

## THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

The history of Iran until the 1970s provided ample evidence for an irreversible secular and Westernizing process. Reza Khan, an ambitious military man who maneuvered his way to national power, was the pivotal figure in this process. In 1926 he founded the new Pahlevi dynasty and began centralizing power and pushing socioeconomic change. His son, Mohammed Reza, commonly known as the shah, followed suit once his throne was secure in the early 1950s. Thanks to a quickening stream of oil revenue, the shah pressed to create industry, spread literacy, promote higher education, impose land reform, and establish Iran as a regional power. Like his father, he moved to reduce the influence of the Islamic clergy and Islamic law.

Then to the surprise of many, a broad coalition led by Islamists challenged the shah's grip on power in the 1970s. The reasons for the coalition's ultimate triumph bears close examination. The following documents capture the concerns of the shah and the leader of the opposition, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, as well as some of the ordinary people caught up in the revolution and should provide some insights into a revolution that bears little resemblance to those considered earlier in this volume.

### 9.1

#### Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlevi Reflects on the Problems of His Regime

Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlevi came to power in 1941 after the Soviets and the British had sent his father into exile for his pro-German views. For the following decade the son struggled to maintain control, and in the early 1950s he confronted a nationalist coalition led by Mohammed Mossadeq that wanted to curb the court's power and nationalize the British company monopolizing the country's oil. An alarmed Eisenhower administration threw its support behind the British, and in 1953 a CIA-orchestrated coup restored the shah to power. Now with U.S. backing, he established strongman rule and used rising oil revenues to industrialize and build up his military. As the 1970s began, his hold on power at home and his influence in the region seemed beyond question.

The entries that follow reveal the shah's thinking during the closing years of his rule. They come from a daily, detailed diary kept by Asadollah Alam, a close and loyal adviser to the shah. Descended from an aristocratic family, Alam had supported the young shah in the 1940s and went on to serve him in a variety of capacities including prime minister between 1962 and 1964 and minister of court and the shah's confidant from 1966 until 1977 (the year before Alam's death). In almost daily meetings they discussed family matters and affairs of the heart as well as politics. Once Alam had filled a diary volume with impressions derived from these contacts, he would send it away for safekeeping in a Swiss bank vault. Following the revolution, the family agreed to publish portions of the diary. What do these entries reveal about the shah's perceptions of domestic problems and international relations? What do they tell us about his regime's vulnerability to a revolutionary challenge? In what ways might the diary be suspect as evidence of the shah's state of mind?

Source: M. Hunt, The World Transformed

## Asadollah Alam

*The Confidential Diary of the Minister of Court*

1970–1977

APRIL 19, 1972

"Your Majesty is always saying that he wishes to be ahead of events," I said, "why not then implement change before change is forced upon us?" "But what more do you expect me to do?" he replied; "No one could have accomplished more than us." He then went on to say that he has discovered the root cause of discontent amongst the younger generation; the disparity between their wages and those of men already in established positions. I suggested that this is only one of several factors at work. If people could be persuaded that they are working to achieve some basic goal, a goal respected by the ruling class, they would be prepared to put up with any amount of deprivation, even real hunger. "But what principles do you suggest we put to the nation?" asked HIM [His Imperial Majesty]. I replied that the public must feel that they are more than mere spectators of the political game. We must prepare the ground for their greater integration into this game; only then will they be satisfied and learn to play by the rules. HIM totally lost track of what I was saying, since he objected: "But we lack the equipment; our department of physical education hasn't enough sports fields, trainers or even simple cash." I explained that this wasn't exactly what I had in mind; that I was talking about popular participation in the game of politics. For example, why does the government continue to meddle in local elections? Leave the public to fight their own political contests and to choose whatever local representatives they prefer. Parliamentary elections may still require a degree of management, but surely this is untrue of elections in the municipalities. Why not allow the people free discussion of their local cares and concerns? What harm could it possibly do? "What are you talking about; of course it would be harmful," he declared, "they'd begin moaning about inflation, or some such rot." "Sadly," I replied, "what they say about inflation is all too true. But even assuming it to be nonsense, why not open the safety valve and allow them to talk nonsense, freely, amongst themselves?" "Precisely the reason I've allowed the opposition party to continue in existence," he replied. "Yes," I said, "but an opposition deprived of free discussion is surely no opposition at all?" At this point he asked [me] why the people pay so little attention to the progress we have made. "Because" I told him, "our propaganda is applied in quite the wrong directions. So much of our self-advertisement is patently untrue, and for the rest it's so mixed up with adulation of Your Majesty's own person that the public grows tired of it. . . ."

