

CANMUN 2025

BACKGROUND GUIDE



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Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the Historical Crisis Committee at Candor International MUN 2025. As representatives of your portfolios, you will be tasked with navigating one of the most significant geopolitical crises of the late 20th century: the Iranian Revolution and the Hostage Crisis of 1979. This background guide is designed to provide you with a foundation for your research. However, it's crucial that you build upon this information by conducting your own research from authentic sources to prepare for a comprehensive and pragmatic debate. The Executive Board will remain neutral, intervening only when necessary. The responsibility to keep the debate moving and productive rests with you. We trust that with thorough research and preparation, you will be able to guide the committee toward a meaningful resolution.

We expect all delegates to maintain the highest standards of decorum, emulating the diplomatic behaviour of your assigned nations. The continuous, ad-hoc nature of this committee means that we will be introducing new, time-sensitive information that you must respond to and incorporate into your debate. Remember, this is a collaborative exercise, not a competition. Our goal is to collectively understand the complexities of this historical event and the diplomatic challenges it presented.

We don't expect to rewrite history in three days, but rather to educate ourselves on the forces that shaped it. We hope this experience will equip you with the skills and perspective needed to become a new generation of leaders. We wish you the best of luck and look forward to a challenging and enlightening conference.

Regards,

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Iran Pre-1979: Historical Context

The roots of the 1979 Iranian Revolution are embedded in Iran's twentieth-century journey, a tumultuous period shaped by monarchy, foreign intervention, religious tension, and the quest for modernisation. The term "pre-1979 Iran" commonly refers to the era leading up to the revolution: the rule first of the Qajar dynasty and, crucially, the Pahlavi dynasty, whose modernisation projects and tightening political grip ignited the fires of upheaval that would transform the Middle East.

Iran's modern history began in earnest with the waning of Qajar authority. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were years of humiliation and crisis. Iran, possessing strategic geography and abundant resources, became a playground for imperial games between Russia and Britain. The Qajar Shahs, unable to reform efficiently or fend off external pressure, sold concessions and presided over an increasingly fragmented society. This era of foreign domination and corruption led to the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), Iran's first attempt to establish parliamentary governance, the rule of law, and popular sovereignty. Although the movement was violently suppressed by loyalist troops and foreign bayonets, the ideals of constitutionalism and national dignity took hold, shaping successive generations of reformers and revolutionaries.

The chaos of World War I and the interwar period gave rise to another transformative figure: Reza Khan, an ambitious military officer who, through a coup in 1921, eventually crowned himself Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925. Reza Shah is remembered for his sweeping drive to centralise power and modernise Iran on Western lines - building railways, founding secular schools, banning the hijab, suppressing tribal autonomy, and encouraging industry. However, his project, patterned after that of Atatürk in Turkey, often relied on coercion and neglected the religious sensibilities and traditional structures that undergirded many Iranians' lives. While new educational and career opportunities emerged, dissent was stifled through the secret police, and political parties were banned. The Iranian clergy, many tribal groups, and the bazaar (merchant) class found themselves at odds with an ever more intrusive state.

A watershed moment arrived in 1941, when the Allies—concerned about Reza Shah's overtures toward Nazi Germany—occupied Iran and forced his abdication. His son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was installed as Shah under Anglo-Soviet tutelage. The younger Shah's early reign was marked by instability, a weak central government, and rising nationalist sentiment. This new

wave of activism culminated in the premiership of Mohammad Mossadegh, who, in 1951, nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, earning him enormous popularity—but also the enmity of Britain and the United States. In 1953, a CIA- and MI6-backed coup toppled Mossadegh and restored the Shah as an absolute monarch. The trauma of 1953—viewed by many as the theft of Iran's chance at democracy—cemented deep anti-Western sentiment and forever haunted relations between Iran and the U.S.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Shah doubled down on modernisation. His "White Revolution," launched in 1963, was a sweeping reform package intended to forestall potential revolution. The reforms redistributed land, enfranchised women, combated illiteracy, and invested in industrial and infrastructural projects. Nevertheless, the results were deeply mixed. The reforms upended rural life, dislocated millions, and eventually swelled the cities with urban poor. Moreover, the reforms failed to address persistent economic inequality, corruption, and unemployment - a dangerous combination for social stability.

At the same time, political life in Iran withered. The Shah, obsessed with the threat of both communist and religious subversion, created a vast security apparatus - the SAVAK, or secret police—renowned for its surveillance, torture, and brutality. Political opponents were jailed, exiled, or silenced. In 1975, the Shah declared Iran a one-party state, further alienating reformists, nationalists, leftists, and the powerful ulema (clergy). As the secular regime pressed for Westernisation and state control over religious institutions, the gap between Iran's urban elite and its traditional population deepened.

