Building on significant nineteenth-century transformations, the modern Iranian nation-state came into being under Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–41). Iran had been a patrimonial kingdom ruled by the Qajar dynasty of shahs, who claimed to exercise absolute sovereignty by right of conquest. In reality, virtually autonomous tribal chieftains, big landlords and merchants, and powerful clerics dominated the lives of ethnically and linguistically diverse populations. Moreover, during the nineteenth century, Qajar Iran had gradually acquired a semicolonial status, being effectively divided into political and economic zones of domination by imperial Russia and Great Britain. The two imperial powers sanctioned each new shah’s accession to the throne, provided him with critical loans, obtained economic concessions, and controlled major trade, banking, telephone, and telegraph systems, as well as Iran’s most efficient military forces.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, a few decades of Qajar modernizing reforms, as well as protonationalist agitation by a small intelligentsia with a modern education, culminated in the granting of the 1906 constitution. Affected by contemporary revolutions in the neighboring Russian and Ottoman empires, Iran’s constitutional movement turned revolutionary too, deposing a despotic shah in a successful civil war. The popular mobilization of 1908–11 radicalized the constitutional movement, adding
democratic and even socialist ideas to its agenda. In the second Majles, the Democrat
Party proposed a progressive reform program including land distribution, labor laws,
separation of religion and the state, and the enfranchisement of women. Though vehe-
mently opposed by the conservative establishment within and outside the constitution-
alist camp, these demands remained at the core of twentieth-century Iran's reform
movements. The constitutional era was the harbinger of political modernity. It intro-
duced modern political parties (both leftist and conservative), modern journalism, and
political propaganda through artistic and literary production.

By 1911, however, the occupation of northern Iran by tsarist armies ended effec-
tive constitutional government, halting its potential for growing more broadly
national and popular. Then, during World War I, the entire constitutional experi-
ment was suspended as British and Russian occupation forces put an end to the
country's independence. Moreover, the occupying armies requisitioned food and
other vital resources, causing enormous economic devastation, famine, and mil-
ions of deaths. The damage, both material and political, inflicted by this massive
foreign intervention has yet to be fully investigated by historians of modern Iran.

In 1917, the collapse of Russia's tsarist regime freed northern Iran, where a num-
ber of nationalist movements immediately emerged to challenge Britain's control of
the Tehran regime. Significantly weakened by the war, the British tried to consolidate
their hold by imposing the notorious 1919 Anglo-Persian Agreement, which would
have turned Iran into a virtual protectorate. The failure of this attempt, due to grow-
ing nationalist resistance, made it clear that Britain could no longer maintain its
imperial presence directly. Meanwhile, the ongoing Anglo-Soviet war had spilled
over into Iran's northern Gilan province, where Red Army detachments joined local
anti-British rebels to declare a socialist republic. For a moment it seemed possible for
Gilan rebels to capture Tehran, overthrow the Qajars, and install a revolutionary,
even Soviet-style, regime. Soviet-backed rebels had routed the Cossack Brigade, and
only the British military presence prevented their march on the capital. Once again,
foreign intervention proved decisive in shaping the fate of modern Iran.

During 1921, however, the chaotic tug of war between British forces, the Red
Army, and Iranian nationalists was finally settled. The 1921 Anglo-Soviet accord
ended superpower clashes in Asia, making Iran a buffer zone between the Soviet
Union and England's colonial holdings in India and the Middle East. Great Britain's
new imperial strategy now favored a centralized Iranian state that could impose
order, ensure continued British access to the country's oil, and keep the Soviets at
bay. This new global context was the background to the establishment of a modern
Iranian nation-state, coinciding with the rise of an obscure soldier of fortune by the
name of Reza Khan. All accounts agree that the February 1921 army coup that
launched Reza Khan's political career was instigated by British diplomatic and mili-
tary personnel stationed in Iran. However, Reza Khan's own initiative enabled him
subsequently to rise above the ranks of numerous "British agents" to assume the
mantle of a national leader.

Up to this point, direct Russo-British intervention had blocked the formation
of an Iranian nation-state, something that now had to be built from the ground up.
Nationalist historiography, even when critical of Reza Shah, often credits him for having “saved” or “revived” Iran as a nation. Ironically, this underestimates Reza Shah’s accomplishment, which was not the revival but the creation of a modern Iranian nation-state. This of course was not the accomplishment of a single individual. Reza Khan’s rise from a military strongman to a modern dynast and dictator was backed by most elite factions, from nationalists to clerics, socialists, and even some communists. In the great devastation and confusion of the post–World War I era, liberal and social democratic agendas for nation building had paled in comparison to newly emerging authoritarian models. To many postwar intellectuals, Lenin, Ataturk, and Mussolini were modern heroes who had accomplished similar goals: national independence, a strengthened military and modernized state, forced and massive capital accumulation, and rapid industrialization. This new authoritarian nationalism, and its corresponding positivist notions of historical progress, formed the core ideology of Iran’s influential modernist newspapers of the 1920s, like *Iranshahr* (1922–27) and *Farangestan* (1916–24).

Republican Turkey provided the closest model for the modern Iranian state formed under Reza Shah during the 1920s and ’30s. However, the Turkish Republic and its Kemalist ideology emerged in the context of relatively modern legal and political institutions, state bureaucracy, and physical infrastructures already in place by the late Ottoman period. Pahlavi modernization consciously emulated Turkish reforms without achieving their scope or effectiveness. Even in theory, Reza Shah’s modernization agenda was less ambitious and more conservative than Ataturk’s. Officially, Kemalism was based on the six principles of nationalism, republicanism, secularism, etatism, populism, and revolutionism. Reza Shah never claimed to be revolutionary or even populist, and after an initial maneuvering quickly became antirepublican. He was a right-wing nationalist, implementing certain etalist policies, while his secularist reforms were less deeply rooted than Turkey’s. Finally, unlike their Turkish counterparts, Iran’s modern armed forces never performed against foreign adversaries, assuming a less direct political role.

