister Bakhtiar had submitted his resignation. I was astonished and added that I had not gone there to submit mine. I asked whether the prime minister was there, and he told me that he was not at the house but was somewhere in the vicinity and had not been brought to the house for reasons of security. I said: 'But you did not tell me that the prime minister was not going to be here.' His reply was: 'The prime minister is not far away and he is in touch with us. The other gentlemen are waiting for us next door so that we can reach an agreement.' I asked who the other gentlemen were. At this point he asked me to follow him to another room.

When I entered, I saw seven or eight people were sitting there, who were introduced as Messrs. Dr Siassi, [Mehdi] Bazargan, Dr Sahabi, [Abbas] Amir-Entezam, Engineer Khalili and someone else . . . After I sat down, one of them began praising the army for its decision and said that the army and the nation belonged to each other and they asked me to help them to establish security. I said: 'Security would be maintained if you were to issue a statement to this effect. You [addressing Bazargan] have been appointed prime minister by Khomeini, therefore either you or Khomeini should issue a statement ordering the people not to attack army barracks and to respect its dignity and honour. If you were to issue such a statement, security would automatically be established.' He said: 'Fine. I shall order such a statement to be issued immediately.'

In fact, two statements were made on Tehran Radio, one from Khomeini himself, read out by Ayatollah Musavi-Ardebili:

Now that the armed forces have stepped back, have declared their neutrality in the face of political affairs and have expressed support for the nation, the dear and courageous nation is expected to maintain law and order when the troops return to barracks. You should stop saboteurs, who may try to create catastrophe and instruct them of their religious and humanitarian obligations. Do not allow anyone to attack foreign embassies. If, God forbid, the army were to enter the arena again, you must defend yourselves with all your might. I hereby inform senior army officers that if they were to stop the army's aggression, and instruct them to join the nation and its legal Islamic government, we would regard the army as part of the nation and vice versa.

In addition, Tehran Radio contacted Jafroodi while Bazargan was still in his house, spoke to Bazargan and got him to make a statement:

We were all sitting in my house, when a friend of mine, who was in charge of the radio, telephoned and asked to interview Mr Bazargan. He asked whether they should come to my house or Mr Bazargan should go to the radio station. I passed the message to . . . Bazargan, who volunteered to go to the radio station and there he broadcast the following speech: 'I am delighted to offer my congratulations to the combative Muslim nation of Iran, who today has survived a torturous and anxious journey to achieve victory for its revolution. I deem it necessary to express my gratitude to army officers and soldiers. I would like to recommend that in accordance

with Imam Khomeini's assertion, the army is part of the nation and you must treat army officers and soldiers as your brothers. Our dear compatriots must demonstrate patience and must give this government a chance to employ far-sightedness and justice to direct the country along the right path. It is obvious that chaos, anarchy and confusion will not only prevent us from achieving something positive, but it will, God forbid, make matters much worse and more catastrophic than ever before.

By the end of 11 February revolutionary crowds had broken into Evin prison, releasing all the prisoners, including the politicals; and had ransacked the former headquarters of SAVAK. Elsewhere in the country, in Shiraz, in Rasht, and in other places, the revolutionaries, often led by air force personnel, took over police and SAVAK buildings and established locally the same outcome as in the capital.¹⁹ Bakhtiar went into hiding.

On the afternoon of 11 February, US Ambassador Sullivan was attempting to organize the safe evacuation of some US military personnel who were trapped in a building that was under attack, when he received a series of telephone calls from the White House. In one of these, David Newsom asked him on behalf of Zbigniew Brzezinski what were the chances of a successful military coup: 'The total absurdity of such an inquiry in the circumstances then existing in Tehran provoked me to a scurrilous suggestion for Brzezinski that seemed to shock mild-mannered Under-Secretary Newsom.' Back in the US, General Huyser was asked the same day, as part of the same deliberations, whether and under what conditions he would return to Iran to 'conduct a military takeover'. His response was more polite, but no more encouraging than Sullivan's.²⁰

The fighting that finally toppled Bakhtiar's government had been spontaneous; instigated by the enthusiasm of the revolutionaries themselves, by the Homafaran, and by the Fedayan and the MKO rather than by Khomeini, who was more concerned to avoid the revolution descending into complete anarchy. But the outcome left him dominant. Since 1979 the Islamic regime has regarded 11 February as the date of the final victory of the Islamic revolution – and has celebrated the ten days between Khomeini's return and 11 February as the *Daheh-ye Fajr* – 'ten days of dawn'. Others since have cynically called the festival *Daheh-ye Zajr* – 'ten days of torment'.²¹

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Within a short time Khomeini approved summary trials for killings and other acts of oppression by members of the regime over the previous months and years, and appointed Sadeh Khalkhali, who was to become infamous, to carry them out. One of the first to be arrested was General Rahimi, who had been responsible for enforcing martial law in Tehran. Rahimi's captors allowed Western journalists to put questions to him on the evening of 11 February. He was unrepentant, confirmed his continuing loyalty to the Shah and said it had been necessary to send in forces to restore order. He was asked:

'Do you believe your life is in danger from the decision of the court which, we understand, will try you?'

General Rahimi smiled slightly, looked up and lifted his hands a little, as though all these questions were an irrelevance.

'I came into this world once, and once I will leave it'²²

Rahimi and three other generals (including the former head of SAVAK, General Nasiri, who had been badly injured after his capture) were shot on 14 February on the roof of the Refah school.²³

I

The Background: *Ma Chegoneh* *Ma Shodim?*¹ ('How Did We Become What We Are?')

