Iran and America: The Failure of Understanding

A historian of 19th century Islam predicted Khomeini's revolution more accurately than any CIA or State Department analyst

Some 6000 Ph.D.-holding political scientists work in the United States. Less than ten of them, by some counts only three, specialize in the contemporary domestic politics of Iran.

"America knows astonishingly little about Iran," writes one of these experts, James Bill of the University of Texas at Austin. According to another, Richard Cottam of the University of Pittsburgh, "American diplomacy has seemed to be ignorant of Iranian history."

What the handful of academic specialists have to say about Iranian politics is of particular interest because the conventional channels of information—the U.S. embassy in Tehran, the CIA, and most of the American press—have been conspicuously inadequate in their performance over the last decade.

The political scientists did not predict the date of the Shah's downfall or the quarter from which he would be deposed. But they seem to have perceived the instability of the Shah's regime at least as clearly as did the CIA or the State Department.

For a prediction that there might be a religious-led revolution in Iran, headed by Khomeini specifically, it is necessary to turn not to the CIA or State Department estimates but to a learned article published in 1972 by a scholar of 19th century Islam.

The Shah left Iran on 16 January 1979, after a chain of increasingly violent disturbances that began a year earlier, in January 1978. The quality of political reporting from Iran by U.S. government agencies was examined by the House Select Committee on Intelligence, which rendered a verdict of "no better than fair." As late as September 1978, 4 months before the Shah's downfall, the Defense Intelligence Agency predicted that the Shah "is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years." The CIA, according to the House committee's report, was ahead of its defense counterpart with an assessment in August 1978 that was at least entitled "Iran after the Shah." But the report in its preface asserted that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a 'prerevolutionary' situation." As for the State Department, its Bureau of Intelligence and Research lacked a full-time Iran expert and so produced no intelligence report on Iran during 1978, the House committee notes.

The Bureau did do something, though. It convened two seminars, held in March and October 1978, at which academic specialists were invited to share their views with mid-level government analysts and policy-makers. A paper given at the March 1978 seminar by James Bill seems to have been as clear a warning of the impending revolution as any that U.S. government had available. Bill's paper, entitled "Monarchy in crisis," warned that as the violence escalated, more and more groups would coalesce in opposition to the Shah's regime. "As this occurs," the paper concluded, "the Shah will have lost the will and capacity to use his traditional tactics of political control. Unless something is done to break this wildly spinning vicious circle, the future of the current actions in the Iranian political drama can only be a grim one. And the American future in Iran can in no way be considered bright."

Even Bill did not foresee who would replace the Shah; in an article in the Winter 78/79 issue of *Foreign Affairs* he suggested that "the most probable alternative if the Pahlavi dynasty should be destroyed by force and violence is that a left-wing, progressive group of middle-ranking army officers would take charge." Almost no political analyst, in or out of government, seems to have perceived the religious establishment as even a possible focus of opposition to the Shah's regime. According to the House committee report, the CIA had no useful contact with the religious opposition for the 2 years prior to November 1977.

For a clear and unequivocal statement that the religious opposition in Iran might be considerable, that it had the capacity to organize the rural and urban masses for political action, and that Khomeini specifically might be able to shape this instrument into "a popular and even revolutionary force," it is necessary to look to the writings of Hamid Algar, a scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, whose specialty is the relationship between religion and state in 19th century Iran.

Algar is by origin an Englishman who became a Muslim and took an Islamic first name. He brought his understanding to bear on the contemporary scene in an essay published in 1972.* Although other scholars believed that the political power of the ulama, or religious establishment, would continue to decline in Iran, Algar perceived a direct line of descent between the successful political opposition mounted by the ulama in the 19th century and the contemporary struggle of the Khomeini-led section of the ulama against the Pahlavi regime. According to Algar, the tradition of opposition to autocratic power and injustice stems from the fundamental paradigm of Shi'ite belief, the martyrdom of the righteous Imam Hussein at the hands of the wicked Caliph Yazid. When the Shah started to be denounced as the "Yazid of the age," a powerful mixture of religion and politics was brewing.