Displaying the cynical shrewdness that was to be the hallmark of his political career, Reza Khan almost immediately rid himself of his 1921 coconspirators, like Sayyid Zia al-Din Tabatabai, who were known British agents. Alone, he had more room for his political ambitions, being able to present himself as a man of destiny suitable to the needs of various factions. An unknown entity, his posture was that of a patriotic soldier, interested only in Iran’s independence and revival as a modern country. Thus, while acting as a nationalist free agent, he safeguarded vital British interests in Iranian oil and in keeping the Soviets out of Iran. An orphan raised in the barracks to become a self-made man of action, Reza Khan came from a humble family background. Hailing from the northern province of Mazandaran, he was an ethnic Persian whose rise to kingship reversed the centuries-long tradition of Iranian monarchy being the preserve of ethnic Turks.

Reza Khan’s priority during the 1920s was the unification and expansion of Iran’s armed forces under his own tight command. True to global patterns, the newly centralized armed forces then conquered a host of virtually autonomous
territories, bringing them together to form a modern nation. The 1920s military campaigns pacified tribal khans, landed elites, clerical leaders, and rival nationalist and revolutionary movements, as well as both rural and urban populations. At the same time, Reza Khan quickly assumed control of major state revenues, such as those from crown lands, municipalities, indirect taxes, roads and customs tolls, the opium monopoly, and royalties from the American Standard Oil Company. By 1923, he had taken charge of the Ministry of War (and assumed the title Sardar Sepah, “commander of the army,” by which he was known until he became shah), refusing oversight of its budget to any one else. Such moves were essential to building up Reza Khan’s political clout, while allowing him to amass a personal fortune.

Paving his road to dictatorship through the Majles, Reza Khan also built a parliamentary base, cultivating the support mainly of the Socialist and Modernity (Tájadód) parties. Ironically, these secular and progressive parties backed Reza Khan’s rise to power, while a conservative coalition of the Qajar family, landlords, bazaar merchants, and clerics, led by Sayyid Hasan Modarres, resisted his advances. When the fifth Majles convened in 1924, Reza Khan, having used the army and police to secure favorable votes, produced a large supporting bloc of deputies. The Socialist and Modernity coalition then pushed through new legislation on conscription, abolition of titles, adoption of family names, and special taxes on tea and sugar to pay for the construction of a trans-Iranian railway. Beyond the modernizing and nationalist elite, however, these measures were not popular with most Iranians. Conscription, for example, was widely and actively resisted, while regressive taxation added to the burdens of an already impoverished majority.

Reza Khan’s next move was to place himself at the head of another “progressive” campaign to make Iran a republic. With the Qajar Ahmad Shah away in Europe, the establishment of a republic could elevate Reza Khan from minister of war and prime minister to the presidency of the new republic. But the republican campaign backfired as it faced mounting opposition both in the Majles and from the clerical establishment. Reza Khan was put on the defensive, and for a brief period it seemed that the new antirepublican Majles majority might remove him from his posts. He resigned as prime minister and declared his intention to leave the country. Army commanders then instigated disturbances around the country, threatening to invade Tehran and reinstate their commander in chief. At this point, the Tehran political elite missed its final chance to contain Reza Khan’s obvious dictatorial ambitions. Instead, a high-ranking Majles delegation, including independents like Mohammad Mosaddeq, invited Reza Khan to return to premiership.

Back in the saddle, Reza Khan chose another path to dethrone the Qajars, this time planning to set up a new dynasty with himself as king. In 1924, he led a military campaign in the southern oil-rich province of Khuzistan, removing Shaykh Khazal, an Arab tribal chief who had ruled a semiautonomous British protectorate. Restoring Khuzistan to Iran further strengthened the hand of Reza Khan, who demanded the Majles recognize him, instead of the shah, as the commander in chief of the armed forces.
The final push came in 1925. Fairly secure in the Majles, Reza Khan muzzled the press and pacified the capital’s streets through the open use of violence and terror. He found excuses to bypass the Majles by imposing martial law, which remained in effect until the change of dynasty in early 1926. Under such conditions, and following a countrywide campaign of anti-Qajar agitation, on October 31, 1925, the Majles voted the abolition of the Qajar dynasty, transferring power to a provisional government with Reza Khan at its head. On December 12, a constituent assembly was elected to vote on the establishment of the new Pahlavi dynasty. Of the 260 deputies to this assembly, only three abstained from voting for the new dynasty. Although martial law was technically lifted during these elections, the military was effectively running them, producing candidates favorable to Reza Khan.

Thus, while Reza Shah’s full-blown despotism emerged during the 1930s, the foundations of a modern dictatorship were already in place by the mid-1920s. This was not the product of an extraordinary individual’s whim, or the repetition of some perennial pattern of “Iranian despotism.” Rather, the Pahlavi state grew out of a conservative modernist drift among Iran’s postwar political elite, anchored in a particular social base, within a global context sustained by Great Britain’s imperial hegemony.

**Reza Shah’s New Iran: Founding a Modern Nation-State (1926–41)**

Some scholars have characterized Pahlavi Iran as “pseudo-modernist,” conforming to a presumed pattern of Iranian “arbitrary” rule. Quite the contrary, the Pahlavi “New Order” was a modernist construction, albeit of a conservative and authoritarian variety. Neither did Reza Shah rule like some ancient “Oriental despot.” In fact, he never dispensed with a technically functioning constitutional system, nor was his dictatorship hovering “arbitrarily” above political factions and social classes.