Revolutions

The Iranian revolution of 1979 is sometimes spoken of as the third great revolution of modern times, after the French and the Russian.² The interpretation of all three of these revolutions will always be controversial, but many people still broadly think of the first two in terms set out by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. According to that analysis, the French revolution was a bourgeois revolution, in which the perennially rising middle class pushed aside the old forms of feudalism and asserted its growing economic power in political terms, setting up the forms of representative government and establishing the bourgeois class and capitalist economics as dominant for the period that followed. The Russian revolution, following on from the French, was the proletarian revolution predicted by Marx, bringing in an era of socialist government in the interest of the working class, at least according to the theory.

These crude characterizations conceal many contradictions. Even a cursory reading of the events of the French revolution shows the way that populists exploiting the militant influence of the urban poor of Paris (and the threat of war from France's enemies) diverted the revolution away from the principles of bourgeois liberalism toward terror, political murder and repression. One of its prime outcomes was a redistribution of land to peasant farmers that in the long run had profoundly conservative and anti-capitalistic consequences. The Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 took place in one of the European states in which the proletariat was least developed and least numerous as a proportion of the population as a whole, directly contradicting Marx's own predictions. It had less of the character of a mass movement, and more of the character of a *coup d'état*. Nonetheless, the labels still stick.

The Iranian revolution was an Islamic revolution – that much is clear.³ But beyond that label, despite some family resemblances to those earlier revolutions, it remains an enigma, and many non-specialists in the West (and not just in the West), despite so much writing and comment on the subject since, have no conceptual moorings for it – no clear sense of why it happened or what it signified. We are still living through the consequences of the Iranian revolution of 1979, and the longer-term outcomes remain hard to assess.

The bare facts of the Iranian revolution of 1979 can be quite briefly told. It began in a period of economic uncertainty, after the oil-fuelled boom of the early 1970s had begun to falter, with rising inflation and unemployment. In 1977 the Shah's government relaxed some of its previous repressive measures, permitting the reappearance of some expressions of dissent from the liberal left. But an attack in a government-backed newspaper on the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini in January 1978 led to a demonstration by religious students in the shrine city of Qom in which a number of demonstrators were shot and killed by police. Fuelled by condemnations from Khomeini outside Iran and from other clerics within, a cycle of further demonstrations and shootings followed, after intervals of forty days' mourning each time. The demonstrations (mainly involving young students and people from the bazaars) got larger and more violent, and the number of dead increased. Over the summer and early autumn workers frustrated at low pay joined demonstrations and went on strike – the strikes in the oil industry being especially damaging. On 8 September (afterwards known as Black Friday) martial law was declared, and a large number of demonstrators were killed in Tehran. After this the Shah lost whatever credibility he had left, and the general wish (aligning with Khomeini's longstanding demand) was for him to go. Strikes and demonstrations continued and increased in intensity, especially in the religious season of Ashura in December. Troops began to desert, and on 16 January 1979 the Shah fled out of the country. Khomeini returned on 1 February, troops loyal to the Shah's government gave up the struggle ten days later (the *Dabeh-ye Fajr*), and at the end of March a nationwide referendum gave 97 per cent support for an Islamic republic.

But these bare facts may leave the uninitiated little the wiser. Why did the Shah lose control? Why did leadership of the revolution fall to the Shi'a clergy? What were the people's grievances and how did they come

to be expressed so forcefully? And why did the Shah's regime fail to accommodate them? Why were the revolutionaries so hostile to the West? Was it primarily a religious, or a democratic, or a social revolution? Or a nationalist revolution? To begin to answer these questions it is necessary to reach further back into the history of Iran, of the Islamic religion, and of Shi'ism.

Islam and the Shi'a

When Mohammad first began to preach the revelation of Islam in Mecca in AD 613, he soon encountered opposition from the leading families that controlled the city. Prime among these were the Quraish, to a junior branch of which Mohammad's own family belonged. Those families drew their prosperity partly from their trusteeship of the pagan shrines in Mecca, which Mohammad was attacking, and they felt threatened also by his emphasis on fair dealing in business and generosity to the poor. Most of what Mohammad preached either stated or implied a criticism of the status quo, of which the Quraish were the prime proprietors and beneficiaries. The Quraish retaliated against the growing number of Mohammad's followers with ridicule, and later with violence. So on the one hand, in the form it has come down to us, we have a picture of wealthy, corrupt, impious, unjust rulers; and on the other, virtuous, poor, oppressed Muslims, bravely speaking out against them. This image of arrogant power and virtuous resistance (initially not unlike the position of Jesus and his disciples vis-à-vis the ruling Pharisees and Sadducees in the New Testament) repeats itself again and again in the history of Islam, and especially in the history of Shi'a Islam, reinforced each time by new exemplars, right down to modern times and the 1979 revolution.

Eventually Mohammad and his followers were forced to leave Mecca, to set up a new Muslim community in Medina. War followed between the Quraish of Mecca and the Muslims of Medina (the migration from Mecca to Medina in AD 622, the *Hijra*, became the date for the beginning of the Muslim calendar, representing as it did the proper founding of the Muslim *umma*, the community of Muslim believers). Most of the rulings in the Koran, and in Islam more widely, regulating the conduct of war (conditions for just war, restrictions on the waging of war, the treatment of captives, etc.) derive from positions taken on this conflict.