From his knowledge of the religious establishment, Algar in 1972 had no difficulty in identifying the exiled Khomeini as "the most eminent representative of the religious opposition to the present regime in Iran." Khomeini's targets were the same then as now: the Shah's autocratic rule and the American influence in Iran. Political repression made estimates difficult, but in Algar's view Khomeini's following was "still considerable," as was the religious opposition.

Khomeini, Algar noted, "is highly regarded not only by those who owe him loyalty as *marja'* [a high religious title], but also by secular and even leftist segments of the opposition. After the ambiguities of Kashani and the quietism of Burujirdi [his two predecessors as preeminent religious leader of Iran], the clear stance of Khumayni and his followers has been able to win the confidence of many intellectuals in the ulama as a popular and even revolutionary force. . . . The ability of the ulama to organize the urban and rural masses for po-

*"The oppositional role of the ulama in twentieth century Iran," in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*, Nikki R. Keddie, Ed. (University of California Press, 1972).

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litical action is clearly recognized, and positive mention of Khumayni is a frequent feature of the leftist press in exile." Algar concludes:

> It must be recognized that in the present age as in the years of the Constitutional Revolution [the events of 1905–1911, in which the ulama played a major role], the state is held in certain quarters to be tyrannical and irreligious, and subservient to foreign and infidel powers. It is true that the state has now a more effective apparatus of repression at its disposal than was the case in the nineteenth century, and also that there are certain powerful ideological currents in the opposition to the regime that to an extent run counter to the influence of Khumayni and his followers. Yet it would be rash to predict the progressive disintegration of the political role of the ulama. Despite all the inroads of the modern age, the Iranian national consciousness still remains wedded to Shi'i Islam, and when the integrity of the nation is held to be threatened by internal autocracy and foreign hegemony, protests in religious terms will continue to be voiced, and the appeals of men such as Ayatullah Khumayni to be widely heeded.

Why should a historian of 19th century Islam have read the political situation in Iran apparently more accurately than all the U.S. government's political officers and intelligence analysts? The answer lies partly in Washington and partly in Tehran. According to an analyst familiar with both State Department and CIA reporting, the attention of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was focussed not on the Iranian political scene but on matters of concern to policy-makers in Washington, such as oil, the extent of Soviet penetration, nuclear proliferation, and the Persian Gulf. CIA reporting was targeted even more narrowly, since the agency had considerably fewer resources and a tighter list of requirements.

The irony of the Iranians' current charges that the embassy was a nest of spies is that American understanding of Iranian problems would be much deeper if it had been. In fact, because the Shah's Iran was regarded as a friendly country, the CIA was forbidden to make contact with the opposition. As for the State Department, even without such a restriction it seems to have evinced a long-standing distaste for encouraging any of its officers to mingle with the natives. James Bill, who once spent 6 months interviewing the staff of the Tehran embassy, said recently in *Foreign Affairs*:

"The American diplomatic and intelligence mission in Tehran, one of whose tasks it is to remain au courant with things Iranian, has had a most undistinguished record for many years. The ambassadors and chiefs of mission have, until very recently, been more concerned with confirming Washington's stereotype of Iran than encouraging their diplomats to develop a true understanding of Iranian society. . . . Few American officials have had the linguistic fluency, intellectual curiosity, personal fortitude or occupational time to pierce the crust of Iranian society. . . . An examination of the Embassy's invitation lists over several years indicates that the same old faces and families have long encircled the American diplomatic community. Speaking impeccable English and often presenting themselves as dedicated voices of the opposition, these members of the social elite have helped shape the official American image of Iran since the mid-1950's."

Bill is equally critical of the American national press, whose reporting of Iran over the years has been "consistently sparse, superficial and distorted." In the decade from 1965 to 1975 the *New York Times* carried only 195 references to the Iranian domestic scene, compared with 1114 to Israel and 263 even to Ethiopia, Bill states. Other academics agree that coverage of Iran by the American press has been scant, and generally inferior to that of *Le Monde*.