Religious leaders, especially Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, emerged as the voice of resistance. Khomeini, exiled in 1964, became a symbol of defiance, denouncing the regime's land, family, and educational reforms as un-Islamic. His messages, delivered via smuggled cassette tapes and epistles, reverberated through mosques, bazaars, and university campuses, fusing anti-imperialist rhetoric with Islamic revivalism in a way no secular opposition figure had done.

By the late 1970s, Iran appeared prosperous on paper, buoyed by oil revenues and modern infrastructure. Yet beneath the glittering surface, social discontent simmered. Rapid change and widening inequality bred resentment among the poor and young, while middle-class Iranians and intellectuals bristled at the denial of political freedoms. The anger of the religious establishment further inflamed the climate. Thus, on the eve of the revolution, all the fault lines, modernisers versus traditionalists, the elite versus the masses, secularists versus clerics, converged.

This complex historical inheritance, marked by cycles of reform and repression, foreign intervention and nationalist reaction, personal ambition and collective trauma, set the stage for the events of 1977–79. By January 1979, when your committee's freeze date was set, Iran teetered on the brink, its monarchy fatally weakened and revolution in full flood. Understanding this history is essential for grasping the choices, fears, and hopes that shaped every actor in the ensuing crisis.

The Pahlavi dynasty, under Reza Shah Pahlavi and later his son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, presided over a transformative yet deeply contentious era in twentieth-century Iranian history. Their decades of rule witnessed dramatic reforms - economic, social, and cultural - alongside intense political repression and escalating tension with the nation's religious leadership. The Shahs' efforts to modernise and secularise Iran left enduring legacies, both constructive and destructive, that shaped the socio-political landscape on the eve of the 1979 Revolution.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event	Significance/Notes
Jan 9, 1978	Mass protests in Qom against Shah's regime; police kill at least five demonstrators	Early large-scale public unrest
Feb 18, 1978	Demonstrations marking fortieth-day memorials for Qom victims in Tabriz, multiple killed	Spread of protest movement beyond Tehran
June 7, 1978	Reforms announced; head of SAVAK dismissed	Shah's first concession to public pressure
Aug 19, 1978	Cinema Rex fire in Abadan kills hundreds; blame exchanged between regime and opposition	Escalation of violence and tension
Sept 8, 1978	Martial law declared; brutal crackdown on protesters in Jaleh Square (Black Friday) with over 100 deaths	Turning point; public outrage intensifies
Oct 3, 1978	Ayatollah Khomeini expelled from Najaf, Iraq; moves to France	Gains new media visibility, globalizes revolution
Nov 6, 1978	Shah addresses nation, promises reforms	Attempt to placate dissent without real concessions
Dec 10-11, 1978	Nationwide protests; millions demand Shah's removal and Khomeini's return	Opposition mass mobilization peaks
Dec 29, 1978	Mohammad Reza Shah appoints Shapour Bakhtiar as Prime Minister	Last attempt to maintain monarchy
Jan 4, 1979	Bakhtiar officially becomes Prime Minister	Transitional government struggles for legitimacy
Jan 12, 1979	Khomeini forms Revolutionary Council from exile in France	Establishes coordinated revolutionary authority

Key Information

The White Revolution: Ambitions and Contradictions

The so-called "White Revolution," launched officially in 1963 under Mohammad Reza Shah but with foundations laid by his father, sought to rapidly modernise Iran and ward off revolutionary threats. This ambitious series of reforms was described as "white" to emphasise its oppositional stance to violent "red" (communist) revolution. At its heart were large-scale land reforms designed to break up the huge holdings of wealthy landowners and distribute land to millions of poor peasants. The Shah aimed to weaken the traditional landed aristocracy - a group that had previously formed the social and economic backbone of the country - while creating a new base of support among grateful rural citizens (Britannica, 2024).

Land reforms were paired with programs to extend the vote and improve the legal status of women. By granting women the right to vote, expanding access to education, and raising the legal age of marriage, the Shah's policies challenged centuries-old Islamic traditions. Advances in literacy and infrastructure followed, with new schools, hospitals, and roads built throughout the country. The state also aimed to increase industrialisation, offering incentives to local entrepreneurs and inviting foreign investment.