Eventually (in AD 630) the Medinans triumphed, occupied Mecca, converted the Meccans (including the Quraish) to the new religion, removed pagan idols from the Ka'ba in Mecca and made it the central shrine of Islam that it has been ever since. Islam became the dominant religion of the Arabian peninsula.

But in AD 632 the Prophet Mohammad died, and the new religion faced a crisis over who should succeed him as the leader of the *umma*. The way it was resolved was fateful for the future of Islam. One of Mohammad's closest companions, Abu Bakr, was selected as *khalifa* (caliph – successor). But some Muslims felt that the wrong choice had been made, and that another of the companions should have been chosen – Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. They believed the Prophet himself had chosen Ali to succeed.

Despite continuing argument and strife, the caliphs Omar and Othman succeeded Abu Bakr, and eventually Ali himself became the fourth caliph. But there was conflict between those who supported Ali, and those who had supported his predecessor (who had been murdered). There were tensions also over the spoils yielded by the enormous conquests made by the Muslims at this time, which had taken rich swathes of territory from the Roman and Persian empires (the latter conquered after Persian defeats at the battles of Qadesiyya and Nahavand in 637 and 641 respectively). The followers of Ali tended to be those who wanted to uphold the austere principles of Islam against what they saw as the corrupting influence of wealth and government in the expanding Arab Empire. After Ali's death in 661, these tensions continued, and the caliphs of the Umayyad line that followed him (relatives of the murdered Othman) were regarded as increasingly worldly. Those who had followed Ali held to the view that the real leaders of Islam should be the children of Ali (who by virtue of his marriage to the Prophet's daughter Fatima were also the descendants of Mohammad himself).

So by now the Muslim followers of Ali saw themselves in much the same position as that in which the original followers of Mohammad had perceived themselves in opposition to the pagans of Mecca; virtuous austerity resisting worldly authority, oppression, immorality and corruption. It was in this spirit that Ali's son, Hosein, led a small group of followers in revolt in AD 680. He tried to link up with sympathizers in Kufa, south of present-day Baghdad, but was confronted by the forces of the Caliph Yazid at Karbala. The Kufans failed to turn out in

his support, and Hosein refused to make terms. The caliph's troops loosed arrows into Hosein's camp, killing Hosein's infant son among others. Outnumbered, his followers tried to fight back but were overwhelmed and massacred, and Hosein was cut down also.

For the Muslim sect that later called themselves the Shi'a Ali (meaning the partisans or followers of Ali) or simply the Shi'a, the desperate battle of Karbala was the defining moment. Ever since that time the Shi'a have mourned the event as the essence of injustice; as the victory of the oppressors over the righteous, of the strong over the weak, of the corrupt over the pious. The Caliph Yazid became the archetype for all worldly wickedness, and Hosein the model for heroic self-sacrifice. Karbala became one of the central shrine cities for Shi'a Muslims, along with Najaf (the tomb of Ali). Initially Shi'ism was more a tendency than a sect, drawing to it people who especially revered the memory of Ali and Hosein, and who believed that the leadership of Islam should have descended in their line. Their descendants were known as the Shi'a Emams, who in each generation were rivals or at least potential rivals to the caliphs. There was a further schism after the death of the seventh Emam, Jafar al-Sadiq, in AD 765, with the supporters of his elder son splitting away to form the Ismaili sect (despite the fact that he predeceased his father), while the majority of the Shi'as followed his younger son, Musa al-Kazim. The succession followed Musa's descendants until the twelfth Emam, who was believed to have disappeared at the time of the eleventh Emam's death in AD 874. Iranian Shi'as believe that the twelfth Emam (the Hidden Emam, to whom rightful leadership on earth should fall in principle) never died, but will reappear at the day of judgement. They are known as twelver Shi'as (because they recognize twelve Emams) to distinguish them from the Ismailis and some other minority Shi'a sects.⁴ In time, Shi'ism developed a separate body of traditions and religious-legal rulings of its own, in parallel to the main Muslim tradition of Sunnism.

Shi'ism, the Ulema and the Revolution of 1979

Shi'a Islam became the religion of Iran after it was imposed by Shah Esmail I and his descendants, the Safavid dynasty, from 1501. Prior to that, Iran's Muslims were predominantly Sunni, with scarcely more

Shi'a Muslims than other parts of the Islamic world. The centres of Shi'ism were the shrine cities of what is now Iraq – Najaf, Karbala, Samarra. After that date, those shrines remained important centres of Shi'a religious learning and pilgrimage (as they have to this day), but Iranian Shi'ism took on a much greater significance. The Safavids enforced adherence to Shi'ism as a matter of state policy. Learned men of religion – *ulema* – drew close to the Safavid rulers, in a relationship of mutual support, especially towards the close of the Safavid period of rule in the years around 1700. Religious endowments (tax-free grants of wealth and land to institutions like mosques, schools and shrines) proliferated and channelled wealth to the *ulema*. Shi'ism became deeply entrenched in the cultural, intellectual and political life of Iran.

Did Iran turn Shi'a simply because the Safavids imposed Shi'ism? Or was Iranian Shi'ism also an expression of the Iranians' distinctive, separate consciousness of themselves within the Islamic world? The complex nature of Iran's national identity and Iranian nationalism is discussed in a later chapter. But Iranian Shi'ism had a series of essential, interrelated effects on the development of modern Iran, and the revolution of 1979. Most fundamental was the development of the independent social and political authority of the *ulema*.

