

About the Author

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Key Points

- ◆ Iran's experience in 1978–1979 and after highlights key factors that could shape the outcome of the political struggles defining the Arab spring of 2011: the quality of regime leadership; the nature of civil-military relations; the training, equipment, employment, and cohesion of regime security forces; and the extent of foreign support.
- ◆ The Shah's military was the main pillar of his rule but failed to quash the Islamic Revolution in 1978–1979. Reasons include the Shah's weak leadership, a military incapable of acting coherently to counter opposition demonstrations and propaganda, and the Shah's belief that the United States no longer supported him.
- ◆ The leadership of the Islamic Republic has avoided repeating the many mistakes of the Shah. It has acted resolutely, created specialized security forces and employed them effectively, calibrated the use of force to prevent escalating violence, and cowed much of the opposition through a campaign of intimidation.

Iran's Islamic Revolution: Lessons for the Arab Spring of 2011?

by Michael Eisenstadt

The Islamic Revolution surprised senior U.S. policymakers as well as the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. On the eve of revolution, Iran—a key U.S. ally—seemed relatively stable despite bouts of urban terrorism in the early and mid-1970s. At the first signs of escalating unrest in early 1978, neither Iranian nor U.S. officials considered the possibility that Iran's armed forces, the largest and most modern in the region (next to those of Israel), would prove unable to deal with whatever trouble lay ahead. The fall of the Shah a year later, therefore, raised searching questions regarding the role of the armed forces during the crisis and its failure to quash the revolution. The recent emergence of popular protest movements that have overthrown authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt—and that are challenging similar regimes in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria—has revived memories of the Shah and his fall. These developments have again raised questions regarding the role of armed forces during revolutions and whether Iran's experience during the Islamic Revolution and after holds relevant lessons for current developments in the Middle East.

The Shah and Armed Forces

Both the Shah and his father, Reza Shah, owed their positions and survival to the armed forces.¹ Reza Shah came to power in a 1921 coup that eventually toppled the Qajar dynasty that had ruled Iran for more than a century. In 1941, British and Soviet armies occupied Iran and forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza. The new Shah also owed his political survival to a 1953 coup engineered by the United States

and Britain, which deposed the radical, populist prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq.²

From the beginning of his reign, the armed forces were the main pillar of Mohammad Reza Shah's rule. Accordingly, the Shah was careful to cultivate the loyalty of the officer corps, providing generous salaries and a variety of benefits (subsidized housing, free education for their children, subsidized commissaries and exchanges, comfortable pensions, and, in some cases, plum jobs as provincial governors, in government ministries, or with state enterprises). The Shah personally approved all promotions above major, which generally were based more on loyalty than competence. He required all his service chiefs to report directly to him, prohibited them from meeting to plan and coordinate, and fostered rivalries to prevent them from plotting against him. The Shah also periodically reshuffled and cashiered officers to prevent power blocs from emerging within the military.

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The security services, which included SAVAK (National Intelligence and Security Organization), military intelligence, and Special Intelligence Bureau, closely monitored anyone with decisionmaking authority. Also, the Shah had to approve all troop movements and military flights, thereby stifling initiative among his commanders. While this system of control served the Shah well in normal times, it proved fatal during the revolution.

The Shah aspired to transform Iran into the dominant regional power in the Gulf. To accomplish this goal, he oversaw the dramatic expansion of the military. By 1978, Iran's armed forces were the largest in the region and, after those of Israel, the most sophisticated (the acquisition of the latest military equipment also reinforced the military's loyalty). Iran fielded 413,000 men (285,000

soldiers, 100,000 airmen, and 28,000 sailors). The army consisted of three armored divisions, three infantry divisions, and four independent brigades. Major equipment items included 1,870 tanks, 459 combat aircraft (including 200 F-4 Phantoms, and 60 F-14 Tomcats), 3 destroyers, and 3 frigates.

Origins

The roots of the Islamic Revolution can be traced to developments that long predated it. In 1963, the Shah initiated his "White Revolution," a series of far-reaching reforms intended to modernize and Westernize Iran. While these reforms produced rapid economic growth, they also led to social dislocation, rapid urbanization, and the adoption by the ruling elite of Western habits and customs that alienated traditional and religious elements in Iranian society. The reforms also threatened to undermine the economic base and influence of Iran's clerical establishment, alienating the clergy from the regime.