While politically modernizing, the Pahlavi state sustained Iran’s existing socioeconomic structure and social hierarchies. The economically dominant classes, mainly landlords and a small bourgeoisie, with investment in trade, manufacture, and a few modern industries, seemed content with a semiconstitutional dictatorship. Ultimately, the new regime preserved the social standing and economic privileges of Iran’s largest landlords, with the shah having made himself the richest member of this class. From the fifth Majles (1926) to the thirteenth, Reza Shah personally decided the outcome of parliamentary elections. Still, big landlords dominated the Majles, upholding their class interests, rather than being mere puppets to the shah. These men deferred politically to an autocratic monarch who in turn safeguarded the collective interests of the class he had joined.

A new urban middle stratum, encompassing members of the liberal professions, bureaucrats, military men, teachers, and journalists, also benefited from the
state-building project, providing the creative force of a modernist culture. Conforming to global standards, the bulk of the population carried the main burdens and paid for the creation of the nation. For example, while the rich were not taxed, the impoverished majority paid surcharges on sugar and tea to build the trans-Iranian railroad, the new nation’s greatest showcase project. Peasants endured onerous exploitation, strengthened by modern legal codes that secured private property and land. Semiautonomous tribal populations were disarmed, removed from communal pasturelands, and, along with peasants, were drafted into the military or forced-labor battalions. A new urban working class, numerically small but strategically located in Khuzistan oil fields and a few modern industries in Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan and Mazandaran, emerged, but remained tightly controlled by “anticollectivist” laws that prevented organizing, unions, and strikes.

While the new nation’s subjects could not exercise citizenship rights, they did benefit from the elimination of contending power centers, a functioning centralized government, a modern infrastructure of paved roads and electronic communications, and rudimentary gains in education, health, and hygiene. For most Iranians, however, these benefits were minimal and indirect. By midcentury, the great majority of both male and female adults and children were still illiterate. Women lacked even nominal political rights, remaining legally under the guardianship of fathers and husbands. The officially sponsored campaign for the “emancipation” of Iranian women did not empower them in a legal or political sense. Consisting mainly of unveiling in public, this campaign was in fact part of a more comprehensive 1930s project to uniformly “dress the nation” in modern attire. New marriage and family laws, introduced from 1928 to 1935, were only slight improvements for women. These laws required the secular registration of all marriages and raised the legal age of marriage for girls from nine to thirteen. Men’s sharia-based privileges of polygamy, temporary marriage, easy divorce, and child custody remained intact. Indeed, Reza Shah’s own ironclad rule over a household of three wives and numerous children showcased the persistence of Islamic patriarchy in Pahlavi modernity.

Both admirers and critics tend to see the early Pahlavi state’s stance toward religion as the triumph of secularization. In fact, Reza Shah’s religious policies were cynical and instrumentalist rather than enlightened. When it served his purposes, Reza Khan had cultivated good relations with powerful clerics, and he did not in principle oppose Islam or the clergy after becoming shah. However, in keeping with the centralizing imperative of the modern state, Reza Shah could not tolerate the older tradition of clerical intervention in politics. This significant departure toward the secularization of politics was accomplished by official decree and the occasional use of force against nonconformist clerics. On the other hand, there was little systematic reform of religious institutions or critical engagement with conservative Islamic thought. Consequently, the social bases and doctrinal foundations of clerical authority remained intact and unchallenged. Thus, while dormant and conciliatory under Reza Shah, clerical power quickly reemerged to intervene in politics during the second half of the century.
As Reza Shah’s rule became more dictatorial, intellectual and cultural production grew more stifled. In literature and the arts, the revolutionary voices of modernists like Taqi Ra’fat, Aref Qazvini, and Reza Mirzadeh-Eshqi had been silenced in the 1920s. In historiography, prominent figures such as Abbas Iqbal and Mohammad Ali Forughí focused on writing state-sponsored textbooks and nationalist tomes paying homage to the glories of the distant past. The most original historian of the 1930s, Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), was intensely nationalistic and selectively supportive of Reza Shah’s nation-building projects. His “canonical” history of Iran’s constitutionalism was written in the 1930s and bears the mark of its time, although with a distinct populist bent that does not fit the dominant mold. Journalists carefully toed the line laid down by state censorship, while the best fiction of the 1930s, for example, the works of Sadeq Hedayat, reflected a dark, depressive, and introspective mood. In 1937, the Organization for the Development of Thought (Sazman-e parvaresh-e afkar) was set up to propagate cultural uniformity via the press, school textbooks, radio, music, theater, and public lectures.

In politics, the last vestiges of dissent were rooted out after the 1931 passage of “anticollectivist” laws that allowed the state to imprison individuals deemed “disloyal” to the monarchy and the country. The new repressive legislation was used most famously against the so-called Group of Fifty-three, a loose assortment of leftist intellectuals, civil servants, and university students who formed circles to read and discuss the Marxist magazine Donya (the World). The groups’ leader, the Berlin-educated professor of chemistry Taqi Arani (1903–39), became an iconic figure of the modern left, a principled intellectual loyal to his ideals and comrades, defiant in captivity all the way to his death. Arani’s brave defense in court also set a precedent for a new political genre, whereby the accused turn the tables on state prosecutors, bearing witness to history. The intellectual tendency Arani and his group represented has been claimed by both communists and democratic leftists. In the end, it seems rather to have stood somewhere between the two, more in line with European Marxism after World War I and before the consolidation of Stalinism.