In 1722 the Safavid regime, ruling from its splendid capital in Isfahan, succumbed to a revolt by militant, plundering Afghans. Most of the next seventy years were marred by foreign invasions, civil war, internal revolts, military adventures, punitive taxation, expropriation, general chaos and unpleasantness. The *ulema* fell from their previous position of privilege and wealth, many of their endowments were confiscated or plundered, and some criticized them for their perceived complicity in the failure of Safavid rule.⁵ Many of them emigrated, along with many other refugee Iranians, to southern Iraq or to India or elsewhere (it is possible, for example, that Khomeini's ancestors emigrated to India at this time). This emigration had a lasting impact in parts of India, in the shrine cities of Iraq and in some of the territories along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf.

In these circumstances, new patterns of thought emerged among the Shi'a *ulema*, partly in response to this trauma (though the thinking closely mirrored debates that had rolled back and forth in the early centuries of Islam, and its beginnings had emerged already in the Safavid period). One school – the Akhbari – argued for a theological position

that each individual Muslim had in the Koran and in the *hadith* (the written traditions of the sayings and actions of the Prophet and, in Shi'ism, the Emams) all he needed for his guidance, and that there was only a limited place, if any, for the interpretation of religious law based on reason (*ijtihad*). The Akhbari position was close to the traditional line of Sunni Islam on these points. The other school – the Usuli – argued, on the contrary, that *ijtihad* was necessary to reinterpret religious law afresh in each generation, in the light of new circumstances and new understanding, and that only trained, learned *ulema* could be trusted to do this. By the end of the eighteenth century, as a greater degree of order was restored by the first Qajar Shahs, the Usulis were winning the argument, and a new arrangement emerged, according to which ordinary Muslims gave their allegiance – and often, a portion of their material earnings – to a class of specially qualified *ulema* called *mojtahed* (those qualified to perform *ijtihad*). In each generation, among the whole body of *mojtahed*, one or two clerics emerged to serve as a supreme guide to other *ulema* and to ordinary Muslims in religious matters. Such a cleric was called a *marja-e taqlid* (source of emulation) or *marja*.

In this way the Shi'a clergy developed a religious hierarchy, analogous to that of other religions – to that of the Catholic church, for example – but quite unlike the looser arrangements of Sunni Islam. As time went on, and more ambitious young men strove to qualify as *mojtahed*, new, more elevated levels of dignity were added to distinguish between the clerics – *hujjatoleslam* ('proof of Islam'), and *ayatollah* ('sign of God'). This system helped the *ulema* to reassert their social authority and to restore their wealth, as a class; this time quite independently of secular rulers, at a time (the nineteenth century) when the monarchy continued to be relatively weak.

Religious law has a much wider significance in Islam than in Christianity and other religions. In principle, it is meant to govern every aspect of a Muslim's life. This gave clerics a role much more important than that of mere prayer-leaders in the mosque. They were arbitrators in family or business or other legal disputes and acted as judges in criminal cases. They served as notaries for official documents. Often they were the only authority figures in smaller towns or villages and acted effectively as governors, in association with elders or village headmen. In the larger towns and cities the *ulema* tended to have specially close connections with the merchants and craftsmen of the bazaars, who

often demonstrated their piety by giving money for religious purposes – for example to repair the roof of a mosque or to help set up a religious school (*madreseh*). *Bazaari* and *ulema* families often intermarried. Between them, the *ulema* and the *bazaaris* tended to be the dominant urban classes, and their close relationship came to be of central importance in politics from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Through the religious hierarchy, the contacts established during their long training, and family connections, the *ulema* had access to a network of clergy and ordinary Muslims across the whole country, and beyond.

The strong position of the *ulema* in Iranian society meant that when secular authority failed or was challenged, almost always the *ulema* (or at least some of them) emerged as leaders of political dissent. This happened in 1890–92 (when the government attempted to grant a tobacco monopoly to a British contractor, Major Talbot, but had to reverse the policy in the face of a determined boycott organized by clerics and *bazaaris*), in 1905–6, in 1953, in 1963 and, of course, in 1978–9. They were able to communicate and coordinate action with other *ulema*, and to disseminate propaganda, often using the most up-to-date communications technology (in 1892, the telegraph system; in 1978, cassette-tapes, telephone and Xerox copiers). Their religious authority gave them a unique advantage by comparison with other potential leaders of mass movements; it meant independence and a degree of immunity from repression, as a class. Secular rulers found it difficult, and often counter-productive, to act even against individual mullahs. And in addition, the most senior *marjas* were often out of reach of the Iranian government altogether, living in Najaf or one of the other shrine cities of Ottoman Iraq (the three provinces of Ottoman Iraq – Mosul, Baghdad and Basra – were ruled under a British mandate from 1920 and became the independent Kingdom of Iraq in 1932).

Popular Shi'ism

Another important element in Iranian Shi'ism, often viewed with mixed feelings by the orthodox *ulema*, were the public, popular manifestations associated with the death of Hosein, and the other traditions of the early history of the followers of Ali. Each year, Shi'a Muslims take part

in processions that are in effect commemorative funeral processions, to mark the anniversary of the martyrdom of the Emam Hosein at Karbala.⁶ The participants weep and beat their chests. They carry heavy funerary symbols, including replicas of the Emam's coffin, and huge multi-pronged objects that represent Hosein's banner. Strongmen train specially to compete for the honour of carrying these symbols. They also may beat themselves with chains and in the past some cut themselves on the head with swords to show their devotion and their fellowship with the martyrs of Karbala. The grandest processions would take place in the bazaars of great cities, but smaller versions would go ahead each year even in otherwise quiet villages. These rituals of collective grief may seem strange, even threatening, to outsiders (and images often appear to this effect on Western TV screens), but there are close parallels, both in the way the processions take place and in the spirit in which they are enacted, with practices in traditional Good Friday processions in many Catholic countries.