The Shah's modernization plans required a large foreign presence, including 9,000 U.S. military technicians and advisors and 60,000 foreign workers and businessmen (most of them American). The pervasive presence of these foreign workers—who often were paid much more than their Iranian counterparts—fostered resentment and offended the nationalist and religious sensibilities of some Iranians.³

Political modernization did not match rapid economic growth. Large parts of the population, particularly the educated middle class, chafed at not having a political voice. And an economic downturn in the mid-1970s, leading to inflation, a tighter job market, reduced government spending, and falling real income, contributed to widespread dissatisfaction at a time of rising expectations, setting the stage for the revolution.⁴

A Year of Turmoil

The spark that set off the revolution was the publication, on January 7, 1978, of an editorial in

a government newspaper that defamed the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who since 1963 had led the religious opposition to the Shah (for most of this time, from exile in Iraq).⁵ Two days later, police shot seminary students demonstrating in Qom against the editorial, killing six and wounding many more.

Few if any Iranians or Americans grasped the importance of these events when they occurred; after all, Iran had weathered violent unrest in the past. Indeed, the regime's success in dealing with the previous major episode of unrest in 1962–1963, in which the Ayatollah Khomeini also figured prominently, contributed to a sense of confidence.⁶

At a mass demonstration in Tabriz on February 18–20, 1978, to mark the end of the 40-day mourning period for the fallen Qom seminarians, however, a large crowd quickly overwhelmed the police. The government called in the army to quell the protests (the first time the army had been called on to deal with domestic unrest since 1963). Lacking proper training and equipment to deal with demonstrators, the army used excessive force, killing 6 demonstrators and wounding more than 100.

These events established a pattern that was to repeat itself in the year leading up to the Islamic Revolution: large demonstrations prompted the military to overreact, leading to fatalities and another round of demonstrations and bloodshed at the end of the mourning period, starting yet another cycle of violence.⁷ Meanwhile, the regime vacillated between attempts at conciliation—seen by the opposition as a sign of weakness—and hardline actions, which often led to fatalities and further violence. These contradictory policies helped drive events toward revolution.⁸

The progressive deterioration in the security and economic situation due to increasingly frequent demonstrations, and increasingly effective strikes by state employees and oil industry workers, eventually caused the Shah to declare martial law on September 7, 1978. The next day, the army massacred hundreds of demonstrators in Tehran. The media, parliament, and even the Shah harshly criticized the armed forces for their heavy-handed response, striking a blow at flagging military

morale.⁹ This event, which became known as “Black Friday,” further radicalized the opposition and drove events in a more violent direction.

In response to the escalating violence, the Shah appointed a military government on November 5, 1978, but continued to pursue a conciliatory approach to the opposition, including attempts at political liberalization. (For instance, the *Majles* was permitted to debate and reject military decrees.)¹⁰

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The crisis came to a head in December 1978 during the holy month of Moharram. While millions of people participated in mass demonstrations in Tehran and around the country, the military experienced its first major act of rebellion: an attack on December 11, 1978, in Tehran's Lavisan Barracks by army conscripts who killed more than a dozen officers and wounded many more. This incident inspired mutinies and acts of rebellion elsewhere, leading the armed forces to confine many units to their barracks. Amid the growing chaos and in a final bid to placate the opposition, the Shah asked longtime opposition politician Shahpour Bakhtiar to form a government. Bakhtiar agreed to do so if the Shah would leave the country, disband SAVAK, put on trial military and police personnel who shot protestors, and allow Iran's foreign affairs to be run by civilians.

Disheartened by this development, the army commander and martial law administrator for Tehran, General Gholam Ali Oveissi, resigned on January 4, 1979. Oveissi was a hardliner who opposed the Shah's abdication. His resignation further undermined military morale and reduced the prospects that the armed forces

might play an active political role after the Shah's departure. After naming a "regency council" to act in his absence, the Shah left Iran for Egypt on January 16. (He subsequently moved on to Morocco, Mexico, the Bahamas, the United States—for medical treatment—and Panama, where he died in July 1980.)