By the late 1930s, the modern Pahlavi police state had cut down more than the last vestiges of democratic and leftist opposition. Reza Shah’s paranoid suspicions led to the murderous demise even of men like Abdol-Hosein Teymourtash and Alí-Akbar Davar, key architects of the new regime’s political and legal structure. The shah’s own demise, however, came in the wake of his drawing close to Hitler’s Nazi regime. By the late 1930s, German firms were involved in most of Iran’s industrial, mining, and building projects, and Germany had a major role in building the Trans-Iranian Railway. The Nazis’ extreme nationalism, antidemocratic and anticommunist bent, and Aryan racial ideology fitted well with Reza Shah’s dictatorial temper. Pro-German sympathies also resonated with Iranian nationalists who resented the Anglo-Russian imperial legacy, just as had been the case during World War I. Thus, although fascism as a mass movement never took root in Iran, Reza Shah’s pro-Nazi drift became a significant departure, unacceptable to the Allies. Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the British and Soviet governments demanded the expulsion of all Germans from Iran. Reza Shah’s procrastination led
to a quick invasion and occupation of the country by British and Soviet armies. By September 1941, the Allies forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his son and go into exile, where he died in 1944.

**The Roads Not Taken: Midcentury Marxism and Secular Nationalism (1941–53)**

As during World War I and its aftermath, the 1941 Allied occupation and the following decade were a major instance of global political actors directly intervening to change the course of modern Iranian history. Though less materially destructive than the 1911–21 period, the midcentury decade of direct foreign intervention was an onerous burden and had major political consequences. Occupation armies took over the country’s vital resources and transportation and communication facilities, requisitioning food and other provisions. On the other hand, the collapse of Reza Shah’s dictatorship suddenly opened up new political horizons.

At the behest of the Allies, Prime Minister Mohammad-Ali Forughi supervised a return to the constitutional system, with the young monarch, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, acting as a figurehead. Thus, during the 1941–53 period, while suffering foreign occupation and intervention, Iran ironically had in place its most sustained semidemocratic parliamentary system. This was due to a geopolitical balancing act similar to the nineteenth-century Anglo-Russian dominion over Iran. Unlike the Qajar era, however, mid-twentieth-century imperial intervention led to the emergence of powerful political movements, forcefully expressing the aspirations of Iranians themselves. The most prominent of these midcentury movements were nationalism and Marxism.

Midcentury Iranian nationalism emerged largely within a constitutional framework, allowed to function pluralistically because of the wartime consensus of the Allies. Hence, the still landlord-dominated Majles soon came to include nationalists of various stripes, as well as a few liberal, democratic, and even communist deputies. Another important arena for the articulation of popular nationalism was the new public space opened up by the relatively free press. The freedom of the press and of public expression surpassed that of the Constitutional era, remaining unmatched by any other period of relative political freedom in twentieth-century Iran.

The lack of political party programs and organization is often seen as the major flaw of the 1940s to ’50s generation of Iranian nationalists. It took until the late 1940s for a number of parliamentary factions and personalities to form the loosely organized National Front coalition, united only around the popular demand for oil nationalization. Beyond agreement on this single issue, the National Front was politically and ideologically incoherent and fragile, a fact exploited by its enemies, who first successfully splintered it before defeating it in the early 1950s.
In contrast, Marxists formed modern Iran’s only real political party immediately after Reza Shah’s fall in 1941. The success of the Marxist Tudeh (Masses) Party was such that its organizational structure and ideological coherence became a model for groups with diverse ideologies, both secular and Islamist, under the monarchy and the Islamic Republic. The Tudeh Party began as an antifascist coalition dedicated to the cause of Allied victory, constitutionalism, and social reform. Backed by Soviet occupation forces, however, it quickly turned into a full-fledged Stalinist organization. Still, the party’s unique success was due mainly to its blending of popular demands with modern organizational skills rather than to Soviet backing and machinations.

The Tudeh was the only party with a comprehensive program of social reform, including labor laws, women’s full enfranchisement, and land reform. Moreover, it was the only organization that joined together two modern social classes in a strategic political alliance. On the one hand, the party was linked to a tightly knit trade union movement with tens of thousands of members in Iran’s strategic industrial sectors, most notably oil, printing, and textiles. On the other hand, Marxists were remarkably successful at recruiting the country’s modern middle-class intelligentsia of teachers, university students, journalists, writers, poets, artists, members of liberal professions, and government employees, including hundreds of junior army officers.

Tudeh Party members played a major role in shaping mid-twentieth-century Iran’s political culture, not only through superb propaganda and organizational skills, but also by leading in literary, artistic, and journalistic production. A major influence on modernist culture, for example, was the translation movement dominated by Marxist intellectuals and their “fellow travelers.” By the mid-twentieth century, before the age of film and television proper, the first and second generations of Iranians with a modern education formed their perceptions of the world, and of Iran’s place in it, primarily by reading translations of foreign fiction. The most popular authors of this period included Victor Hugo, Jack London, Anatole France, Mark Twain, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens, Romain Rolland, Ignazio Silone, Pearl Buck, Nikos Kazantzakis, John Steinbeck, Maxim Gorky, Bertolt Brecht, Anton Chekhov, and Leo Tolstoy. Despite the diversity of genre and theme, the broad worldview of modernist translations focused on nationalism, anti-imperialism, class conflict, and resistance to social and political oppression.

The Allies had agreed to evacuate Iran at the end of the war, but all three major powers used wartime occupation to extend their influence into the postwar period. The British tried to consolidate their control of the oil industry, conservative politicians, and Majles deputies. Their position, however, weakened due to an upsurge in Iranian nationalism, as well as competition from both the United States and the Soviet Union. Americans built their influence by providing financial aid and training to the armed forces and the police. U.S. companies also sought entry into the British-dominated oil industry. Similarly, the Soviet Union used its military presence to obtain postwar political and economic gains. The difference was that while
the British and the Americans tied themselves to Iran's conservative political and military establishment, the Russians made their influence felt by supporting general popular demands, addressed by the Tudeh Party, and also by backing the grievances of Iran's Azeri and Kurdish minorities.