OCTOBER 7, 1973

Referring to a recent broadcast on the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation], he [the shah] declared, "The bastards have the audacity to state that the chances of a revolution in Iran have receded, since our army will be able to crush any rising, now that we've purchased so many new weapons. What the hell do they mean 'the chances of a revolution'? Our farmers and workers are far too happy ever to contemplate becoming revolutionaries." In the same way, he's outraged by an article in the [London] *Financial Times*, describing the problems we face with inflation.

DECEMBER 9, 1973

[The shah] is extremely anxious about student unrest which has now infected every campus save the Pahlavi University at Shiraz. "Mark my words, Moscow is behind it all," he said. I replied that this might be so, but that we should bear in mind that they would have to be sowing fertile ground if their success is to be explained. For my own part, I'm convinced that the university authorities have made the mistake of refusing any sort of dialogue with the students. The same goes for the country at large; our government behaves like the conqueror of a vanquished land. As I said to HIM, for all his achievements and his tireless endeavour, there's a growing sense of alienation between regime and people. "I'm afraid you're right," he replied. "I've sensed the same thing myself. Something must be done."

MARCH 22–APRIL 3, 1974

I remarked to him [the shah] that every one of his dreams seems to have come true. It's almost unbelievable, but our oil income has rocketed from \$2 billion to \$16 billion; heavy rainfall suggests a bumper harvest, and HIM is now unrivalled amongst Middle Eastern statesmen. "But I have so many more aspirations," he replied. "To be first in the Middle East is not enough. We must raise ourselves to the level of a great world power. Such a goal is by no means unattainable."

MAY 21, 1977

Much to HIM's disgust the new US ambassador, William Sullivan, has issued a statement to Congress, referring to the existence of religious opposition groups here in Iran . . . "Doesn't he realize these people are Islamic Marxists, mere Soviet puppets," HIM said. I replied that, whilst various of them may well be manipulated by the Soviets, or for that matter by Washington, there are others who act solely out of ignorant fanaticism . . . HIM remarked that he had no objection to girls wearing scarves at school or university; "But veils are out of the question . . . Tell my private secretariat to inform the government accordingly."

## 9.2

## Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Challenge

The author of the stunningly successful revolution against the shah was an obscure Islamic cleric, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In 1963, the sixty-one-year-old-Khomeini chastised the shah publicly, setting in motion a contest between two seemingly ill-matched political forces. Exiled in 1965, Khomeini exploited the simmering discontent within Iran, using his own considerable charisma as well as an effective network of clerical supporters. Anti-regime demonstrations grew in force during 1978 and finally drove a demoralized and isolated shah into his own exile in January 1979. Khomeini returned home the next month. From his leading position within the revolutionary coalition, he would go on to purge secular allies, create an Islamic Republic at home, and confront the United States and Iraq.