The Shah's departure effectively meant the end of his regime. Iran's senior military leaders could not decide what to do: continue to support Prime Minister Bakhtiar's government, throw their support behind the Islamic opposition, or launch a coup and impose military rule. Ayatollah Khomeini left his exile in France to return to Tehran on February 1, 1979, where he was greeted by more than 3 million people. The military made no attempt to block his return.

On February 5, Khomeini appointed a provisional government under the leadership of the veteran nationalist opposition politician Mehdi Bazargan. On February 11, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces declared its neutrality in the ongoing struggle between the Bakhtiar government and the provisional government appointed by Khomeini. Amid signs that the military was disintegrating and the opposition was looting government armories of their weapons, the council ordered all military personnel back to base. The declaration of neutrality by the military effectively yielded control of the country to Khomeini: the next day, Shahpour Bakhtiar resigned, formally marking the end of the Shah's regime.

The revolutionary government spent much of 1979 consolidating its rule, with clerical and nationalist elements vying for control over the levers of power. As part of this process, some revolutionaries wanted to abolish the military. But the new regime needed the military to consolidate its rule and deal with growing unrest in the provinces among various ethnic minorities (Kurds, Turkmens, Baluch, and Arabs) that were demanding autonomy. The regime therefore decided to purge the armed forces of former regime loyalists while taking steps to "Islamicize" them. At the same time, in May 1979, Khomeini ordered the formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to counterbalance the regular

military, which, despite the purges, was still distrusted by the revolutionaries because of its former association with the Shah and U.S. military. The mistrust was not unjustified: the government uncovered preparations for a coup in July 1980, leading to a much deeper purge of the armed forces (particularly the air force).¹¹

On October 24, 1979, the provisional government approved a new Islamic constitution, formalizing Ayatollah Khomeini's role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. One month later, on November 4, radical student activists—suspecting that the provisional government sought to repair ties with the United States—seized the U.S. Embassy. Ayatollah Khomeini endorsed the seizure the next day, causing the United States to halt the sale of arms and spare parts to Iran. Finally, on November 6, the head of the provisional government, Prime Minister

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The ratification of the new Islamic constitution in a nationwide referendum on December 2–3, 1979, and the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections in January and March 1980, respectively, marked the end of the initial period of consolidation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). While the number of people killed during this period of revolution and consolidation is still unknown, estimates vary from a low of 700 to 900 killed to a high of as many as 10,000.¹²

Military Failure

A number of factors contributed to the failure of the Iranian armed forces to quash the Islamic Revolution.

They include the Shah's character, civil-military relations, social cleavages in the military, opposition propaganda, improper training, equipment, and employment of the armed forces, and perceived mixed signals from the United States.¹³

The Shah's Character. There is a broad consensus among those who knew him that the Shah was weak, indecisive, and unwilling to take the steps necessary to stay in power. He reportedly suffered from dramatic mood swings. He was also allegedly demoralized by what he perceived as mixed signals from the United States—particularly its criticism of Iranian human rights violations and insistence on political reform. Even though the United States continued to support him, the Shah was convinced that the Carter administration was conspiring with the opposition to get rid of him. Given his past dependence on foreign support against his domestic adversaries, this perceived abandonment may have had a significant impact on his decisionmaking. Finally, the Shah was suffering from a recurrence of cancer, which had been first diagnosed in 1973. While some sources assert that his illness had no palpable impact on his judgment, others claim that medication left him listless.

Dysfunctional Civil-Military Relations. The military was incapable of action without the Shah's direction. He had barred cooperation among his service chiefs and had fed petty personal and professional jealousies among his officers to preclude such cooperation. Moreover, even when some senior officers and civilian politicians argued for tough measures against the opposition, the Shah wavered—deploying troops to quell the unrest, but then imposing restrictive rules of engagement on them; agreeing to martial law, but then quickly offering compromises that undercut its efficacy; and installing Prime Minister Bakhtiar as a concession to the opposition, but failing to order his generals to back him. Vacillation emboldened the opposition and demoralized the military, which was forced to confront the demonstrators for nearly a year without proper training and equipment, without an effective strategy, and without permission to use the means they had at their disposal, except in extremis. And when

they did use the means at hand, they were harshly criticized by the Iranian media and by the Shah.