Yet, for all its modernising rhetoric, the White Revolution was riddled with contradictions. While land redistribution benefited some peasants, it left many others landless or with insufficient plots to make a living, inadvertently accelerating migration to cities and swelling Iran's urban poor. Efforts to expand women's rights were hailed by some but generated deep backlash among conservative clerics and segments of rural society. Economic growth, fueled by booming oil revenues, created new opportunities - for some - but also widened the gulf between the very rich and the very poor (EBSCO, 2018).

Political Repression: SAVAK, Censorship, and One-Party Rule

At the same time as the Pahlavi state proclaimed reform, it intensified its grip on society through surveillance, censorship, and punishment. The regime was obsessed with stability and terrified of dissent. The creation of SAVAK, the Organisation of Intelligence and National Security, became synonymous with fear and oppression. Established in 1957 with support from American and Israeli intelligence agencies, SAVAK's reach extended into all corners of life: it infiltrated universities, workplaces, mosques, and even households. Its methods included monitoring correspondence and phone calls, encouraging informants, and employing arrest, torture, and extrajudicial execution to silence critics (Wikipedia: Pahlavi Iran).

Such measures were complemented by systematic censorship of the press, literature, and political debate. Newspapers were routinely shuttered for critical reporting; authors and poets encountered pre-publication scrutiny. Laws against "anti-national" activity targeted opposition parties, labour unions, and student organisations. Pluralist politics were gradually stamped out. By 1975, the Shah dissolved the existing multi-party system and declared Iran a one-party state under the Rastakhiz (Resurgence) Party. Membership was required; non-conformists risked exclusion from jobs, education, and even physical safety (Case Western, 1980).

The government's monopoly on power and information fostered a climate of mistrust and resentment. Political freedom became virtually nonexistent, leaving only revolutionary channels for dissent. Even seemingly innocuous gatherings and conversations were cause for suspicion.

Relationship with the Clergy: Secularisation and Alienation

Perhaps the greatest flashpoint of the Pahlavi era was the monarchy's fraught relationship with Iran's powerful Shi'ite clergy. Reza Shah (r. 1925–1941) set the secularising pattern: he closed Islamic schools, diminished clerical authority over the courts, and even banned women's veils. His abrupt demands, such as the compulsory Western hat and dress codes, were experienced as humiliating assaults on religious identity and daily practice, desecrating the mosque and sanctity of prayer attire (Britannica, 2024).

Mohammad Reza Shah did not reverse these policies. If anything, he doubled down, using the White Revolution to further diminish clerical influence. Reforming family law, expanding women's rights, and attempting to centralise control of religious endowments (waqf) enraged the ulema, who saw these reforms as direct transgressions of Islamic law. The clergy became the voice for those dislocated by modernisation and those disturbed by rapid Westernisation. Ayatollah Khomeini, at first a lesser-known cleric, rose to national prominence by publicly denouncing the Shah's reforms as illegal and anti-Islamic in 1963, leading to his exile but cementing his status as an icon of resistance.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Pahlavi regime periodically tried to co-opt, manage, or sideline religious authority. Moderate clerics were offered positions in government advisory councils; some accepted, others refused. Yet the widening rift between crown and mosque became a chasm. The state's attempts to assert national secular identity (adopting pre-Islamic Persian symbols, reorganising the calendar to begin with the founding of the ancient empire) only deepened clerical hostility and alienated traditionalist segments of society (NYU, 2015).

By the late 1970s, the Pahlavi regime's reforms were simultaneously sweeping and brittle. Despite tangible modernisations in infrastructure and education, the rural poor and urban migrants remained marginalised; political freedoms were suffocated; and the nation's religious

heritage was humiliated and scorned by the very institutions claiming to guide it into modernity. The contradictions between progress and repression, secularisation and faith, state power and popular participation proved unsustainable. The Iranian Revolution emerged, in part, as a mass uprising to reclaim dignity, voice, and an identity the Pahlavi experiment had tried to overwrite.

The opposition to the Pahlavi regime in the years leading up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution was extraordinarily diverse, reflecting varying, sometimes contradictory aspirations among Iranians for social justice, religious purity, constitutional rule, and even classless revolution.

Understanding this opposition landscape is essential for grasping why the revolution succeeded, and why the new Islamic Republic faced instant factional challenges.

Major Fractions: Islamists, Secularists, and Leftists

The most potent force, in retrospect, was the coalition centred around Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Shi'a clerical establishment. Despite his exile, Khomeini and his followers built an ideology that fused anti-imperialism, Islamic social justice, and outright opposition to the monarchy. Khomeini's network leveraged mosques, religious seminaries, and clandestine sermons distributed via cassette tape to create mass mobilisation. The core of his following included traditional clergy, religious students, the urban bazaar merchants (bazaari), and a vast swath of discontented middle and lower classes who felt alienated by the Shah's secular, Westernising policies.