Khomeini differs so dramatically from the third-world leaders discussed earlier in this volume that it is difficult to know how to label him. Fundamentalist, patriot, revolutionary, populist, and nationalist are only some of the more obvious choices. In searching for the most appropriate label, consider Khomeini's appeals in the statements and sermons that follow. Do you see elements of continuity in these appeals? Is there any shift in content or tone between the first challenges of the mid-1960s and the moment of triumph in 1979-80? In exploring the views of the shah's chief antagonist, we have nothing like the Alam diary to turn to. We have to use instead public statements and imagine ourselves in the place of one of the faithful listening to Khomeini delivering a sermon, a theological student in a seminary taking notes as Khomeini lectures, or one of the urban poor hearing Khomeini on an audiotape smuggled into the country. Which concerns and themes would you guess had the greatest appeal to his audience? How might the public nature of these statements skew our understanding of Khomeini?

*Sermons and Writings*

1963-1980

SERMON DELIVERED IN QUM, IRAN, JUNE 3, 1963

Iranian nation! Those among you who are thirty or forty years of age or more will remember how three foreign countries attacked us during World War II. The Soviet Union, Britain, and America invaded Iran and occupied our country. The property of the people was exposed to danger and their honor was imperilled. But God knows, everyone was happy because the Pahlavi had gone!<sup>1</sup>

Shah, I don't wish the same to happen to you; I don't want you to become like your father. Listen to my advice, listen to the *'ulama* [learned clergy] of Islam. They desire the welfare of the nation, the welfare of the country. Don't listen to Israel; Israel can't do anything for you. You miserable wretch, forty-

<sup>1</sup>A reference to the 1941 abdication of the shah's father on the demand of Britain and the Soviet Union.

Hamid Algar, ed. and trans., *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 29-30; 115, 120, 126-27, 132, 178-79, 181-82, 185, 240, 286-87, 303, 305.

five years of your life have passed; isn't it time for you to think and reflect a little, to ponder about where all this is leading you, to learn a lesson from the experience of your father? If what they say is true, that you are opposed to Islam and the religious scholars, your ideas are quite wrong. If they are dictating these things to you and then giving them to you to read, you should think about it a little. Why do you speak without thinking? Are the religious scholars really some form of impure animal? If they are impure animals, why do the people kiss their hands? Why do they regard the very water they drink as blessed? Are we really impure animals?

SERMON DELIVERED IN QUM, IRAN, OCTOBER 27, 1964

A law has been put before the Majlis [parliament] . . . that all American military advisers, together with their families, technical and administrative officials, and servants — in short, anyone in any way connected to them — are to enjoy legal immunity with respect to any crime they may commit in Iran.

If some American's servant, some American's cook, assassinates your *marja*<sup>2</sup> in the middle of the bazaar, or runs over him, the Iranian police do not have the right to apprehend him! Iranian courts do not have the right to judge him! The dossier must be sent to America, so that our masters there can decide what is to be done!

. . . If someone runs over a dog belonging to an American, he will be prosecuted. Even if the Shah himself were to run over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted. But if an American cook runs over the Shah, the head of state, no one will have the right to interfere with him.

. . . The government has sold our independence, reduced us to the level of a colony, and made the Muslim nation of Iran appear more backward than savages in the eyes of the world! . . .

I don't know where this White Revolution<sup>3</sup> is that they are making so much fuss about. God knows that I am aware of (and my awareness causes me pain) the remote villages and provincial towns, not to mention our own backward city of Qum. I am aware of the hunger of our people and the disordered state of our agrarian economy. Why not try to do something for this country, for this population, instead of piling up debts and enslaving yourselves?

LECTURES DELIVERED TO SEMINARY STUDENTS,  
NAJAF, IRAQ, JANUARY–FEBRUARY 1970<sup>4</sup>

At a time when the West was a realm of darkness and obscurity — with its inhabitants living in a state of barbarism and America still peopled by half-savage redskins — and the two vast empires of Iran and Byzantium were un-

<sup>2</sup>A scholar of proven learning and piety whose rulings are authoritative in matters of religious practice.

<sup>3</sup>A broad-gauge government program to modernize Iran. It included prominently the promotion of industry, the liberation of women, the advancement of higher education as well as basic literacy, the implementation of land reform, and the establishment of civil law in place of Islamic law.