Thus, as the Anglo-American wartime alliance with the Soviets unraveled in 1944–45, Iran became one of the first theaters of the Cold War. Soviet armies delayed their departure from northern Iran, backing the formation of an autonomous government in Azerbaijan and an independent republic in the Kurdish regions. These Soviet-backed regimes responded to ethnic demands for cultural and linguistic autonomy and, especially in Azerbaijan, initiated education and land reform and gave women the vote. Yet the Soviets soon abandoned their Azeri and Kurdish clients in exchange for political and economic concessions from the Tehran government. Giving in to mounting Anglo-American pressure, the Red Army was withdrawn in 1946. Meanwhile, Moscow had negotiated a deal with Prime Minister Qavam al-Saltaneh to obtain an oil concession in northern Iran. The Iranian military then moved into Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, where the autonomous regimes were crushed and large numbers of their followers massacred. The Soviet Union did not get the oil concession, which was not approved by the Majles.

The opportunistic policy of the Soviet Union during the 1945–46 Azerbaijan and Kurdistan crisis damaged leftist prospects. Nevertheless, the Tudeh Party's popularity and impact continued to grow, even after it became illegal when implicated in a 1947 attempt on the shah's life. This was an indication that the party's popularity was tied directly neither to Soviet influence nor to its legal and above-ground status. By the late 1940s, however, a rival popular movement had appeared around the demand for oil nationalization. British control of Iran's oil industry was highly resented, seen as both a blatant case of economic exploitation and a gross violation of Iran's national sovereignty. The oil nationalization movement peaked during the 1951–53 premiership of Mohammad Mosaddeq, the inspirational leader of the National Front.

The rise and fall of Mosaddeq is generally seen as the crucial turning point where Anglo-American intervention destroyed modern Iran's chances for charting an independent course under a secular nationalist regime. Equating the oil nationalization movement with a fundamental assertion of national sovereignty, Mosaddeq became immensely popular, while arousing great fear and opposition among the British. Acting at the behest of the latter, the shah dismissed Mosaddeq in the summer of 1952. But an outburst of popular protests led to the reinstatement of Mosaddeq who by then symbolized defiance of both the British Empire and Iran's conservative political establishment. As Mosaddeq's confrontation with the British intensified, the United States also turned against him, joining covert operations to destabilize and overthrow his government. At the same time, the National Front began to fall apart, its secular and Islamic right-wing factions joining forces with the Anglo-American project for Mosaddeq's removal.

In mid-August 1953, Mosaddeq was overthrown in a military coup organized by the CIA. The oil crisis had led to a British economic embargo and evacuation
of Iran; thus the covert British plan for Mosaddeq’s overthrow was implemented by the Americans. The United States was already the major foreign influence on the Iranian armed forces, working closely with the shah and Mosaddeq’s other domestic opponents. Diplomatic records and memoirs, as well as most academic studies, explain the 1953 coup in terms of American fears of an imminent communist threat in Iran. In fact, the communist threat was used to justify a course of action that laid the foundations for three decades of U.S. political and economic hegemony in Iran.

Had the United States chosen to support Mosaddeq, or at least stay neutral, the National Front rather than the Tudeh Party would have been strengthened. With only several thousand members, including a few hundred junior army officers, the Tudeh Party was hardly poised to come to power. Nor was the global context favorable to a communist takeover in Iran. Dealing with the aftermath of Stalin’s death, and aggressively confronted by the Americans in Korea and elsewhere, the Soviet Union was not in a position to risk another major military showdown with the United States by sponsoring a Tudeh Party takeover in Iran.

FROM THE CIA COUP TO THE SHAH-People Revolution (1953–63)

The 1953 coup was a watershed in modern Iranian history. It marked the decisive end of an independent nationalist course, propping up instead an increasingly autocratic Pahlavi monarchy in a close Cold War alliance with the United States. The shah’s restoration to the throne by the CIA cast a dark shadow on the legitimacy of his dynasty, while growing U.S. involvement in Iran’s military, political, and economic affairs confirmed widespread perceptions of his regime as essentially an American client state. Though the shah was not a mere American “puppet,” dependence on the United States damaged his legitimacy, breeding popular resentment and uniting the opposition in a grand anti-American and anti-shah coalition.

Post-1953 U.S.-Iranian relations were complicated and went through several phases. In the first phase, during the 1950s, the shah was not an absolute monarch but presided over an Anglo-American-backed regime that quickly rooted out Mosaddeq’s supporters and crushed the Tudeh Party. Too popular to be executed, Mosaddeq was imprisoned and then lived under house arrest until his death in 1967. Thousands of National Front and especially Tudeh Party members were imprisoned, and scores of communist army officers were executed. A massive wave of repression swept the country, hitting particularly the politicized intelligentsia and activist university students.

In December 1953, for example, special commando units raided Tehran University and opened fire on students, killing three and injuring many more. The
students were protesting Mosaddeq’s trial and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon’s visit to Iran.

The post-1953 regime was not an entirely foreign imposition, since it also enjoyed the support of Iran’s conservative political establishment, high-ranking military officials, big landlords, and powerful clerics. Meanwhile, America increased its military and economic aid, while U.S. companies received a share equal to that of Britain (40 percent) in the new international consortium formed in 1954 to extract and sell Iranian oil. In 1955, Iran joined the United Kingdom, Turkey, Pakistan, and Iraq in the Baghdad Pact, a Cold War alliance supported also by the United States. In 1957, American and Israeli advisors helped establish Iran’s political police organization. Known by its Persian acronym SAVAK, it soon became a hated presence, with spies who spread fear everywhere, enforcing loyalty by jailing and torturing dissidents.