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In the end, it tried to ride out the storm as best it could, in the hope of preserving the institution of the armed forces as well as its privileges.

Social Divisions in the Armed Forces. The military was deeply divided in their attitudes toward the regime. Senior officers were generally loyal to the Shah due to their privileged position in Iranian society. Midranking and junior officers, many drawn from the middle and lower middle classes, were split between upwardly mobile officers who identified with the armed forces and those who identified on some level with the general population or the opposition. The junior officers who attended university in Iran in the 1970s were exposed to the political currents present on campus and may have been influenced by some of them. This echelon of the officer corps was most susceptible to opposition propaganda.

The enlisted ranks were split: the professional non-commissioned officer corps was largely loyal to the Shah, but most of the military's cadre of technical specialists (especially air force warrant officers—the *homofaran*) and its large conscript force sympathized with the opposition. In 1977–1978, the contracts of many of the *homofaran* were involuntarily extended, preventing them from taking higher paying jobs in the civilian sector. This led to widespread dissatisfaction and mass defections to the opposition during the revolution. The conscript force consisted largely of the

sons of peasants and the urban poor, and often endured poor conditions of service. Young, lonely conscripts serving far from home were especially susceptible to the propaganda of local political activists and clerics during the revolution.

Opposition Propaganda. The revolution owed a good measure of its success to the opposition's deft propaganda campaign, which sought to win over young conscripts and junior and midlevel officers. In so doing, the opposition

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exploited fissures in the military. Young conscripts were generally from the socially conservative lower and lower middle classes and thus tended to identify on some level with the demonstrators. They were particularly susceptible to opposition propaganda and religious appeals.

The opposition took both "soft" and "hard" approaches toward the armed forces. Demonstrators handed out flowers to soldiers, and young conscripts who wanted to desert were assisted with a change of civilian clothes and enough money for the fare to their home village or city. Soldiers were urged not to open fire on demonstrators and were promised a warm reception if they came over to the opposition. They were also constantly reminded of Khomeini's religious decrees, which provided religious sanction for the opposition. On the other hand, the opposition promised that those with blood on their hands or who refused to break with the regime would eventually be punished, and warned the army against a coup, threatening an unending holy war by the people if it did so.

Improper Training, Equipment, and Employment. From 1945 through 1963, the primary mission of the armed forces was internal security. After 1963, it was organized primarily for external defense. It was

therefore not organized, equipped, or trained for the internal security mission or for crowd control. As a result, the military response to large demonstrations was often inappropriate—even though the armed forces were instructed not to use lethal force, except in extremis. When force was used, it was often enough to further inflame and embolden the opposition and provoke additional violence, without either cowing or crushing the opposition.

"Mixed" U.S. Signals. Great Britain and the Soviet Union were responsible for putting the Shah on the throne in 1941, when they forced his father to abdicate, while Great Britain and the United States were behind the military coup that ensured that he remained on the throne in 1953. Accordingly, the Shah was sensitive to perceived shifts in the position of his great power patrons. The Shah apparently believed that the Carter administration's criticism of Iran's human rights policies, despite Washington's repeated declarations of support, was proof that the United States was conspiring with the opposition to depose him. On the eve of the Shah's departure, Washington sent the deputy commander of U.S. European Command, General Robert Huyser, to Iran to signal continued support for the regime and to urge the military leadership to support the civilian government that the Shah had appointed, and to not undertake a coup. However, his mission "seemed to have been misperceived by all Iranians. The generals wanted Huyser to tell them what to do, the Shah came to believe that the American general was responsible for arranging a deal between the revolutionaries and the military to end the monarchy, and the revolutionaries were convinced Huyser was in Iran to promote a coup."¹⁴

Consolidating the Revolution

The provisional government established by Ayatollah Khomeini after his return to Iran did not dismantle the armed forces, although there were elements in the new regime that wanted to do so. Instead, the new government attempted to co-opt the military and purge it of officers perceived as loyal to the former regime so that it could use the armed forces to consolidate control over

the levers of power, ensure domestic order, and deter foreign threats.