Crucially, not all Islamists were unified behind Khomeini's vision of the velayat-e faqih (rule by Islamic jurists). Other important religious personalities like Ayatollah Shariatmadari advocated for a constitutional model and opposed dictatorship in all forms. Some religious figures, such as Ayatollah Taleghani, aligned with leftists for a period, seeking a blend of socialism and Islam. Islamist organisations, both militant and non-militant, proliferated, the most prominent later merging under Khomeini's leadership or being suppressed after the revolution.

Next in line were Iran's liberal nationalists and secular opposition. The National Front, with roots in the Mossadegh era, sought a return to a constitutional monarchy or a democratic republic, hoping for civil rights, an independent judiciary, and the rule of law as defined in the 1906 Constitution. Related was the Freedom Movement of Iran, under Mehdi Bazargan, which pursued gradual reform through legal, parliamentary processes and attempted to bridge religious

and secular ideals. These groups drew support from the urban middle class, professionals, and students, but suffered from years of organised repression and a lack of ideological unity.

One of the Shah's key ideological opponents was left-wing organisations, especially the Tudeh (communist) party and Marxist guerrilla groups such as the Organisation of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (OIPFG) and the Mojahedin-e Khalq (PMOI, or People's Mujahedin). The Tudeh was heavily infiltrated and weakened by the regime's secret police (SAVAK). Guerrilla groups attempted assassinations, bombings, and attacks on regime targets, contributing to a climate of instability. The Fedayeen were Marxist-Leninist, while the PMOI combined Islamic values with Marxist rhetoric and would later fiercely oppose the clerical regime. Although few in numbers compared to Islamist or nationalist factions, these revolutionary leftist groups played a key role in the armed phase of the revolution and in challenging the Shah's security forces during the regime's collapse.

Several organisations of students and youth, both in Iran and in the diaspora, played an amplified role, especially during the crescendo of mass protests and sit-ins from 1977 onward. The Confederation of Iranian Students, for example, maintained an active voice abroad, keeping international attention on the regime's abuses. Their activism complemented that of labour unions, oil workers, journalists, and women's associations, demonstrating the revolution's truly grassroots origins.

Ethnic and Regional Opposition

Another layer of opposition emerged from ethnic and regional minorities, such as the Kurds in western Iran, who long sought greater autonomy and were frequently marginalised by the central government. Similar alliances were sometimes struck with Arab, Azeri, and Baloch minorities. While these groups contributed to unrest, they struggled to unify their local demands with the national movement and often faced suspicion from both the regime and dominant revolutionary actors.

Internal Division and Temporary Unity

Despite their differences, these diverse groups managed a measure of unity during the critical months of 1978–79. Khomeini, in particular, deferred explicit statements on post-revolutionary governance, seeking to keep constitutionalist, Marxist, and liberal factions in the coalition. Most

groups could agree on detesting the monarchy and rejecting the regime's brutality, censorship, and corruption. Strikes and protests often brought disparate groups together in the streets for common goals- ending martial law, removing the Shah, and initiating political change.

Notably, however, the unity proved temporary. After the Shah's departure and subsequent regime change, Khomeini's followers moved quickly to consolidate power, marginalising or banning leftist, secular, and ethnically based parties. Post-revolution, new institutions like the Revolutionary Guard and Committees of Islamic Revolution ensured that clerical dominance would be total, with past comrades-in-arms transformed into targets of repression (sometimes at the cost of thousands of lives).

The Organisation of Revolt

Revolutionary committees - or *komitehs* - sprang up in mosques, schools, and neighbourhoods during the months of crisis. These grassroots bodies became the main structures for organising strikes, protests, and distribution of scarce resources, often assuming control in the absence of a functional state. Many were eventually co-opted by Khomeini's supporters to exercise control and purge non-clerical revolutionaries.

To safeguard the revolution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Pasdarān*) was quickly established. It grew from a relatively small paramilitary to a formidable military and political force. Alongside the *Basij* - militias of young volunteers and older men, these groups enforced "revolutionary order," suppressed dissent, and policed morality, setting the stage for the post-revolutionary state.

The opposition's diversity in 1979 made the Iranian Revolution possible, representing the deep, widespread alienation caused by the Pahlavi regime's authoritarianism, uneven modernisation, and perceived subservience to Western interests. The ability of these factions to cooperate, however briefly, enabled them to topple a monarch long thought invincible. Yet their profound ideological clashes meant the revolution's aftermath was marked by new forms of exclusion and violence, as the clerical regime secured a monopoly on power, leaving former allies divided, exiled, or destroyed.