The Iranian cultural landscape during the post-1953 years was one of pessimism, cynicism, and frustration. The mostly left-leaning and nationalist intellectual elite pondered the crumbling of its ideals in the face of the repression unleashed by the coup regime. This is clearly manifest in the most influential prose and poetry of the 1950s, often reflecting a dark and brooding mood of despair. The pessimistic modernism of the writer Sadeq Hedayat made him a cultural icon, while poets like Ahmad Shamlu and Mehdi Akhavan-Sales lamented the spiritual “dark night” and “cold season” descending upon the country. During the immediate postcoup years, many of the country’s best writers, poets, and translators spent some time in jail, an experience that only widened the breach between them and the Pahlavi regime.

No major social or economic reform took place in the 1950s. The landlord-dominated Majles, supported by high clerics, rejected all proposals for land reform, deemed essential to economic development and improving the lot of the country’s impoverished majority living in the countryside. After Reza Shah’s fall, public outcries had forced the Majles to take over the large tracts of land he had appropriated by graft and intimidation. Advocates of land reform, primarily the Tudeh Party, had called for the distribution of these holdings to poor peasants. Instead, during the 1950s they were repossessed by the shah, who began selling them, keeping a large portion for his family.

By the late 1950s, however, the regime was facing serious problems. In 1958, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown as a wave of military coups and popular unrest shook the pro-Western regimes of the Middle East. In Iran, endemic economic hardship, exasperated by inflation and falling wages, caused labor strikes and open unrest among the urban working and middle classes. At the same time, blatant corruption in stage-managed Majles elections became a major embarrassment. Particularly alarming to the shah was the exposure of secret plans for another military coup. News of contacts between the coup planners and American officials made an already insecure shah more nervous and wary of U.S. backing in times of trouble.

Thus, by the early 1960s, although Iran was not on the brink of revolution, as claimed by Soviet propaganda, it was clear that real political and economic changes
were necessary. The issue of reforms in Iran became more urgent when it was taken up by the new Kennedy Administration in the United States. In response to partly rural revolutions in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, American strategic thinking now emphasized the need for socioeconomic reforms, in particular land reform, as a means to undercut the appeal of communism.

What became known in Iran as the “White Revolution” was therefore an American-sponsored reform project, aimed at buying the regime stability and social support through a major socioeconomic transformation. Significantly, the project was introduced as a “revolution,” a concept that became central to the regime’s self-definition until its demise in the 1970s. Without irony, the key planks of the “White Revolution,” soon to be called “The Shah-People Revolution,” were borrowed directly from Iran’s socialist and communist movements. These were land reform, enfranchisement of women, workers’ profit sharing, nationalization of natural resources, and the expansion of public education via a literacy corps.

Discussion of reform came into focus in the early 1960s, while political conditions became more unstable. The shah, for example, had been forced to intervene personally and cancel the blatantly rigged 1960 Majles elections. Increasing unrest, including strikes by teachers, and especially by university students, then brought down a succession of cabinets. A revived National Front became active again, calling for the restoration of constitutional government and free elections. With no organization and its leadership in exile, the Tudeh Party could not have much influence, but a younger generation of Marxists emerged, especially as leaders of a radical student movement active in Iran and among Iranian students in Europe and the United States. Finally, an Islamist opposition appeared, mixing a conservative stand against land reform and women’s suffrage with a strong rejection of the regime’s subservience to the United States.

A turning point was reached in 1963, after the shah took personal charge of implementing the reform package originally introduced in 1962 by the U.S.-backed prime minister Ali Amini. In January 1963, the shah’s six-point reform proposal received the typical near-unanimous approval in a nationwide referendum. Without rejecting the reform package, the National Front and its leftist student factions boycotted the referendum on the grounds that it was carried out under undemocratic conditions. The Islamist opposition, however, rejected both the referendum and the reforms. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini now emerged as the most radical voice of the Islamist opposition, denouncing the shah’s reforms as a ploy to enhance Iran’s subjugation to the United States and Israel. Khomeini’s rise to prominence came in the wake of intense rivalry among the country’s high clerics to fill the position of the deceased Grand Ayatollah Hosein Borujerdi, the undisputed leader of the clerical establishment and a conservative supporter of the shah. A relatively unknown cleric of modest religious rank, Khomeini quickly became a prominent ayatollah by taking a political stance and skillfully manipulating popular sentiments against the regime and its American backers.

In June 1963, riots broke out in Tehran and other cities when Khomeini was arrested after strongly attacking the shah in a sermon. Several days of bloody street
protests were eventually put down with casualties reaching into the hundreds or more. While members of the secular opposition had taken part in the protests, the most active participants came from the lower bazaar strata, who traditionally followed the clergy. In the Islamic Republic, the June 1963 events are depicted as a harbinger of the 1978–79 revolution. In fact, the "1963 uprising" mobilized a more limited social base and lacked revolutionary demands. Like National Front leaders, Khomeini in 1963 asked only for the observance of the constitution and not for the regime's overthrow. It was only after being exiled from Iran that he joined the radical opposition, declaring, by the early 1970s, that monarchy was in principle anti-Islamic. In 1964, however, he was exiled to Turkey, after denouncing the shah for the granting of diplomatic immunity to U.S. personnel stationed in Iran. Soon he went to Iraq, where he remained an important but by no means undisputed opposition leader. Up until the late 1970s, as Khomeini himself often complained, radical opposition to the regime was not predominantly Islamic, nor was it led by the clergy.