Thus, in February 1979, amid signs that the military was disintegrating, the provisional government recalled military personnel to their duty stations and attempted to reconstitute the armed forces. It undertook limited purges of the upper ranks of the military—summarily executing many of the Shah’s senior generals—and embarked on a process of Islamicization to ensure that the armed forces were loyal to the new regime. To this end, the new government established its own system of oversight and control over the military. It assigned clerical commissars to the armed forces and created an Ideological-Political Directorate to indoctrinate the armed forces in the ideology of the revolution. It also created several security organs to keep an eye on the armed forces (elements of which were eventually integrated into military intelligence, the intelligence arm of the Revolutionary Guard, and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security).

The regime also created a series of revolutionary organizations to safeguard the Islamic Republic against domestic and foreign threats, maintain internal security, and counterbalance the military, which it distrusted.¹⁵ These revolutionary organizations included the IRGC, established in May 1979, and its popular militia and reserve force, the *Basij*, established in April 1980. The *Basij* was created after the failed U.S. hostage rescue attempt in order to create an “army of 20 million” to defend Iran against foreign intervention and invasion.

Lessons of the Shah

The Islamic Republic has created a number of new security and military forces to safeguard the Islamic Revolution and suppress periodic political unrest—and has devoted significant efforts to ensure their loyalty and reliability.¹⁶ In so doing, it has taken care to learn and implement the lessons of the Shah’s military and to draw its own lessons regarding the need for decisive leadership, proper training, equipment, and employment of the

security and military forces, and intensive indoctrination to counter opposition propaganda.

According to the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the regular military is responsible for defending Iran’s borders and maintaining internal order, while the IRGC is responsible for safeguarding the revolution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. The IRGC also controls Iran’s strategic missile forces. IRGC garrisons are located near all major cities, in areas contested by various separatist groups, and in porous border regions. During the Iran-Iraq war, the IRGC’s ground, air, and naval units and the *Basij* fought alongside regular military units. The regular military and IRGC routinely hold joint military exercises, while the *Basij*, in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, has played a greater role in preparing to confront a foreign invasion, implement the regime’s new decentralized defensive concept (the so-called mosaic doctrine), and preserve the values of the revolution. The IRGC and *Basij* also routinely participate in exercises that hone their ability to deal with domestic unrest. The Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), which were created in 1991 by uniting the urban police, rural gendarmerie, and revolutionary committees (*komitehs*), partners with the *Basij* (and ultimately the IRGC) to maintain domestic order.

The intermittent unrest that has roiled Iran since the early 1990s has exposed latent tensions between the country’s political and military leadership as well as political differences between the senior echelons of the armed forces and the rank and file, forcing adjustments in the division of labor among the security forces. The first sign of trouble was the refusal of army and IRGC units garrisoned near Qazvin (a major town northwest of Tehran) to obey orders to quash riots there in August 1994. Members of these units apparently refused to turn their weapons on the Iranian people. The regime was forced to airlift in special IRGC and *Basij* anti-riot units from elsewhere to put down the violence.

The May 1997 election of reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami to the presidency put further stress on civil-military relations. Though senior IRGC officers had endorsed his conservative opponent, credible

postelection press reports indicated that IRGC personnel voted for Khatami in even greater proportions than did the general population (73 versus 69 percent).

This voting pattern indicates that the IRGC—a military organization long thought to have been a bastion of support for conservative hardliners—in fact reflected the divisions within Iranian society. These numbers should not have come as a surprise; for the past two decades, due to a drastic decline in volunteers, the IRGC has increasingly come to rely on conscripts to meet its manpower needs. The use of conscripts, however, raises questions about the reliability of the IRGC should it be needed to quell popular unrest.

The student riots of July 1999 provided the backdrop for the next major test of the security forces. These riots were put down by the LEF, which were relieved by the *Basij* once the situation had stabilized. (The former were often aided by the thugs of the *Ansar-e Hizballah*, a shady vigilante group sponsored by hardline senior clerics.) Thus, by July 1999, a new division of labor had emerged: the LEF had become the regime's first line of defense against domestic unrest, with the *Basij* providing backup. When necessary, they might be reinforced by IRGC "Special Units," followed by IRGC ground forces. The regular military's ground forces would be deployed only as a last resort.