This parallel is echoed again in the *ta'zieh* – a form of traditional street theatre in which the events of Karbala and other incidents in the lives of the Emams are acted out, to the accompaniment of traditional verses – very like the mystery plays of medieval Europe. The *ta'zieh* may also be performed at other times of the year, but the usual time is at Ashura, the anniversary of Karbala, like the processions. In former times itinerant preachers called *rowzeh-khans* would visit villages and urban households to deliver the same verses telling the same stories from memory.

Many of the *zur-khaneh* ('houses of strength') in the towns also incorporated a religious element, venerating the Shi'a martyrs in their practices (though the *zur-khaneh* tradition is of obscure origin, and some argue that it includes significant pre-Islamic features). The *zur-khaneh* is a distinctively Iranian institution, in which men train for wrestling and for public performances of bare-chested brawniness, including the impressive juggling of large, heavy wooden clubs, performances of drumming and poetry recitations.⁷

These traditional, popular manifestations repeat and stress the wickedness of Yazid and the other oppressors of the Shi'a, and the virtue of Hosein and the other Emams. They are alien and often abhorrent to Sunni Muslims, elsewhere in the Islamic world, who regard them as idolatrous and as innovations not justified by religious texts. In 1979 they

were familiar to all Iranians; even to socialists, secular nationalists, atheists or modernizers, soldiers or rich playboys who had turned away from Iran's religious tradition. The Ashura processions in particular made a template for the public expression of collective solidarity and moral feeling that was significant in the revolution – as well as reinforcing the common understanding among all classes of Shi'a beliefs about the Emams. The processions reconfirmed and reinforced ideas about the arrogance and corruption of power and wealth, and the virtue of modesty and poverty, that run deep in Shi'ism and in Islam more generally.

Two Revolutions

The revolution of 1979 was the second revolution of the twentieth century in Iran. The first happened in the years 1905–11, and is a convenient starting-point for considering the origins of the second.

Like many previous monarchies in Iran, going back to the time of the Achaemenids, the Qajar dynasty that ruled from 1796 until the 1920s did so with a relatively light touch. Turning their back on the example of eighteenth-century military monarchs like Nader Shah and the founder of the Qajar dynasty, Agha Mohammad Shah, the later Qajars employed only a small standing army. They relied instead on regional governors, who were often the leaders of local tribes, to maintain their authority in the further-flung parts of the country. Their rule had more the character of a system of alliances than that of the centralized government of a modern state.⁸

But this relatively weak state showed its disadvantages as the nineteenth century progressed and foreign powers began to take an increasing interest in Iran. Russia and Britain watched each other's involvement in Iran jealously – the Russians expanding their influence southwards; the British seeking to protect their possessions in India. With little coercive power within the borders of the country, and therefore little ability to raise taxes, the Qajar monarchs became increasingly dependent on loans from Russia and Britain, and they made economic concessions to them in return (the tobacco monopoly was just one example). This was unpopular with ordinary Persians, and especially with the *bazaaris*, who would be among the first to feel the economic damage from the foreigners' activities (some of them would also have benefited, but they

tended to keep quiet). The economy, still predominantly agricultural, had also adjusted to outside pressures (cheap imports of food commodities and textiles in particular), changing from a simple subsistence structure with only small surpluses towards the production of cash crops for export. But this meant domestic production of food staples could no longer support an expanded population in times of famine or economic disruption.

In the later nineteenth century Naser od-Din Shah, who had ruled since 1848, had gone from an initially liberal position at his accession to a much more conservative stance, distrustful of reform. The early part of his reign had been marred by his removal and murder of the reforming prime minister Amir Kabir, and by government persecution of the Babi religious movement. The Babis were largely destroyed and driven into exile, where the movement evolved into an independent religion, the Bahai faith. Since that time, with just a few periods of respite, Bahais have been persecuted in Iran, sometimes viciously. By the 1890s Naser od-Din's finances were in a mess, the most efficient armed force in the country was officered by Russians (the Cossack brigade – only around 400–600 soldiers) and the national bank, the Imperial Bank of Persia, was run under the ownership of the British-based Baron Paul de Reuter (the founder of Reuters news agency).

When Naser od-Din Shah died in 1896, he was replaced on the throne by his more liberal-minded (but sickly) son, Mozaffar od-Din Shah, who removed censorship and constraints on political associations. The result was an upsurge in press and political activity, with new newspapers appearing, and the formation of political societies (*anjoman*). Many of these new newspapers and groups were critical of the government: the latest grievance was that the Shah's ministers had given control of customs to a Belgian, Joseph Naus. They were also saying, drawing upon Western models, that the country needed a proper constitution, that the arbitrary rule of the Shah had to be limited, and the rule of law regularized. Iranians (some of them at least) have been struggling for those things ever since, down to the present day.

