

Chapter 18: The Promises and Realities of Decolonization: 18-4c Islamic Revolutions in Iran and Afghanistan
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18-4c Islamic Revolutions in Iran and Afghanistan

Although the Arab–Israel conflict and the oil crisis concerned both superpowers, the prospect of direct military involvement remained remote. When unexpected crises developed in Iran and Afghanistan, however, significant strategic issues for the superpowers came to the foreground. Both countries adjoined Soviet territory, making Soviet military intervention more likely. Exercising post–Vietnam War caution, the United States reacted with restraint in Iran to avoid military intervention. The Soviet Union chose a bolder and ultimately disastrous course of direct intervention in Afghanistan.

Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (**REH-zah PAH-lah-vee**) succeeded his father as shah of Iran in 1941. In 1953 covert intervention by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped the shah retain his throne in the face of a movement to overturn royal power. Even when he finally nationalized the foreign-owned oil industry, the shah continued to enjoy American support. As oil revenues increased following the price increases of the 1970s, the United States encouraged the shah to spend his nation's growing wealth on equipping the Iranian army with modern American weaponry. By the 1970s popular resentment against the ballooning wealth of the elite families that supported the shah and the brutality, inefficiency, malfeasance, and corruption of his government led to mass opposition.

AP® Exam Tip

Explain how a variety of factors, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, led to the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

[Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini \(Shi'ite philosopher and cleric who led the overthrow of the shah of Iran in 1979 and created an Islamic republic.\)](#) (**A-yat-ol-LAH ROOH-ol-LAH ko-MAY-nee**), an exiled Shi'ite (**SHE-ite**) philosopher-cleric who had spent most of his eighty-plus years in religious and academic pursuits, became the leader of the Iranian opposition. Massive protests forced the shah to flee Iran and ended the monarchy in 1979. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, which replaced the monarchy, Ayatollah Khomeini was supreme arbiter of disputes and guarantor of the government's religious legitimacy. He oversaw a parliamentary regime based on European models but imposed religious control over legislation and public behavior. The electoral process was not open to monarchists, communists, and other opposition groups. Shi'ite clerics with little training for government service held many of the highest posts, and stringent measures were taken to combat Western styles and cultural influence. Universities were temporarily closed, and their faculties were purged of secularists and monarchists. Women were compelled to wear

modest Islamic garments outside the house, and semi-official vigilante committees policed public morals and cast a pall over entertainment and social life. Many sectors of the Iranian economy were also placed under the direction of clerically controlled foundations, leading to massive capital flight. Clerical mismanagement and inflation have contributed to decades of economic stagnation and isolation in Iran.

President Carter had criticized the shah's repressive regime, but the overthrow of a longstanding ally and the creation of the Islamic Republic were blows to American prestige. The new Iranian regime was anti-Israeli and anti-American. Seeing the United States as a "Great Satan" opposed to Islam, Khomeini fostered Islamic revolutionary movements that threatened the United States and Israel. In November 1979 Iranian radicals seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held fifty-two diplomats hostage for 444 days. Americans felt humiliated by their inability to rescue the hostages or negotiate their release.

In the fall of 1980, shortly after negotiations for the release of the hostages began, [Saddam Hussein \(\(1937–2006\) President of Iraq from 1979 until overthrown by an American-led invasion in 2003. Waged war on Iran from 1980 to 1988. His invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was repulsed in the Persian Gulf War in 1991\)](#) (**sah-DAHM hoo-SANE**), the ruler of neighboring Iraq, invaded Iran with the intention of toppling the Islamic Republic. His own dictatorial rule rested on a secular, Arab-nationalist philosophy and long-standing friendship with the Soviet Union, which had provided him with advanced weaponry. He feared that the fervor of Iran's revolutionary Shi'ite leaders would infect his own country's Shi'ite majority and threaten his power. The war pitted American weapons in the hands of the Iranians against Soviet weapons in the hands of the Iraqis, but the superpowers avoided overt involvement during eight years of bloodshed. Covertly, however, the United States used Israel to transfer arms to Iran, hoping to gain the release of other American hostages held by radical Islamic groups in Lebanon and to help finance the Contra war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. When this deal came to light in 1986, the resulting political scandal intensified American hostility to Iran. Openly tilting toward Iraq, President Reagan sent the United States Navy to the Persian Gulf, ostensibly to protect nonbelligerent shipping. The move helped force Iran to accept a ceasefire in 1988.

Enormous Crowd Mourns the Death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989

An Islamic revolution overthrew the shah of Iran in 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini sought to lead Iran away from the influences of Western culture and challenged the power of the United States in the Persian Gulf.





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While the United States dealt with Iran, the Soviet Union faced even more serious problems in neighboring Afghanistan. In 1978 a Marxist party with a secular agenda seized power. Offended by the new regime's efforts to reform education and grant rights to women, traditional Afghan ethnic and religious leaders led a successful rebellion. The Soviet Union responded by sending its army into Afghanistan to install a communist regime. With the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan paying, equipping, and training Afghan rebels, the Soviet Union found itself in an unwinnable war like the one the United States had earlier stumbled into in Vietnam. Facing growing economic problems and widespread domestic discontent over the war, Soviet leaders withdrew their troops in 1989. Three years later rebel groups took control of the entire country and then began to fight among themselves over who should rule. In this chaotic situation a radical Islamic party with close ties to Pakistan, the Taliban, took power in 1996. They installed a harsh religious regime and soon faced armed opposition. The Taliban had received financial support from the Saudi Arabian Osama bin Laden during their rise to power and later provided him with protection as he organized the militant organization al-Qaeda that later attacked the United States on September 11, 2001.

Section Review

- During the 1970s and 1980s, political violence grew in Latin America, sponsored in part by U.S. fears of communist subversion.
- The United States opposed revolutionary movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador.
- A radical anti-American Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini triumphed in Iran in 1979 and led to a ten-year war with Iraq.
- The Soviets intervened in Afghanistan in 1979 but failed to defeat local opponents backed by the United States and Pakistan, leading ultimately to Taliban government.

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