

TIMES PAST
1979

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban are the big threats today. But Americans got their first taste of radical Islam 35 years ago, when Muslim extremists seized power in Iran.

BY VERONICA MAJEROL

When members of the terrorist group ISIS recently posted videos depicting the gruesome beheadings of three Americans, it was only the latest chapter in a decades-long battle between the U.S. and Islamic militants.

That battle began 35 years ago, when Iran erupted in revolution and 66 Americans were taken hostage at the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979. The events came as a shock, since Iran had been a strong U.S. ally. The ouster of Iran's secular monarchy and its replacement by an anti-American Muslim theocracy gave Americans their first taste

of the radical brand of Islam that has come to define much of the Middle East today.

"Iran was the first modern state devoted to *jihad* [holy war] against the West," says Clifford May, president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, D.C. He adds that radical Islamist groups today, like the Taliban and ISIS, are "all fruit from the same tree . . . that grew from that 1979 revolution."

Before the revolution, Iran's Shah (king), Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, had ruled since inheriting the throne from his father in 1941. From America's perspective, the Shah had done a lot of good things for Iran, bringing an ancient and backward nation into the 20th century and creating one of the region's most advanced economies. Using the nation's vast oil wealth, he built modern roads and highways, hospitals and universities, museums and movie theaters. He gave peasants land-ownership rights and



Watch a video featuring recent interviews with Iranians;



Download two primary source speeches at www.upfrontmagazine.com

'Death to America':
Protesters rally around a portrait of
Ruhollah Khomeini, Jan. 1979 (right);
Iranians burn an American flag at
the U.S. Embassy, 1980 (left).



lion. (His 500 guests feasted on imported caviar, peacock, and champagne, and slept in carpeted tents with marble bathrooms.) Middle-class Iranians wanted more political freedom and grew tired of the regime's repressiveness—including its brutal secret police, known as the Savak, which imprisoned, tortured, or killed thousands of political dissidents.

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

To some Iranians, this was welcome progress. But others began to see American influence as a threat to their Persian culture.

"By being the supporter of the Shah," says Ervand Abrahamian, a history professor at Baruch College in New York, "the United States fell into the image of being the enemy."

The widespread anger among Iranians

helped the Shiite clergy mobilize opposition to the Shah. In January 1978, students in the Iranian city of Qom took to the streets to protest the monarchy. They were encouraged by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a firebrand Muslim cleric who was living in exile in France. After police shot and killed 20 demonstrators, the largely peaceful protests spread throughout Iran and swelled to hundreds of thousands, then millions of people.

The Shah imposed martial law. But the protests continued anyway, along with violent confrontations with security forces. By December 1978, 2 million Iranians were on the streets of Tehran, demanding that the Shah abdicate.

The Shah and his wife fled Iran in January 1979, ushering in a brief period of confusion before Khomeini returned to Iran and assumed control as "Supreme Leader." Iran's new constitution provided for an elected legislature and president, but the real power lay with a small and secretive group of *mullahs* (religious clerics), headed by Khomeini.

Khomeini and the mullahs—and a roving army of "spiritual enforcers" known as the Revolutionary Guards—ended up

**Khomeini
called the
U.S. the
'Great Satan.'**

expanded rights for women. President Jimmy Carter, who traveled to Tehran for a New Year's Eve dinner in 1977, toasted the Shah and his nation as "an island of stability" in the Middle East.

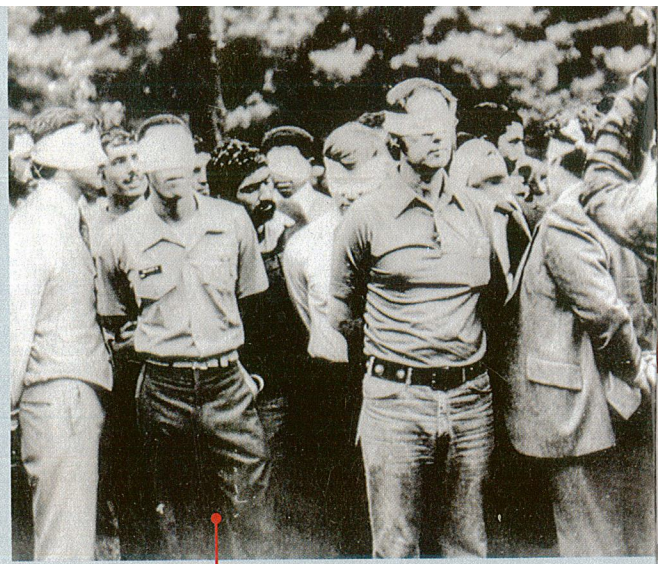
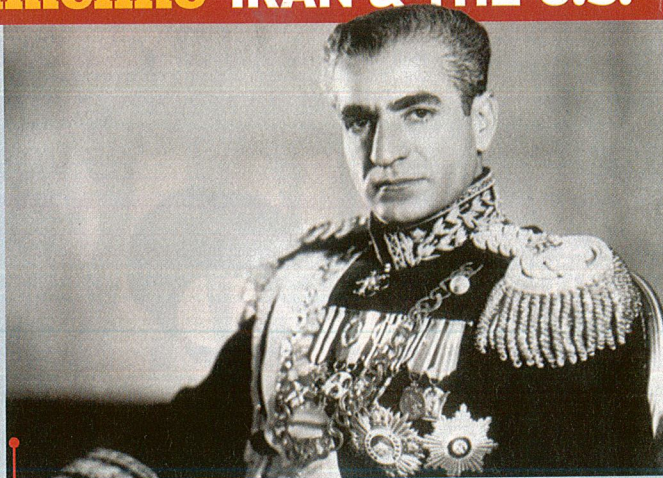
A \$200 Million Party

But dissatisfaction was festering among ordinary Iranians. Many came to resent the royal family's ostentatious wealth. In 1971, to mark the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire,* the Shah threw a party that cost an estimated \$200 mil-

AFP/GETTY IMAGES (AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH POSTER)

*Although Iran is in the Middle East, its people are Persian, not Arab.