<sup>4</sup>A student recorded these lectures, subsequently published as a book titled *Islamic Government*.

der the rule of tyranny, class privilege, and discrimination, and the powerful dominated all without any trace of law or popular government, God, Exalted and Almighty, by means of the Most Noble Messenger [the prophet Mohammed] (peace and blessings be upon him), sent laws that astound us with their magnitude. He instituted laws and practices for all human affairs and laid down injunctions for man extending from even before the embryo is formed until after he is placed in the tomb. In just the same way that there are laws setting forth the duties of worship for man, so too there are laws, practices, and norms for the affairs of society and government. Islamic law is a progressive, evolving, and comprehensive system of law. . . .

. . . Huge amounts of capital are being swallowed up; our public funds are being embezzled; our oil is being plundered; and our country is being turned into a market for expensive, unnecessary goods by the representatives of foreign companies, which makes it possible for foreign capitalists and their local agents to pocket the people's money. A number of foreign states carry off our oil after drawing it out of the ground, and the negligible sum they pay to the regime they have installed returns to their pockets by other routes. As for the small amount that goes into the treasury, God only knows what it is spent on. . . .

Our wretched people subsist in conditions of poverty and hunger, while the taxes that the ruling class extorts from them are squandered. They buy Phantom jets so that pilots from Israel and its agents can come and train in them in our country . . . — Israel, which is in a state of war with the Muslims . . . .

. . . It is our duty to begin exerting ourselves now in order to establish a truly Islamic government. We must propagate our cause to the people, instruct them in it, and convince them of its validity. We must generate a wave of intellectual awakening, to emerge as a current throughout society, and gradually, to take shape as an organized Islamic movement made up of the awakened, committed, and religious masses who will rise up and establish an Islamic government. . . .

. . . So, courageous sons of Islam, stand up! Address the people bravely; tell the truth about our situation to the masses in simple language; arouse them to enthusiastic activity, and turn the people in the street and the bazaar, our simple-hearted workers and peasants, and our alert students into dedicated *mujahids* [those engaged in jihad or holy struggle]. The entire population will become *mujahids*. All segments of society are ready to struggle for the sake of freedom, independence, and the happiness of the nation, and their struggle needs religion. Give the people Islam, then, for Islam is the school of *jihad*, the religion of struggle; let them amend their characters and beliefs in accordance with Islam and transform themselves into a powerful force, so that they may overthrow the tyrannical regime imperialism has imposed on us and set up an Islamic government.

DECLARATION ON THE ANTI-SHAH DEMONSTRATIONS,  
ISSUED IN PARIS, OCTOBER 11, 1978

Great people of Iran! The history of Iran, even world history, has never witnessed a movement like yours; it has never experienced a universal uprising like yours, noble people!

Today primary school children of seven or eight stand ready to sacrifice themselves and shed their blood for the sake of Islam and the nation; when has anything like that been seen? Our lion-hearted women snatch up their infants and go to confront the machine guns and tanks of the regime; where in history has such valiant and heroic behavior by women been recorded? Today the thunderous cry of "Death to the Shah!" arises from the heart of the primary school child and the infirm old man alike, and it has blackened the days of this vile Pahlavi regime and so shattered the nerves of the Shah that he seeks to calm himself with the blood of our children and young people.

Beloved sisters and brothers! Be steadfast; do not weaken or slacken your efforts. Your path is the path of God and His elect. Your blood is being shed for the same cause as the blood of the prophets and the Imams [recognized religious leaders] and the righteous. You will join them, and you have no cause to grieve, therefore, but every reason for joy.

MESSAGE ON OCCASION OF THE IRANIAN NEW YEAR,  
TEHRAN, MARCH 21, 1980

We must strive to export our Revolution throughout the world, and must abandon all idea of not doing so, for not only does Islam refuse to recognize any difference between Muslim countries, it is the champion of all oppressed people. Moreover, all the powers are intent on destroying us, and if we remain surrounded in a closed circle, we shall certainly be defeated. We must make plain our stance toward the powers and the superpowers and demonstrate to them that despite the arduous problems that burden us, our attitude to the world is dictated by our beliefs. . . .