At the height of the July 1999 unrest, 24 senior IRGC commanders published a letter to President Khatami threatening a coup should he not use his influence over his supporters to restore order quickly. Such a threat was unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic, though given the political divisions in the armed forces, it is unclear whether a coup would have succeeded. The result could well have been bloody street violence, perhaps even civil war. In the end, Iran's security forces restored order, thereby averting a coup, though the threat of overt military intervention was an unsettling new development.

Hardline elements in the security services and armed forces had in fact already covertly intervened in the political arena when they participated in the murder of dissident and reformist intellectuals starting in the

autumn of 1998 and continuing through the spring of 2000. With these extrajudicial killings, the senior leadership of the security services and armed forces signaled their loyalty to the supreme leader and other conservative rivals of President Khatami, thus dooming the first incarnation of Iran's reform movement.

The 2005 election of president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, himself a former *Basiji* and Revolutionary Guard, was a manifestation of the continued rise of these security hardliners and the ascendancy of a power elite composed largely of IRGC veterans, who form a significant bloc in the cabinet and parliament, and who have benefited from the expansion of the IRGC into nontraditional roles in business and industry.

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The protests that followed in the wake of the 2009 presidential elections constituted the most serious challenge to date to the legitimacy and stability of the Islamic Republic. They revealed new organizational arrangements for dealing with domestic unrest, with the *Ansar-e Hizballah* and *Basij* this time in the lead in dealing with the unrest, and with the LEF playing a supporting role. This arrangement was consistent with the role assigned to the *Basij* in 2003 as the first line of defense against possible U.S. regime-change efforts. Although IRGC units were available if needed, they were not committed as part of the first line of defense. Senior IRGC officers did play, however, a key role in directing the suppression of the protests—formalizing IRGC status as first among equals in the internal security arena.

In 2009, the regime also disrupted opposition communications by shutting off or monitoring Internet and cell phone communications and jamming satellite television

broadcasts. It sought to wear down the Green Movement by attrition, intimidation, and demoralization, rather than by escalating the conflict and using overwhelming force to crush it. This effort is consistent with a well-established pattern of behavior by the IRI whereby it deals with dangerous adversaries through strategies of patience, attrition, and, if need be, delay—the same strategy it adopted in dealing with the reformists and students in 1997–1999 and in nuclear negotiations with Europe and the United States since 2003. This approach might be rooted, at least in part, in regime concerns that elements of the security forces could refuse to follow orders or defect to the opposition if massive force were used against the civilian population.

Lessons of the Islamic Republic

IRI leadership does not appear afflicted by self-doubt and indecision, which paralyzed the Shah and his senior military leadership. Khamenei and his senior commanders have been resolute, and senior ranks of the security forces have acted with firmness, taking the fight to the opposition—perhaps due to the belief that any sign of weakness would further embolden them.

Basij and LEF antiriot units are now well equipped, with body armor, shields, and relatively low-tech weapons (wooden sticks, batons, chains, water cannon, and tear gas). By avoiding live fire and calibrating their response to keep fatalities down, they have precluded the mass funerals and demonstrations that energized the revolution against the Shah. Moreover, by ensuring that street clashes were bloody, close-quarter melees, they have frightened off the less stout-hearted among the opponents of the regime. Finally, their mistreatment, torture, and humiliation of detainees have demoralized and intimidated the populace and discouraged opposition to the regime.¹⁷

The IRI seems acutely aware of the vulnerabilities of the security forces, as demonstrated in past incidents, and has acted to rectify or to work around them. It has adjusted the division of labor among the security forces when this has proven necessary, creating special units in the *Basij* and LEF that are trained and equipped for

crowd control, while keeping much of the LEF and the IRGC in reserve. Finally, it has devoted considerable attention to the ideological indoctrination of security forces to ensure their loyalty and to counter enemy psychological warfare—including putative U.S. efforts to foment a “soft revolution.”