Timeline IRAN & THE U.S.



1941 American Ally

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

1953 Iran & the C.I.A.

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

1979

Revolution & Hostage Crisis

Months after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini seizes power in Iran, 66 Americans are taken hostage at the U.S. embassy in Tehran; most are held for 444 days. The crisis mars Jimmy Carter's presidency, helping Ronald Reagan win the 1980 election.

substituting one autocratic regime for another. Women lost some of the social gains they had made under the Shah and were forced to wear head coverings whatever their beliefs.* Opponents were imprisoned and tortured as ruthlessly as under the Shah.

America Held Hostage

Iranian anger at the U.S. exploded in October 1979, when President Carter allowed the Shah to come to the U.S. for cancer treatment.

On November 4, thousands of young Iranians, many of them students, stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took 66 Americans hostage. Bound and blindfolded, the embassy workers were paraded through the streets as crowds of Iranians burned American flags and shouted "Death to America!" The students wore badges bearing the portrait of Khomeini and quoted lines from his speeches, like "America must know it can't play with the feelings of the Iranian nation."

Though Khomeini didn't order the taking of hostages, he immediately endorsed



it, identifying the U.S. as "the Great Satan" and an "enemy of Islam."

The 14-month standoff that followed humbled President Carter and led to the deaths of eight American servicemen in a failed rescue operation. In the U.S., people held vigils and wore yellow ribbons to express solidarity with the hostages. As the crisis dragged on, Americans grew increasingly frustrated—a sentiment that helped Ronald Reagan

in his successful 1980 presidential campaign against Carter.

The hostages, held for 444 days, weren't released until the moment Reagan took the oath of office, on Jan. 20, 1981. Khomeini died in 1989 and was succeeded by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is still in power today (see "Who's in Charge?").

The U.S. and Iran have been at odds ever since the Iranian Revolution, with tensions rising in the past decade over Iran's refusal to halt its suspected nuclear weapons program.

The latest round of sanctions that the U.S. and its allies have imposed on Iran for its nuclear program have hit the Iranian economy hard. When President Hassan Rouhani, who is more moderate than recent leaders, took office in 2013, he promised Iranians that he'd get the economy back on track by working out a deal with the West. The U.S. and its allies are now in talks with Iran, but it's unclear whether a real deal would ultimately stick.

Ironically, the U.S. and Iran, a Shiite Muslim nation, now find themselves on the same side, as enemies of ISIS—the

*Some, however, credit post-revolutionary Iran for opening up educational opportunities for women, who now make up 60 percent of university students.

Iran's former president,
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013),
cheered on Iran's nuclear program
and declared that Israel should be
"wiped off the map."



1985 Iran-Contra

The "Iran-Contra affair" hurts President Reagan's second term: The U.S. secretly sold arms to Iran in exchange for the release of Americans held by Iranian-backed militants in Lebanon. The money went to anti-communist rebels, known as Contras, in Nicaragua.

2006-2014 Sanctions & Negotiations

In 2006, the U.N. approves sanctions on Iran for its suspected nuclear weapons program. The U.S. and Europe later tighten sanctions, and Iran agrees to negotiations, which are now at a critical point.

TODAY ISIS

Is the enemy of my enemy my friend? The U.S. and Iran—a Shiite Muslim nation—are both foes of the Sunni extremist group ISIS. But that may not be enough to get Washington and Tehran to work together.

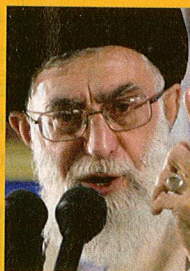
Who's in Charge?

Iran is a theocracy with unelected religious leaders wielding great power

UNELECTED

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

The Supreme Leader is commander-in-chief of the military and appoints the head of the judiciary and six members of the Guardian Council. He serves for life. Ayatollah Khamenei succeeded Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who died in 1989.



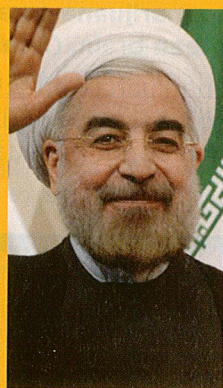
Guardian Council

Made up of six Islamic clerics and six jurists, the council must approve all laws passed by parliament and all candidates for parliament and president. In 2013, it approved only eight presidential candidates out of more than 700 who applied to run.

ELECTED

President Hassan Rouhani

Presidents are elected by the people and serve no more than two consecutive four-year terms. Despite being the public face of Iran, their powers are limited.



Parliament

The 290 members of the parliament, known as the *Majlis*, are elected by popular vote every four years. All bills they pass are subject to approval by the Guardian Council.

Sunni Muslim extremist group trying to establish an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Though that should, in theory, provide an opening for cooperation, the troubled history between the U.S. and Iran makes collaboration unlikely. In September, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said he was open to working with Iran on ISIS, but Ayatollah Khamenei has publicly rejected the idea.

Anthony Cordesman, a Middle East expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says the world has gotten more complicated since the Iranian Revolution 35 years ago. For one thing, he says, radical Islamist groups today, from Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS in the Middle East to Al Shabab in Africa, each have their own agendas that they'll stop at nothing to impose.

"What is really different [today] is the emphasis on violence," he says. "In terms of conspiracy theories and the degree and willingness to use violence, those have certainly gotten worse." •

With reporting by Roger Cohen of the Times; and Peter Edidin and Gabriel Tyler.