In 1905 these various developments came to a head under the direct influence of a price crisis caused by a disruption of trade with Russia, following the abortive revolution and general turmoil in Russia that year. In the northern part of the country the price of sugar went up by a third and the price of wheat by 50 per cent. The government responded

by accusing bazaar merchants of profiteering, but the slump in imports also brought a collapse in customs receipts and state revenues, which meant there was not enough money for the Shah to make his usual payments to some of the *ulema*, or to the small number of troops at his disposal.

After some demonstrations and unrest in June, in December 1905 two sugar merchants from the Tehran bazaar were given beatings on the feet (the *bastinado* or *falak*) at the orders of the governor of Tehran for charging too much for sugar. One of them was a respected elder figure who had paid to repair both the buildings of the bazaar itself, and three mosques. The bazaar merchants closed their shops, and several thousand *bazaaris*, religious students, *ulema* and others went to the shrine of Shah Abd ol-Azim to the south of the city, led by two senior clerics, Ayatollahs Behbehani and Tabatabai. From the sanctuary of the shrine (taking sanctuary in this way was called *bast*) they demanded the removal of the governor who had ordered the beatings, enforcement of shari'a law, dismissal of the Belgian, Naus, and the establishment of an *adalatkhaneh* (House of Justice – a representative assembly). After a month of stalemate the Shah gave in and accepted the protestors' demands.

But (as with earlier promises) the Shah made no attempt to convene the House of Justice, and in July 1906 there were further street protests by theological students when the government tried to take action against some radical preachers. One of the students, a *seyyed* (someone believed to be descended from the Prophet Mohammad), was shot dead by the police, which caused an uproar and more demonstrations, in which a further twenty-two were killed.⁹ In the streets the Shah's government was denounced as the rule of Yazid, recalling Hosein and Karbala. Behbehani, Tabatabai, 2,000 *ulema* and their students left Tehran for Qom (then as now the main centre for theological study in the country), and a larger group of merchants, mullahs and others (eventually several thousand) took *bast* in the extensive grounds of the summer residence of the British legation at Qolhak, to the north of Tehran. The *ulema* and the *bazaaris* were effectively on strike, bringing the capital to a standstill. The Qolhak compound became an impromptu academy of political discussion and speculation, with liberal and nationalist intellectuals joining in and addressing the assembled crowds. Many of them spoke of the need to limit the powers of the Shah by establishing a constitution (*masbruteh*), and the demand for a House of Justice became more spe-

cific, shifting to a call for a properly representative national assembly (Majles). Coordinated by the *ulema*, like-minded groups from the provinces sent telegrams in support to the Shah.

One might think that the protection given to the constitutionalist opposition by the British legation in the summer of 1906 would have created goodwill toward the British among progressive-minded Iranians at least. But this did not happen, at least not in any lasting way. British hospitality toward the revolutionary opposition had more to do with weakening Russian influence at the Qajar court than any deep commitment to the fostering of representative institutions in Persia. For nearly a century Britain and Russia had been rivals in the country, but their rivalry had been aimed more at spoiling the position of the other in the short term than about winning Iranian affections or creating a partnership with Iran in the longer term. Russian expansionist motives were fairly plain; British motives (primarily, until the discovery of oil in Iran in 1908, concerned with the security of British India) had often been disguised under a mask of friendship and an ostensible commitment to development and liberal institutions. Britain had made alliances with Persia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, at the time of the Napoleonic wars, only to renege on them or slither out of their provisions when they became inconvenient. This had contributed to the humiliating loss of Persian territory in the Caucasus to Russia in 1813 and 1828. In the middle of the century Britain had intervened to prevent Persia from retaking Herat (part of Afghanistan today but a Persian territory before 1747). Eventually British policy turned against the constitutionalists and through the rest of the twentieth century was primarily interested in Iranian oil. For many Iranians Britain was the most dangerous of Iran's enemies, and (notwithstanding friendliness toward individuals) that reputation still lingers: the British have been thought to be devious, untrustworthy and always looking for new ways to damage Iran.¹⁰

On 5 August, threatened by a potential mutiny among the Cossack brigade, whom he had been unable to pay, Mozaffar od-Din Shah gave in again and signed an order for the convening of a national assembly. By this time the Shah was seriously ill. The Majles met for the first time in October 1906, and rapidly set about drafting a constitution, which was ratified by the Shah on 30 December (one story says that members of the *ulema* advised him, in the light of his many sins, to do one great

good last thing before he died).¹¹ The revolutionaries had won their constitution. Mozaffar od-Din Shah died only five days later.

The Majles was elected on the basis of partial, not full, suffrage, on a two-stage system, and represented primarily the middle and upper classes (as was the case in most other countries with elected assemblies at the time). In each region electors voted for delegates to regional assemblies, and those delegates nominated 156 members for the Majles (except in Tehran, where they were elected directly). Outside the Majles, both in the capital and in the regional centres, the political changes and the elections stimulated the creation of more new political societies, some of which quickly grew powerful and influenced the deliberations of the Majles itself. Some represented occupations, others regions like Azerbaijan, others ethnic or religious groups. There were *anjoman* for women for the first time. There was another new wave of political activity and debate across the country, manifested also in the expansion in the number of newspapers; from just six before the revolution began to over 100.¹² This burgeoning of political consciousness was disturbing in itself to the more traditional-minded; especially to the more conservative members of the *ulema*.