The IRI has been careful about how it employs its security forces, at least in part due to fears that the security forces might refuse orders or fracture—with some personnel deserting or going over to the opposition—if it were to try to crush the opposition with massive force. It uses violence in a calibrated fashion—there have been no Tiananmen Square moments in Tehran. Instead, the regime has sought to prevail by prolonging the struggle to wear down its domestic opponents rather than by seeking a decisive outcome through escalation and massive use of force. The regime has also detained thousands of members of the opposition—many of whom have been mistreated and tortured; it has held show trials of prominent reformers, who have been forced to make televised “confessions;” and it has placed the leadership of the Green Movement under house arrest in order to intimidate and demoralize the opposition.

Finally, most of the units used for internal security tasks seem to be drawn from the poorer, more religiously conservative elements of Iranian society, whereas the leadership and much of the rank and file of the opposition tend to be drawn from the educated middle class, elements of which have a somewhat cosmopolitan complexion. Thus, unit cohesion in the security forces has been reinforced by class and urban/rural distinctions. The regime has seized on this point in its propaganda, ridiculing the opposition for being in thrall to foreign ideologies, for betraying the homeland and the ideology of the revolution, and for working on behalf of foreign powers (that is, the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel).

Lessons for the Region

The fall of the Shah raises the question: Could the outcome have been different had the Shah’s military

been employed more effectively to quash the incipient Islamic Revolution?

There are no correct answers to such counterfactual, “what if” questions. History offers examples of the use of force to suppress political and nationalist uprisings—for example, Hungary in 1956 and China in 1989. Other examples involve a more subtle combination of targeted operations, population control measures, and carrots and sticks—for example, Israel during the first and second Palestinian intifadas.

Thus, to consider an extreme case, Syria used brute force to crush a low-grade insurgency by the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood that had roiled the country from 1979–1982, and that culminated in an abortive popular uprising in the city of Hama in February 1982. Syrian security forces leveled parts of Hama in response, killing some 15,000 to 30,000 civilians over a 3-week period. The Syrian army succeeded in quashing the uprising because it imposed a news blackout on and placed a cordon around the city, which prevented details of the uprising from getting out. This ensured that the uprising was limited to Hama and enabled the military to concentrate overwhelming force against the city. The regime also used special units comprised largely of personnel from the ruling Alawite minority, who were loyal to the regime and who shared its hatred for the Islamist opposition.¹⁸ None of these factors applied to the circumstances surrounding the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

The fall of the Shah and the success of the IRI in repressing its domestic opposition highlight the importance of a number of factors in confrontations between popular opposition movements and the military/security forces of the state—at least in cases where the latter are unwilling or unable to use massive violence against the populace. Some of these factors might be relevant to the ongoing confrontations between popular protest movements and regime military/security forces in several Arab states. These factors include:

- ◆ Leadership—strong and decisive civilian and military leadership is necessary, but it is not a

sufficient condition for success in suppressing a popular uprising. Its absence, however, may doom a regime.

- ◆ Civil-military relations—the failure of civilian leaders to partner effectively with the leaders of the military/security forces and to provide clear, consistent guidance, adequate resources, and strong political support may significantly hinder an effective military response.
- ◆ Training, equipment, and employment—the military/security forces must be properly trained, equipped, led, and employed if they are not to take actions that inadvertently contribute to an escalation of violence, and if they are to retain the morale and cohesion needed for a prolonged struggle against popular opposition movements attempting to neutralize or co-opt them.
- ◆ Morale and cohesion—the morale and cohesion of the military/security forces will depend on a number of variables: the degree of political support provided by the civilian leadership; the social makeup of these forces, and the impact of tribal, regional, sectarian, and class solidarities and cleavages on relations among the ranks and between the forces and the populace; the relative effectiveness of regime indoctrination and opposition propaganda; and the ability to insulate vulnerable units from the stresses of internal security duties by creating special units for the most sensitive and demanding crowd control tasks.
- ◆ Ability to draw and implement lessons—the military/security forces must be able to learn from their own experiences (and those of others) and to refine their strategy, tactics, and concept of employment accordingly.
- ◆ Foreign support—foreign criticism of or support for the regime or for the popular opposition can have an important impact on the course of the struggle, although the law of unintended

consequences makes the implications of foreign involvement difficult to predict.