Daily Life and Social Atmosphere in January 1979

January 1979 represented a time of profound uncertainty, upheaval, and tension for ordinary Iranians amid the escalating Iranian Revolution. While the streets of Tehran and other cities were scenes of regular mass protests, strikes, and sometimes violence, the majority of Iranians were simultaneously engaged in the daily struggles to maintain family, livelihood, and normalcy under often chaotic circumstances.

A key characteristic of life during this period was widespread disruption to public services and supply chains. Strikes were rampant and extended across many sectors, including the oil industry, municipal services, transportation, and education. The oil workers' strikes, in particular, crippled Iran's most crucial source of revenue, causing economic instability felt in shortages of petroleum-based products, fuel, and electricity. Public transportation suffered owing to strikes by drivers and workers, leaving many dependent on walking or informal arrangements to get to work, school, or markets. Cities faced intermittent power outages and rationing of essential goods as the government's ability to maintain order and services was eroding rapidly.

Educational institutions were frequently closed or disrupted as university and high school students actively participated in protests or boycotts. These young Iranians—often from middle-class or rural migrant backgrounds—were highly politicised and among the most visible actors in demonstrations. Many schools were physically occupied by students or closed down by authorities fearing further unrest. This created an atmosphere of anxiety and lost opportunity as young men and women faced an unclear future amid the revolutionary turmoil.

Street violence, though not ubiquitous, punctuated the social atmosphere. Government forces frequently used live ammunition and tear gas to disperse crowds, particularly during large-scale demonstrations. Notorious events such as Black Friday in September 1978, when hundreds were killed, had already set a precedent for violent repression. Although by January 1979, large-scale massacres had lessened, skirmishes between regime forces and protestors still occurred. Vigilante groups supporting different factions sometimes clashed, and looting was reported in some cities. Fear of violence was endemic, compounded by rumours and state propaganda intensifying public anxiety.

Rumours proliferated widely in this climate of chaos and censorship. Accurate information was scarce, as official news trusted by much of the public came from a discredited regime press.

Underground networks circulated banned tapes, leaflets, and cassette speeches—especially of exiled Ayatollah Khomeini—to keep revolutionary fervour alive. Word-of-mouth became a vital means of sharing news and warnings. Rumours ranged from false reports of military coups, imminent executions, or foreign intervention to claims of mass defections among the Shah's troops. The result was heightened confusion and mistrust across communities and even families.

Within homes, people confronted the tangible difficulties of economic hardship amid political crisis. The swelling numbers of internally displaced people within Iran, added to the large influx of rural populations into Tehran, created urban overcrowding. Basic necessities like food and medicine, while nominally available, were increasingly costly or hoarded by smugglers and government cronies. Many families faced food insecurity despite Iran's oil wealth, as economic inequality worsened. For the urban poor and working classes who lacked savings or social safety nets, daily survival became a pressing concern.

Yet, amid the fear and deprivation, the social atmosphere was also marked by optimism, defiance, and communal solidarity. Many Iranians expressed hope that a new political order, grounded in justice and Islamic principles, would emerge with the Shah's expected departure. Neighbourhoods organised mutual aid, sharing scarce food and assisting families affected by strikes or violence. Religious institutions, mosques in particular, served as centres for support, not only spiritual but practical.

Oral histories and personal testimonies from the time reveal this duality of despair and hope. Many citizens feared reprisals from secret police or feared armed conflict, but simultaneously took pride in their participation in what they saw as a historic democratic uprising. Mothers worried for their sons who were protesting or at risk of conscription, while shopkeepers tried to keep businesses open despite strikes and curfews. The revolution was not simply a distant political event but a daily lived reality affecting social relations and institutions throughout the country.

To summarise, daily life in January 1979 was fraught with disruptions caused by strikes, economic shortages, and street violence. Rumours and media censorship fostered uncertainty. Yet social resilience, grassroots solidarity, and hope for change kept many Iranians engaged in the revolutionary struggle processes. This complex coexistence of fear and hope set the emotional and social texture of Iran on the cusp of profound transformation.

Situation of the U.S. Personnel in Iran (Jan 14, 1979)

The freeze date of January 14, 1979, situates the committee on the precipice of the Shah's final departure and the full collapse of his regime. For U.S. personnel living and working in Iran, these months represented a period of increasing insecurity, tense uncertainty, and evolving emergency preparedness amid a deteriorating political landscape and growing anti-American sentiment.