Another reason for the lack of American understanding of Iran lies in the nature of Iranian society. Long accustomed to domination by foreign powers, whether by the Mongols, Russia, Britain, or the United States, Iranians have developed to a high degree of subtlety the habit of concealing their true political opinions from outsiders. There is even a special word for such dissimulation—*taqieh*. A more substantial barrier even than *taqieh* was the Pahlavi policy of controlling American perceptions of Iran. Contrary to the current Iranian accusations that the Shah was a puppet of the United States, he was in fact a highly skilled autocrat whose art was nowhere more in evidence than in manipulating his supposedly dominant partner. Within Iran, he bottled up the CIA, controlled the State Department's contacts, and fed the foreign press a diet of ready-made news from his Ministry of Information. In the United States he implanted a sophisticated public relations organization and fostered a network of influential Americans, while his visible ambassador and brother-in-law, Ardeshir Zahedi, skillfully courted the Washington establishment. By a dazzling feat of political legerdemain, the Shah kept the eyes of official Washington focussed on him alone, as if the rest of Iran didn't exist.

In this situation, the role of American academic specialists has been particularly important because they had almost unimpeded access to all strata of Iranian society. A general feeling among the experts is that the State Department has made little use of their expertise and their contacts with Iranians. Marvin Zonis, a Persian-speaking political scientist at the University of Chicago, says he has not been consulted since 4 November, when the embassy hostages were taken, and only occasionally before that. Another expert planned to make a private visit to Tehran but dropped the idea because of lack of interest in Washington. "I think the government never got itself organized to use the expertise of the academic community in any effective way at all," says William Hanaway, the president of the 50-member American Institute of Iranian Studies.

One reason for the dearth of specialists in Iranian affairs is that area studies, which became fashionable in the late 1950's, were among the first departments to be cut back by universities when funds became tight. Regime change and regime collapse is one focus of the political science program funded by the National Science Foundation; none of the grantees, alas, is studying Iran.

American ignorance of Iran is so profound that there is no general basis of information for deciding between the Iranian claim that the Shah is a criminal and the conventional Western view of him as a progressive monarch. Senator Edward Kennedy's sudden public conversion to the former viewpoint illustrates the problem. The work of the handful of academic specialists will be particularly important in fostering a measured assessment of the Shah's rule. Zonis, in his 1971 book *The Political Elite of Iran*, draws a complex portrait of an autocrat who governed by co-opting his opponents. High paying government jobs enticed opponents into the regime; a rigged parliament and a blatantly political system of justice kept the cost of disaffection high. Against those who refused to be co-opted, the Shah's sanctions were exile, house arrest, or imprisonment. According to Zonis, these tools were employed selectively and only as a last resort.

After 1971, however, the tactics of co-option broke down, and coercive measures, including torture and execution, became more commonplace. Yet for a long time, the Shah's system worked. Enormous economic change took place in Iran, even though there was no political change. Bill regards the Shah as "undoubtedly one of the cleverest leaders of this century."

The Iranian charge that the United States is to blame for all the Shah's misdeeds is a simplification of a complex issue. It was Iranians who were successfully co-opted and corrupted by their

own government. The United States did restore the Shah through almost open intervention by the CIA in August 1953, and helped set up his dreaded secret police, the SAVAK. But American influence over the Shah did not suffice to prevent him initiating the 1973 hike of OPEC oil prices. Iranians, a nation of conspiracy buffs, paid more attention to such purely heedless American acts as the appointment of former CIA director Richard Helms as ambassador to Tehran.

Iranian misperceptions of the United States and its role in Iran are the Iranians' problem. For the United States, the general ignorance of Iranian history, religion, and culture has made a direct contribution to the present impasse. "I am not suggesting that understanding would solve everything," says Ruhollah Ramazani, a political scientist at the University of Virginia, "but in a democracy you cannot afford not to be informed."

—NICHOLAS WADE

No CAT Scans in Mexico for Shah?