Finally, popular opposition movements in various Arab countries seem to be drawing strength and inspiration from the successes (thus far) of the opposition movements in Tunisia and Egypt. It is not clear how such a demonstration effect (for example, how events in Libya, where Muammar Qadhafi's determination to stay the course has resulted in civil war) will influence the staying power of opposition movements in other Arab states, or the morale and cohesion of the security forces of other embattled regimes.

Notes

¹ This section draws on Ahmed Hashim, "Civil-Military Relations in Iran: A Case Study," unpublished manuscript, January 1999, 140–168; Mark Roberts, *Khomeini's Incorporation of the Iranian Military*, McNair Paper 48 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1996); 5–28; Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 208–210; Nader Entessar, "The Military and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Post-Revolutionary Iran*, ed. Hooshang Amirahmadi and Manoucher Parvin (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), 57–61; Nikola B. Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic*, R-3473-USDP (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1987), 12–34; Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1–135; and Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (New York: Pelican Books, 1979), 64–102.

² For more on the 1953 coup, see Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The 1953 Coup D'Etat in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3 (August 1987), 261–286.

³ Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 82–83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69–85.

⁵ Inauspicious events seem to spark popular uprisings or revolutions. Thus, the spark for the first Palestinian intifada (1987–1993) was an automobile accident in Gaza involving an Israeli military truck that caused the death of several Palestinians, while the 2010–2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt started by the self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia.

⁶ Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience in Iran* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1980), 109–111.

⁷ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), 34–35.

⁸ Ward, 213. Tape recordings of sermons by the Ayatollah Khomeini and Friday sermons by mosque preachers played a major role in mobilizing demonstrators during the Islamic Revolution in much the same way that social media such as Facebook and Twitter have helped demonstrators to organize recent protests in Iran and the Arab world.

⁹ One key indicator of growing demoralization in the military is the fact that whereas absentee rates in the armed forces averaged 100 to 200 per day at start of 1978, these rates reportedly reached more than 1,000 per day by the end of the year. See Ward, 217.

¹⁰ Hashim, 148–149.

¹¹ Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The Nuzhah Plot and Iranian Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 4 (September 2002), 645–666.

¹² The low estimate is from Clawson and Rubin, 91; the high estimate is from Ward, 225.

¹³ This section draws on Hashim, 140–168; as well as Roberts, 5–28; Ward, 208–210; Entessar, 57–61; Schahgaldian, 12–34; and Zabih, 1–135.

¹⁴ Ward, 221.

¹⁵ This perception was reinforced by the failed July 1980 air force coup, which prompted a new round of much deeper purges of the armed forces. In all, as many as 12,000 servicemembers are believed to have been purged from the armed forces during the first 18 months of the revolution. See Roberts, 45. For more on the coup, see Gasiorowski, 645–666.

¹⁶ This section draws on Michael Eisenstadt, "The Armed Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment," *MERIA Journal* 5, no. 1 (March 2001); Michael Eisenstadt, *The Security Forces of the Islamic Republic and the Fate of the Opposition*, PolicyWatch No. 1538 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 19, 2009), as well as Kenneth Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Ali Alfoneh, *What Do Structural Changes in the Revolutionary Guards Mean?* AEI Middle Eastern Outlook No. 7 (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, September 2008); Ali Alfoneh, *The Basij Resistance Force: A Weak Link in the Iranian Regime?* Policy Watch No. 1627 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 5, 2010); and Ali Alfoneh, *Changing of the Guards: Iran's Supreme Leader Struggles to Control Military*, AEI Middle Eastern Outlook No. 1 (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, April 2010). Ironically, IRI armed forces have had to grapple with some of the same challenges that confronted the Shah's military.

¹⁷ Ali Ahmadi Motlagh, "Political Prisoners and the Security Apparatus in Post-Election Iran," *Muftah*, August 2, 2010, available at <<http://muftah.org/?p=215>>.

¹⁸ Michael Eisenstadt, "Syria's Defense Companies: Portrait of a Praetorian Unit," unpublished paper, 1989.

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