The Contradictions of High Pahlavi Modernity (1963–79)

Following the violent suppression of the 1963 protests, the regime banned the last vestiges of legal opposition. The National Front had to suspend its activities, and its more radical leaders and student activists were jailed. Thereafter, the fateful fifteen years between 1963 and the reemergence of open opposition in 1977–78 witnessed the imposition of an increasingly rigid royal autocracy. During this period, the unfolding of the shah's "revolution" marked Iran's decisive transition to a state-directed market economy, spearheaded by oil-based capital formation and tightly controlled by an absolute monarch ruling through a police state thinly disguised as a constitutional monarchy. From a social and economic point of view, the shah's reforms initially appeared successful. A significant number of middle-sized peasant households received land; women's participation in the new urban labor market increased, while new legislation expanded their rights within marriage and family; public education and health and social services expanded rapidly in urban areas. The 1960s and '70s were thus the peak of Pahlavi-style modernity. By material standards, this was an era of growing prosperity, especially as oil income began to multiply in the 1970s, trickling down partially to the urban middle and lower classes. Such benefits accrued despite the massive waste, mismanagement, and graft of the technocratic elite that ran the country under the shah's tight command.

All was not well, however, as a strong undercurrent of political frustration and cultural malaise brewed just under the surface. University campuses were the most active site of chronic unrest, often turning into openly political demonstrations that became increasingly radical from the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. As
peaceful protests were systematically stifled, university students became the main source of recruitment for a violent campaign of urban guerrilla operations that broke out in the early 1970s. Never more than several hundred strong, the guerrillas were a younger generation of mostly self-styled communists who believed their heroic defiance of an oppressive regime would shake the populace out of fear and complacency. In addition to Marxist-Leninists, the guerrilla movement had an important faction, dubbed “Islamic Marxist” by the regime, that mixed 1960s and ’70s Third Worldism and anti-imperialism with an innovative interpretation of Shi’ism, emphasizing social egalitarianism and violent resistance to tyranny and political oppression.

The origins of “Islamic Marxism” went back to the 1940s, when a modern Islamist movement took shape mainly in response to the sudden popularity of Marxism, especially on university campuses. In 1944, for example, a group of young activists had formed the Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists. They borrowed wholesale from Marxist political and economic theory, but rejected philosophical materialism. Small but influential circles of Muslim socialists remained active during the 1940s and ’50s political struggles. By the 1960s and ’70s, some of their second-generation members had formulated a more comprehensive synthesis of Marxism and Islam.

While quite influential during the last Pahlavi decades, Marxism, both secular and Islamic, was only one strain within a broader and more diffuse culture of opposition. During the 1960s and ’70s, a powerful discourse of nativism, rejecting the West and celebrating Iranian authenticity, had become increasingly pervasive. The writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s booklet Westoxication (Gharbzadegi) was only the most famous articulation of a broadly shared sentiment lamenting Iran’s subjugation to the secular technological domination of a morally hollow and predatory West. A lesser-known source for Iran’s modernist authenticity discourses was the intellectual circle formed by the French Orientalist Henri Corbin and his Iranian associates. Active in Tehran during the 1960s and ’70s, Corbin was at the center of systematic efforts at constructing a modern interpretation of Shi’ism, tying it to Iran’s Zoroastrian and “Aryan” past. The Corbin circle linked a metaphysical critique of the West to a modern recasting of Iran’s religious and mystical traditions. One of Corbin’s closest collaborators was the University of Chicago–trained Seyyed Hossein Nasr, head of Iran’s Imperial Academy of Philosophy during the 1970s. A third major figure was Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, the most prolific and influential interpreter of modernist Shi’ism during the two prerevolutionary decades. Motahhari had been Khomeini’s student and remained in touch with his master. Under the monarchy, his liberal-conservative reading of Shi’i Islam was allowed wide exposure, as it countered both Marxism and various forms of Islamic Marxism, especially the popular brand espoused by Ali Shari’ati.

Beyond books and periodicals, Iran’s homegrown anti-Western authenticity discourse gradually reached larger audiences, soon saturating popular culture, in movies, television series, music, and songs. By the 1970s, the regime, too, had succumbed to the authenticity discourse, halfheartedly embracing its anti-Western
Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda, whose tenure (1964–77) came to epitomize technocratic subservience to the shah’s autocracy, already echoed the authenticity discourse, declaring that under the shah’s leadership Iran followed a uniquely independent course that was “neither Eastern nor Western.” Meanwhile, the regime was actively involved in setting guidelines for the development of national culture. Supported by a growing state budget, the High Council of Culture and the Arts directed and produced numerous cultural events, arts festivals, films, and radio and television programs for adults and children. The bulk of cultural production, in public education, book publication, press, radio, and television, was either state-owned or mainly financed and controlled by the government. Intense censorship of the press and of books was a constant grievance of the Writers Guild, whose more active members often ended up in prison. In the end, however, the regime was increasingly vulnerable to a “countercultural” critique that relentlessly attacked Iran’s growing subservience to the West, primarily in the cultural arena but indirectly yet clearly in politics as well.

A strategic move by the shah to realign Iran’s political culture on a novel course was the mid-1970s inauguration of the Rastakhiz (Resurrection) Party. Quickly discredited as a major political blunder, this project appears to have been the brain-child of former Marxists who proposed that the shah drop the pretense of a parliamentary system and instead adopt a Stalinist-style mass mobilization single party. Thus in 1975, the façade of Western-style democracy was abandoned when the shah declared the creation of an all-encompassing party. He made it clear that Iranians who did not join his new party would have no political say or opportunities for advancement in social life. Mercifully, he granted those who disagreed the right to leave the country.