The American diplomatic presence centred around the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, which housed diplomats, intelligence officers, and support staff. Security concerns escalated swiftly during 1978 and early 1979 as anti-Shah and anti-U.S. demonstrations intensified. The embassy compound became the target of protests, threatening demonstrators, breaches, and occasional acts of physical harassment and vandalism. Embassy security was stepped up multiple times, including curfews and controlled movement of personnel. American diplomats often faced hostility from crowds agitating against U.S. support for the Shah, fueling fears that the embassy could be attacked or overrun.

In addition to diplomats, a substantive contingent of American expatriates worked in Iran's business community. Major U.S. corporations operated within Iran's oil sector, manufacturing, and services. Contractors, engineers, and advisors were integral to projects designed to modernise Iran's economy and infrastructure. As social unrest grew, American staff in these industries experienced increasing restrictions on their movements, protests outside company buildings, and occasional threats to personal safety.

Missionaries, academic staff, and cultural workers formed smaller American communities within Iran's urban centres. These groups were challenged not only by the political upheaval but also by suspicion and accusations that cultural exchanges were tied to evangelisation or Westernization attempts. Schools serving American children were intermittently closed during strikes and curfews, creating anxiety for families.

Evacuation options for Americans began to be considered seriously in late 1978 and early 1979. The U.S. government, embassies, and private firms had contingency plans, but logistical constraints and the rapid deterioration of law and order complicated their implementation.

Flights out of Tehran were frequently fully booked or cancelled amid escalating anti-American protests. The embassy itself became a hub for information dissemination regarding safe exits, visa assistance, and protection for American citizens.

Anti-American sentiment was not limited to mobs but permeated political discourse and revolutionary rhetoric. Many Iranians viewed the United States as the primary backer of an oppressive, corrupt regime that had exploited their country's wealth and suppressed their culture and religion. Demonstrations often included chants and slogans explicitly condemning "Great Satan" America. U.S. cultural centres and institutions became sites of tension. There were sporadic clashes between demonstrators and embassy or American community security forces.

In this atmosphere, American personnel had to navigate a precarious existence. Diplomats worked to maintain channels with regime and opposition figures alike, hoping to safeguard American interests and citizens. Business representatives balanced commercial priorities with deteriorating political realities. Ordinary expatriates sought to protect families and friends, weighing whether to stay or flee, unsure of what the coming weeks would bring.

By January 14, 1979, specifically, the Shah's impending flight created a profound sense of uncertainty. The embassy staff debated the likelihood and timing of violence or revolutionary victory. American public opinion and government policy were also in flux, as officials simultaneously condemned repression and maintained strategic support to the Shah.

In summary, the situation of U.S. personnel in Iran on the freeze date was tense and precarious. The embassy was increasingly vulnerable amidst surging anti-Americanism and revolutionary fervour. American businesses and expatriates faced growing insecurity amid economic disruption and political chaos. Contingency planning for evacuation was underway, but logistically difficult. These conditions set the stage for the crisis that would unfold in the months following January 1979, profoundly shaping U.S.-Iranian relations for decades.

Here is a detailed 1000-word narrative-style elaboration on the role of media and propaganda during the Iranian Revolution up to January 1979, covering domestic press, censorship, underground communication, and international media impact:

The Role of Media and Propaganda in the Iranian Revolution (Up to January 1979)

The media landscape in Iran during the final phase of the Pahlavi regime was defined by a profound contradiction: a formal press apparatus constrained by intense political censorship alongside a thriving underground culture of revolutionary communication that galvanised popular resistance. These dynamics played a central role in shaping public opinion, sustaining revolutionary momentum, and influencing how the Iranian crisis was perceived both domestically and internationally.

Domestic Press and Censorship

In the years preceding the revolution, the Shah's government controlled the media tightly to maintain its narrative of progress and modernisation. State-owned newspapers such as *Kayhan* and *Ettela'at* functioned as mouthpieces for government policy. Their editors and journalists operated under the watchful eye of the Ministry of Information. These official outlets emphasised the regime's narratives of economic development, the "White Revolution" reforms, and Iran's role on the world stage while covering up or downplaying dissent, social problems, and opposition activity.

Criticism of the Shah or his policies was systematically suppressed. The notorious SAVAK secret police had extensive surveillance over journalists and editors, and censorship ensured that reports unfavourable to the monarchy never reached mass audiences. Laws prohibited the publication of politically sensitive material, and newspapers could be suspended or shut down at a moment's notice. Journalists faced harassment, arrest, and torture for perceived anti-regime reporting (Iranica Online, 2024).