The constitution stated explicitly that the Shah's sovereignty derived from the people, as a power given to him in trust; not as a right bestowed directly by God. But the power of the *ulema* and of Shi'ism as the dominant faith of the country was also confirmed in the constitution.¹³ Shi'ism was declared to be the state religion, shari'a law was recognized, clerical courts were given a significant role, and there was to be a five-man committee of senior *ulema* to scrutinize legislation passed by the Majles, to confirm its spiritual legitimacy; until the Hidden Imam – whose proper responsibility this was – should reappear. But the civil rights of non-Shi'a minorities were also protected, reflecting the involvement of many Jews, Babis, Armenians and others in the constitutional project. Jews and Armenians had their own, protected seats for their representatives in the Majles. Many of these features reappeared in the post-1979 constitution.

Mozaffar od-Din Shah's successor, his son Mohammad Ali Shah, had more autocratic instincts than his father. He resolved from the start, although he took an oath of loyalty to the constitution, to overturn it and restore the previous form of untrammelled monarchy, with Russian help. Opposition to constitutionalism began also to harden from the

religious side. Through 1907 and the first half of 1908 the Majles passed measures for the reform of taxation and finance, education and judicial matters. The last were particularly disturbing to the *ulema*, because they saw their traditional role encroached upon.

Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri was prominent among the *ulema* who changed their minds at this time. He had supported the protests of 1905–6 (which in most respects were quite conservative in motivation), but by 1907 he was saying that the Majles and its plans were leading away from the initial aims of the movement and that the constitutionalists were importing ‘the customs and practices of the abode of disbelief’ (i.e. the West). Eventually he shifted further, to express open support for the monarchy against the Majles, which he denounced as illegitimate. He also railed against Jews, Bahais and Zoroastrians, exaggerating their part in the constitutionalist movement. Other *mojtaheds*, like Tabatabai, were more willing to accept Western ideas into the framework of political structures that were necessary to govern human affairs in the absence of the Hidden Emam. But it is fair to say that Nuri understood better than many of the *ulema* the direction that constitutionalism was leading, and (from his perspective) the dangers of it. The general ferment of ideas had affected the *ulema* too, and the *ulema* had never been a united bloc of opinion (no more than any group of intellectuals ever is). The initial success of the revolution had opened up divisions within the revolutionary movement, as has happened with similar movements in other times and places (something similar happened in several countries in Europe in the revolutionary year of 1848–9). The shift of part of the *ulema* into opposition to the constitutional movement was ultimately fatal for the revolution.

In June 1908 the Shah decided that he had enough support to act and sent the Cossack brigade to attack the Majles. The troops fired shells at the building until the delegates gave in, and the assembly was closed. Many leading members were arrested and executed, while others escaped overseas. The Shah’s coup was successful in Tehran, but not in all the provinces. Many of the most dedicated and enthusiastic constitutionalists came from Azerbaijan, which had long been one of the more agriculturally productive, densely populated and prosperous parts of the country, as well as socially and educationally more advanced. In the years around 1900 some of the inhabitants had travelled over the border into Russia for work, bringing back radical political ideas with them. Now, in Tabriz, the regional capital, delegates from the constitutionalist

regional assembly and their supporters (notably the charismatic ex-brigand Sattar Khan) successfully held the city against the royal governor and his forces for a time. In doing so they had the help of a young teacher, Howard Baskerville, an idealistic American from Nebraska, only recently arrived in the city to work as a teacher. Baskerville fought alongside the constitutionalists and was eventually killed leading an attack on the besieging forces in April 1909.

In 1907, newly allied to each other and France, and concerned at Germany's burgeoning overseas presence, Britain and Russia had finally set aside their mutual suspicions and reached a treaty over their interests in Persia. The treaty showed no respect for the new conditions of popular sovereignty in the country (and proved *inter alia* that the apparent British protection of the revolutionaries in their legation in 1906 had little real significance). It divided Persia into three zones: a zone of Russian influence in the north (including Tabriz, Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan – most of the major cities), a British zone in the south-east, adjacent to the border with British India, and a neutral zone in the middle.

One consequence of the treaty was that the Russians, following the Shah's coup of June 1908, intolerant as ever of any form of popular movement, were emboldened to send in troops to restore Qajar rule in Tabriz. But the nature of the electoral process for the Majles had helped to create a depth of resilience in the revolutionary movement. The regional assemblies set up in cities like Tabriz and Isfahan by the first stage of the process served as refuges and as centres of resistance for the constitutionalists, which meant that defeat in Tehran was not the end of the story. Even when the Russians took Tabriz some of the revolutionaries were able to escape to Gilan and continue their resistance with other locals there. In July 1909 they made a move on Tehran, coordinated with a move from the south, where revolutionaries in Isfahan had allied themselves with the local Bakhtiari tribe. As the revolutionaries moved back into the capital Mohammad Ali Shah fled to the Russian legation. He was deposed, went into exile in Russia, and was replaced by his young son, Ahmad (though Ahmad was not crowned until July 1914).

The constitutionalists were back in control, but the revolution had turned more dangerous. The divisions between radicals and conservatives had deepened, and the violence that had first destroyed and then reinstated the Majles also had its effect; many of the armed groups that had retaken the capital stayed on. Several prominent Bakhtiaris took

office in the government. The *ulema* were divided, and many sided with the royalists, effectively rejecting the whole project of constitutionalism. But within a few days the leader of the conservative *ulema*, Nuri, was arrested, tried and hanged for his alleged connections with the coup of June 1908. Both wings of political opinion carried out a series of assassinations – Behbehani was killed, and later Sattar Khan. The radicals (the Democratic Party in the Majles) found themselves denounced by bazaar crowds as heretics and traitors and some of them were forced into exile. There was disorder in many provinces, it became impossible to collect taxes, tribal leaders took over in some areas, and brigandage became commonplace. To try to restore order, to counter the influence of the Russian-officered Cossack brigade, and above all to establish a body that could enforce tax collection, the Majles set up a gendarmerie trained by Swedish officers.