HUGH DOWNS: *The Shah had to come here? He couldn't have stayed in Mexico and got good treatment?*

BARBARA WALTERS: *Well, what he said is, and he keeps saying: He said that he had pills—pills, forgive me, I'm a little excited because I just left him a few hours ago—chills and fever the whole time he was in Mexico. He was being treated for malaria, and that made his condition worse. Then he had intense pain and jaundice.*

The reason he had to come there was for the diagnosis. They didn't know whether it was the gall bladder itself, or whether it was the tumor pressing on the gall bladder, and he had to have a very new and sophisticated instrument called a body scanner. They didn't have that there. They do have it here, and in order to find out whether it was the cancer or the gall bladder, he had to come to this country.

DOWNS: *I see.*

WALTERS: *He did not want to, he said, his doctor said—*

DOWNS: *He didn't want—*

WALTERS: *And the Empress, and they all said: You must, you must come. There are very few of these scanners in the world. They're very very new.*

On 22 November, Thanksgiving day, ABC News Correspondent Barbara Walters interviewed the ex-Shah of Iran in his room at the New York Hospital–Cornell Medical Center. No tape or film was made, for the Shah felt it would be played in Iran and could be misinterpreted. Walters did take notes, and the dialogue between Walters and Downs is from a report aired on the ABC News Magazine 20/20.

The idea that the Shah had to come to the United States for diagnosis unavailable in Mexico is challengeable.

Mexico has at least 16 CAT (computerized axial tomography) scanners. Nine are in Mexico City, three in Monterrey, one in Tlapan, and three in Guadalajara. Five of the Mexican machines scan only a patient's head, 11 scan both head and body. Of these, the newest are three machines built by Ohio Nuclear and known as Delta 2010's. These machines complete a scan in less than 5 seconds and are considered some of the best available anywhere in the world. Older scanners sometimes take 4 to 6 minutes. Estimates by U.S. industry executives put the world total of CAT scanners at 2600, some 1400 of them in the United States.

Body scans are most frequently used to diagnose suspected abdominal problems. A report published in August 1978 by the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment says, "CAT scanning can image tumors in the liver, pancreas, kidney, pelvic and retroperitoneal space that are invisible on conventional x-ray films. In patients with jaundice, CAT scanning may reveal whether the bile ducts are obstructed. In cases of suspected tumor, CAT scanning may reveal spread of the tumor, and thus differentiate patients who might benefit from surgery from those for whom it would be futile."

The Shah is said to have been battling cancer of the lymph nodes for the past 6 years. With chills, fever, weight loss, and jaundice apparently plaguing him in Mexico, a CAT scan as well as other diagnostic tests were needed to see if the problem was cancer, simple blockage of the bile duct, or both.

Experts are at odds over whether good quality CAT scans of the Shah's abdomen could have been made in Mexico. "He could have been taken care of down there without any problem," says the chief radiologist from one midwestern medical school, who has colleagues in Mexico City. "I'm sure they have what is needed."

Others say having a good machine is not enough. "There is a great deal of difference in terms of the experience of the people who are using them," says S. Lewis Meyer, director of marketing for English Medical Instruments. "If I wanted a CAT examination that would provide the maximum amount of diagnostic information, I probably wouldn't go to Mexico City. I'd go to Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Chicago, or someplace else where people have had systems installed for some length of time, and have developed the experience to know what they are looking at."

It appears that the Shah and his doctors felt the same way. On the night of 22 October, he was flown to New York. The next day doctors performed CAT scans of his abdomen. The three CAT scanners at New York Hospital range from the relatively old to the very new. Their General Electric CT/T 8800 is "the current state of the art," as a competing manufacturer put it.

Not just the United States and Mexico have the machines. General Electric, which entered the scanner market just 3 years ago, already has body scanners in Australia, Korea, Japan, Canada, Argentina, Columbia, Brazil, Norway, Sweden, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Russia, Syria, and Iran.

The diagnostic work at New York Hospital showed the Shah's acute problem to be obstruction of the common bile duct by a stone. It also revealed other stones in his gall bladder, and a "lymphoproliferative disorder," according to a press release from New York Hospital. The question of whether the operation on the gall bladder, the radiation treatments for cancer, and the removal of the remaining stone could have been carried out in Mexico or some other country has not yet been addressed. On the issue of CAT scanners and diagnosis, the record speaks for itself.

—WILLIAM J. BROAD

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