Despite stringent controls, cracks appeared in this media monopoly during the revolution's height. Several investigative journalists and editors began submitting more daring pieces. At times, *Kayhan* published articles criticising government mismanagement or corruption, reflecting the regime's waning grip. However, the balance still favoured suppression; many publications hesitated out of fear, and self-censorship remained pervasive.

The Rise of Underground Communication Channels

While official channels faltered, the revolution was notably propelled forward by clandestine methods of communication. Revolutionary leaders recognised the power of the media battle and turned to alternative means to disseminate their message and coordinate action.

One of the most potent revolutionary tools was the cassette tape. Audio recordings of Ayatollah Khomeini's sermons and speeches were clandestinely smuggled into Iran from his exile in Najaf, Iraq, and later France. These tapes were copied and circulated widely in mosques, coffee houses, bazaars, universities, and homes. Often played repeatedly, they carried Khomeini's call for Islam-based governance, denunciations of the Shah's regime, and warnings of moral decay. This grassroots broadcast network proved vital in countering the regime's narrative control and fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose among opposition factions (PBS, 2010).

Underground newspapers, pamphlets, and leaflets represented another critical avenue for revolutionaries. These were printed in secret locations or smuggled from abroad. They exposed government abuses, promoted revolutionary ideology, and issued calls for strikes and protests. Revolutionary graffiti and slogans covered the walls of major cities, turning urban spaces into open expressions of dissent.

The decentralised and anonymous nature of these underground media endeared them to the diverse opposition. Unlike official outlets, they could speak directly to workers, students, religious followers, and disenfranchised rural migrants who constituted the backbone of the protest movement. These communication networks also facilitated the rapid organisation of demonstrations, general strikes, and mosque-centered gatherings.

Impact on World Opinion: International Media Coverage

Beyond Iran's borders, the international media played a powerful role in interpreting and amplifying the revolution's events. Western newspapers, television, radio, and news agencies covered the crisis intensively. The stark images of mass protests, violent government crackdowns, and political chaos attracted global attention, framing Iran as a nation in dramatic transformation.

One important international platform was the BBC Persian Service, based in London, which broadcast news and revolutionary commentary into Iran. The BBC gained a large Persian-speaking audience eager for truthful accounts denied by Iranian state media. Similarly, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and other Western broadcasters provided alternative perspectives, often sympathising with revolutionary goals and emphasising human rights issues.

Coverage in outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and *Der Spiegel* brought the revolution to global audiences, influencing diplomatic discussions and shaping public opinion on U.S. and Western foreign policy. Photographs of wounded protestors, burned government buildings, and vast crowds gave visceral evidence of the regime's instability and the popular demand for change.

However, this global spotlight also had complex consequences. For many Iranians, international media represented a lifeline to the outside world and a validation of their cause. But the perception of Western bias—rooted in longstanding resentment toward British and American interference—meant coverage was often viewed with suspicion by both the regime and segments of the public. Revolutionary leaders like Khomeini emphasised anti-imperialist rhetoric, blaming Western powers for propping up the Shah and attempting to manipulate Iranian destiny.

The Propaganda Wars: Regime vs. Revolutionaries

Both the Shah's regime and revolutionary actors understood the centrality of media and propaganda. The Shah's government launched campaigns that portrayed the opposition as anarchists, communists, and religious extremists threatening modernisation and national stability. Television and newspapers promulgated images of a strong, orderly state fighting chaos and terror.

Conversely, revolutionary propaganda depicted the Shah as a corrupt dictator, a puppet of imperialism, and a moral degenerate alien to authentic Iranian and Islamic values. Religion pervaded this messaging, as images of Khomeini were paired with symbols of martyrdom and resistance. Revolutionary rhetoric emphasised themes of justice, oppression, and liberation—a powerful narrative that resonated deeply with the population's experiences.

Consequences of Media and Propaganda Dynamics

The media environment in the lead-up to January 1979 contributed decisively to the shaping of revolutionary consciousness. While censorship limited official information and attempted to contain dissent, underground communication created an alternative public sphere. The latter multiplied voices, diffused information, energised opposition, and fostered solidarity among disparate groups.

International media coverage intensified pressure on the Shah and encouraged external actors to reassess policies toward Iran. The demonisation and delegitimisation of the monarchy in the foreign press undermined diplomatic support and emboldened revolutionary forces.

Moreover, the revolution proved media-savvy in its early use of modern communication technologies (cassette tapes) to build mass consensus. This was a new characteristic of 20th-century revolutions that could no longer be constrained by traditional state censorship alone.