Once again, I declare my support for all movements and groups that are fighting to gain liberation from the superpowers of the left and the right. I declare my support for the people of [Israeli] Occupied Palestine and Lebanon. I vehemently condemn once more the savage occupation of Afghanistan by the aggressive plunderers of the East [the Soviet Union], and I hope that the noble Muslim people of Afghanistan will achieve victory and true independence as soon as possible, and be delivered from the clutches of the so-called champions of the working class.

MESSAGE TO PILGRIMS, ISSUED IN TEHRAN, SEPTEMBER 12, 1980

Part of the extensive propaganda campaign being waged apparently against Iran, but in reality against Islam, is intended to show that the Revolution of Iran cannot administer our country or that the Iranian government is about to fall . . . . But by the blessing of Islam and our Muslim people, in the space of less than two years, we have voted on, approved, and put into practice all the measures necessary for the administration of the country. Despite all the difficulties that America and its satellites have created for us — economic boycott, military attack, and the planning of extensive coups d'etat — our valiant people have attained self-sufficiency in foodstuffs. Soon we will transform the imperialist-inspired education system that existed under the previous regime into an independent and Islamic education system. The armed

forces, the Revolutionary Guards, the gendarmerie, and the police stand ready to defend the country and uphold order, and they are prepared to offer their lives in *jihad* for the sake of Islam. In addition, a general mobilization of the entire nation is under way, with the nation equipping itself to fight for the sake of Islam and the country. Let our enemies know that no revolution in the world was followed by less bloodshed or brought greater achievements than our Islamic Revolution, and that this is due entirely to the blessing of Islam. . . .

America is the number-one enemy of the deprived and oppressed people of the world. There is no crime America will not commit in order to maintain its political, economic, cultural, and military domination of those parts of the world where it predominates. . . .

Iran has tried to sever all its relations with this Great Satan and it is for this reason that it now finds wars imposed upon it. America has urged Iraq to spill the blood of our young men [in border clashes that preceded the Iran-Iraq war, 1980–1988], and it has compelled the countries that are subject to its influence to boycott us economically in the hope of defeating us. . . . This is a result of the Islamic content of our Revolution, which has been established on the basis of true independence. Were we to compromise with America and the other superpowers, we would not suffer these misfortunes. But our nation is no longer ready to submit to humiliation and abjection; it prefers a bloody death to a life of shame.

### 9.3

#### The Villagers of Deh Koh Come to Terms with the Islamic Revolution

A revolutionary upheaval has many facets. We can read the statements of the leaders and imagine the shocked reaction of foreign observers. Perhaps the facet most difficult to grasp is revolution's impact on ordinary people. Thanks to the account of a German-born, U.S.-based anthropologist, we have a picture of the Iranian revolution from the bottom up. Erika Friedl spent five years during the 1970s and 1980s living among the two thousand villagers of Deh Koh (literally "mountain village," an invented name). It is a six-hour drive to this uplands village from the closest city, Shiraz. Friedl writes from the perspective of five village women whose pseudonyms (Aftab, Begom, Maryam, Hakime, and Gouhar) hide their real identity.

How do these women react to the anti-shah protests in late 1978, the arrival of revolutionary activists in the village, and the war with Iraq that began in September 1980? How much of their reaction is shaped by village insularity and suspicion of outsiders? As with the earlier anthropological account, *Village in the Vauduse*, we need to ask how the anthropologist-observer might bias our understanding. That Friedl had to limit intimate contact to women creates one kind of bias. How might the perceptions of men in the village have differed from those presented here? Does Friedl interpret so much for us that we in fact cannot regard this as a primary source? If so, how do we gain direct access to the views of villagers such as these?