The constitutionalist government also appointed a young American, Morgan Schuster, as financial adviser. Schuster presented clear-sighted, wide-ranging proposals that addressed law and order and the government's control of the provinces as well as more narrowly financial matters; and began to put them into effect. But the Russians disliked Schuster and objected to his appointment of a British officer to head up the Swedish gendarmerie, on the basis that the appointment should not have been made within their sphere of influence without their consent. The British acquiesced. Schuster assessed, probably correctly, that the deeper Russian motive was to keep the Persian government's affairs in a state of chaotic bankruptcy, and thus in a position of relative weakness. If the Russians could keep the Persian government as a supplicant for Russian loans then they would be better able to manipulate it. Any determined effort to put the government of Persia on a sound financial footing, as Schuster's reforms threatened to do, was a threat to Russian interests. The Russians presented an ultimatum: Schuster had to go. A body of women surged into the Majles to demand that the ultimatum be rejected, and the Majles agreed, insisting that the American should stay. But the Russians sent troops to Tehran and as they drew near, the Bakhtiariis and conservatives in the cabinet carried through what was effectively another coup, and dismissed both Schuster and the Majles in December 1911.¹⁴ That date is the one normally taken for the end, and the failure, of the Constitutional Revolution.

Like a love affair, a revolution can turn the familiar world upside

down. It is easy for the participants to be so overwhelmed with delight at their initial success that they make mistakes later because they fail to grasp that the revolution will continue to revolve. While new possibilities may excite some, others may be afraid. New, previously concealed forces may be released. And however poignant the memory of the early days of unity and excitement, later developments and mistakes, however much regretted, make their loss irretrievable. In a revolution, new leaders emerge from unexpected directions, surprising those who were too quick to think themselves the masters, or proprietors. This happened in the French and in the Russian revolutions; also in the Iranian revolution of 1906–11. And also in 1979.

Schuster later wrote a book about his time in Iran called *The Strangling of Persia*, in which he expressed his admiration for the moral courage and determination of the people he worked with in Iran. The book explained much about the revolution, and about Iran at the time, but also about Schuster's attitudes to the country, and something of the reasons why he and by extension the US were so highly regarded by Iranians. Earnest, idealistic Americans like Schuster and Baskerville made a strong impression on Iranians at this time, as did wider US principles of anti-colonialism and self-determination, later promoted by Woodrow Wilson. The United States in this phase and later looked like the partner Iran had long hoped to find in the West; anti-colonial, liberal, progressive; modern, but not imperialist; a benevolent foreign power that would, for once, treat Iran with respect, as an agent in her own right, not as an instrument. That sentiment toward the US persisted, despite disappointments.

The efforts of well-meaning individuals like Schuster and Baskerville could do little enough to swing the balance in favour of the constitutionalists in 1906–11. The revolution fell victim to violent factionalism among the Iranians themselves, and also to the machinations of the Russians and the British. But the Constitutional Revolution was an important event, not just for Iran but for the region and arguably the world as a whole; and it was far from a complete failure. Apart from an abortive move in Ottoman Turkey in the 1870s, it was the first attempt in the Middle East by a people of the region to set up a liberal, representative government by its own efforts. The experience of representative government had a powerful, unifying effect in confirming and energizing Iranian nationalism. The spirit and the goals of constitutionalism stayed alive and vigorous, and were a major factor in Iranian political

life for the rest of the century. Subsequent regimes repeatedly bypassed or flouted it, but the constitution of 1906 remained in force until the revolution of 1979. The Majles continued to be elected and to meet, and in 1919 was instrumental in preventing a post-war attempt to establish a British protectorate in Iran.

A young British officer in Persia at the time, Arnold Wilson, wrote sceptically and rather patronizingly after a long conversation with two optimistic Majles deputies on the road from Shiraz to Isfahan in 1907:

The majlis will not work: it has no roots in the soil and no tradition: either the Qajars or some other dynasty will eventually destroy it . . . but Persian nationalism will get stronger for it has roots and a tradition as old as Persia itself.¹⁵

Morgan Schuster blamed the Russians and the British for the failure of the revolution (and perhaps, by extension, the attitudes of some like Wilson). He wrote of the Majles:

It was loyally supported by the great mass of the Persians, and that alone was sufficient justification for its existence.¹⁶

Ahmad Kasravi, who was a supporter of constitutionalism and also lived through the period of the revolution, blamed the split between the constitutionalists and the conservative clergy:

So the people were of two minds. Bit by bit, a division appeared between the two ways of thinking, and when the mullahs did not see it in their interests to cooperate with the constitution and had to part, a big faction went with them. But the faction that stood fast did not find the way forward to struggle and remained confused. This faction of modernists could not show the people the way forward, either.¹⁷

All three views have some truth to them. Many of the alliances and interests that played out in 1906–11 made their appearance again in 1979. But the events of the Constitutional Revolution were also present in the minds of Iranians in the 1970s as a warning. In particular, the more politically minded among the clergy had learned the lesson that the *ulema* should not allow political leadership to slide out of their hands as they had in 1906.

Although the Qajar government, with Russian support, ostensibly regained its position in December 1911, it never really restored its