In summary, the role of media and propaganda in the Iranian Revolution was a battlefield where competing narratives clashed fiercely. The Shah's regime used censorship, repression, and official media to maintain control. Meanwhile, underground networks of revolutionary media and international broadcasters provided alternative sources of information and legitimacy for the opposition. This dual dynamic helped transform Iranian society, mobilising large segments of the population and facilitating the overthrow of the monarchy in early 1979.

Here is a detailed glossary of key terms related to the Iranian Revolution and the U.S. Hostage Crisis of 1979, designed to assist delegates with fundamental concepts and vocabulary:

Glossary of Key Terms

White Revolution

A series of socio-economic reforms was launched by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi starting in 1963. It included land redistribution, women's suffrage, increased education, industrial growth, and modernisation efforts. Intended to modernise Iran and undercut revolutionary agitation, it nonetheless alienated large parts of society, especially the clergy and rural populations.

SAVAK

The Shah's secret police and intelligence agency (Organisation of Intelligence and National Security) was established in 1957 with CIA and Mossad assistance. Notorious for surveillance, torture, and brutal suppression of political dissent, SAVAK was instrumental in maintaining the Shah's authoritarian control but fueled deep resentment.

Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist)

The political-theological doctrine developed by Ayatollah Khomeini argues that an Islamic jurist or clerical authority should hold supreme political power to enforce Sharia law in governance, ensuring Islamic morality and justice.

Black Friday

September 8, 1978. A day during which thousands of anti-Shah protesters gathered in Tehran's Jaleh Square were fired upon by the military and security forces, resulting in scores of deaths and injuries. This massacre intensified revolutionary fervour and international outrage.

Regency Council

A temporary governing body established to exercise the Shah's constitutional duties during his abdication or absence. Formed in January 1979 after the Shah left Iran, but its authority quickly became nominal as revolutionary forces took power.

Komiteh (Revolutionary Committees)

Grassroots committees formed during and after the revolution to maintain order, organise protests, and later enforce revolutionary laws and morality. They played a pivotal role in the Islamic Republic's consolidation of power.

Pasdaran (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC)

Formally established after the revolution from militias loyal to Khomeini, this paramilitary force protects the Islamic regime. Initially formed to counter coups and internal unrest, the IRGC became a powerful military and political institution.

Bazaaris

Traditional Iranian merchants and traders operating in bazaars are often religious and opposed to Westernisation. Played a crucial role in financing and supporting the revolution.

Marja' (Plural Maraji')

The highest-ranking Shia clerics are recognised as sources of emulation for Shia Muslims. Khomeini was considered a marja' and used his authority to legitimise political leadership.

Ayatollah

A high-ranking title for Shia clerics knowledgeable in Islamic jurisprudence. Ayatollah Khomeini was the most prominent of these figures and the leader of the revolution.

Bakhtiar, Shapour

The last Prime Minister appointed by the Shah in November 1978 was in a failed attempt to quell unrest. Represented moderate secular opposition but was rejected by revolutionary factions and quickly lost power after the Shah's flight.

Mehdi Bazargan

A moderate Islamic politician and head of the Freedom Movement of Iran. Appointed prime minister after the revolution, but resigned after conflicts with radical clerical groups.

Abbas Amir-Entezam

Deputy prime minister in Bazargan's post-revolution government and a former leading opposition figure.

General Gholam-Reza Azhari

An Iranian military leader was appointed prime minister in 1978 as the Shah's regime tried to assert control through martial law and military rule.

U.S. Ambassador William H. Sullivan

American ambassador during the crisis, tasked with managing U.S. diplomacy amidst rising anti-American sentiment and the revolution's escalation.

Cinema Rex Fire

A devastating arson attack on a movie theatre in Abadan in August 1978 that killed hundreds, which catalysed public outrage and anti-Shah protests, though blame was contested between the regime and opposition elements.

Martial Law

Military control was imposed by the Shah's government to suppress protests and strikes, particularly after mass demonstrations and violence in 1978.

Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist)

Theological foundation of the Islamic Republic, positing that jurists should govern or have supreme authority in the state.

Iran Hostage Crisis

Starting November 1979 (after freeze date), the event where Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held American diplomats hostage for 444 days as a protest against U.S. involvement and asylum to the Shah.

Islamic Republic

The political system was established officially after the revolution in April 1979, combining theocratic rule with republican elements under clerical supervision.

Bazaar

Traditional market centres are crucial to Iranian social and economic life, often conservative and supportive of religious leadership.

Monarchy (Pahlavi Dynasty)

Iran's ruling royal family from 1925 until 1979, with Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah reigning.

Velayat-e Faqih

Political doctrine advocating rule by Islamic jurists, the ideological basis for the post-revolution government.