The 1975 inauguration of the Rastakhiz Party promised the eschatological resurgence of a genuinely Iranian New Age, with the shah as the absolute spiritual as well as political leader who could tamper even with the sacred in acts such as replacing the Islamic Calendar with a monarchist one. At the height of his megalomania, the shah also insisted that his leadership had brought the country to the threshold of a “Great Civilization,” with Iran poised to become one of the world’s top five superpowers within a generation. Extending the regime’s control into hitherto undisturbed territories, the Rastakhiz Party targeted Iran’s bazaars, hitting them with an “anti-profiteering campaign” of wage and price controls. At the same time, the regime launched a systematic campaign for controlling the clerical establishment. It tightened its hold over religious seminaries and endowments, arresting numerous high- and low-ranking clerics who had opposed the regime’s new policies.

In conjunction with the Rastakhiz Party, there was also a project for creating a new official monarchist ideology. On the shah’s personal orders, an odd assortment of intellectuals, from renegade Marxists to SAVAK functionaries and authenticity gurus, worked together to forge a new “philosophy” that had to be revolutionary, spiritually rooted in Shi‘i mysticism, and authentically Iranian, hence “neither Eastern nor Western.” However, both the Rastakhiz Party and its revolutionary monarchist philosophy were aborted as a multifaceted economic, political, and
cultural crisis emerged on the horizon in 1976–77. By this time, the economic boom of the 1970s had created massive structural dislocations, with millions flooding into large cities, expecting better urban jobs and higher living standards. Then came the mid-1970s slowdown with unemployment, shortages of housing, social services, electricity, and transportation bottlenecks. Moreover, the rampant corruption and cynicism of the political elite turned the public’s raised expectations into anger and frustration.

While facing a set of new domestic problems, the regime also suddenly appeared less secure in its strategic alliance with the United States. From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, the shah had established particularly close ties with the Nixon administration, buying billions of dollars worth of the most sophisticated American armaments and projecting Iran’s military and political presence into the Persian Gulf region as a main pillar of the pro-American status quo. Then came the post-Vietnam American foreign policy crisis, leading to the Carter administration’s distancing itself from repressive allies. As president, Carter exempted Iran from the implications of his “human rights” foreign policy. Nevertheless, the shah obviously felt less secure of unconditional American support, while Iran’s dissidents, and particularly the liberal opposition, were emboldened to openly criticize political repression.

Thus, beginning in 1977, associations of lawyers, writers, journalists, and artists led a protest movement with secular democratic demands, calling for the restoration of constitutional government. The regime’s slow and indecisive response to such demands then paved the way for a deepening political crisis. Arguably, the regime’s rapid meltdown would not have been inevitable had the shah acted differently during the early stages of what quickly became his regime’s final crisis. In 1977, when ending Prime Minister Hoveyda’s long and sycophantic tenure, the shah could have met the liberal opposition’s basic demands by relaxing his personal control and restoring constitutional government. Even in early 1978, such a compromise might have prevented a revolutionary escalation and possibly saved the Pahlavi dynasty. Eventually, the shah was forced to embrace this option, but then it was too late, coming just prior to his final departure from Iran in 1979.

In fact, the responses of both the shah and the United States to Iran’s escalating late-1970s crisis were indecisive, confused, and counterproductive. As the shah’s situation grew more desperate, American policy became more ambiguous and stymied, with Carter’s advisors clashing on whether to support the shah or negotiate seriously with the radical opposition. For his part, the shah added to the confusion by making significant concessions, such as releasing political prisoners and allowing more freedom of expression, while refusing ultimate power sharing. These half measures added to the frustration of a restive populace, made angrier by the regime’s imposition of martial law and the military’s daily shootings of unarmed street protesters.

The point of no return was reached in 1978, when the violent suppression of originally limited street protests caused their escalation into an ever-widening spiral, which by the year’s end had engulfed the entire country. It was also in 1978 that the leadership of the opposition passed from secular liberals to a radical coalition
formed around Ayatollah Khomeini. In January 1978, a leading Tehran newspaper's personal attack on Khomeini catapulted him to further prominence, causing angry protests that were suppressed with considerable bloodshed. This event set off a cycle of mourning commemorations for the dead that was repeated with more intensity every forty days. By May, mass demonstrations and killings of protesters had spread to all major cities. In August and September, the burning of a movie theater in Abadan and the shooting down of demonstrators in Tehran resulted in several hundred deaths adding more fuel to public anger. During the following weeks, a wave of strikes spread from universities and high schools to encompass virtually the whole country. The shah then appeared on national television, apologizing for past mistakes and telling the people he had heard "the voice of their revolution." By the end of 1978, however, the number of protestors had reached the millions, and nothing short of the shah's stepping down seemed acceptable.

Positioning himself at the head of a diverse anti-shah coalition, and rejecting constitutional compromises, Khomeini now called for the monarchy's revolutionary replacement with an "Islamic government," an undefined notion vaguely conforming to the populist, antimperialist, and anti-imperialist sentiments of the 1970s Iranian opposition. Then, in January 1979, the shah took the U.S. ambassador's advice, leaving Iran after finally appointing a National Front leader, Shapur Bakhtiar, prime minister with real independent authority. The time for compromise, however, had passed. The United States was negotiating with Khomeini's camp, while an American general had arrived in Tehran to replace the shah as the de facto commander in chief of the Iranian armed forces, keeping them intact and cooperative in case of transition to a new regime.

Bakhtiar's caretaker regime, however, could not last long. In early February, following Khomeini's triumphant return to Iran, armed clashes between pro- and anti-shah factions spilled from the barracks into Tehran streets. With the army deeply divided and effectively neutralized, the monarchy finally collapsed in a few days of popular uprising that swept the entire country.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


