

# **The Continuity of Oppression: State of Power in Iran from Reza Shah II to Ayatollah Khomeini**

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## **Abstract**

Modern Iranian history is defined less by rupture than by the structural continuity of a sophisticated police state. This paper argues that the Islamic Republic's theocratic framework sits atop an authoritarian foundation established during the Pahlavi era. By tracing the evolution of power from Mohammad Reza Shah to Ayatollah Khomeini, the study identifies a "durable state logic" that prioritizes survival over democratic legitimacy.

The analysis frames the 1953 coup as the "original sin" of Iranian governance, setting a precedent for suppressing popular will. It contends that the 1979 Revolution functioned as a "change in management" rather than a total liberation, as the new regime repurposed the Shah's repressive machinery—transitioning the functions of SAVAK into the IRGC. Through the "Axis of Resistance" and the systematic rollback of women's rights, the research demonstrates that while justifications shifted from the secular to the divine, the instruments of control remained constant.

**Keywords:** *Authoritarianism, SAVAK, IRGC, Pahlavi Dynasty, 1979 Revolution, Theocracy, Structural Continuity.*

## I. The Original Sin: The Coup d'État Against Mohammad Mossadegh

The History of forceful regime changes is not new, the west tried it in Iran in 1953 by ousting democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. The catalyst for Western intervention was economic: Mossadegh wanted to nationalise Iran's oil industry, threatening the vast revenues that flowed to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, whose majority shareholder was the British Government.<sup>1</sup> In order to remove Mossadegh the Western powers—specifically the United States, through the CIA's Operation Ajax, and Britain, through MI6's Operation Boot<sup>2</sup>—orchestrated a coup to overthrow Mossadegh and reinstate Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi as the ruling monarch.<sup>3</sup> For Iranians the Coup demonstrated, with brutal clarity, that their democratic aspirations could be overturned whenever they conflicted with Western strategic interests.

## II. The Glittering Facade: Progress of Iran amidst Shadow of SAVAK

Following his restoration to power, Mohammad Reza Shah launched the White Revolution<sup>4</sup> in 1963, an ambitious and "sweeping modernisation programme" intended to transform Iran's traditional landscape into a modern, secular state.<sup>5</sup> This initiative was multi-faceted, encompassing land reform, literacy campaigns, and massive infrastructure development that fuelled substantial economic growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s, particularly following the 1973 oil boom. A central pillar of this era was the dramatic shift in the status of women, who were granted suffrage in 1963 and saw the minimum marriage age raised alongside new rights to initiate divorce under the Family Protection Law.<sup>6</sup>

By the late 1970s, these reforms had successfully fostered a "modern, Western-educated professional class," with universities expanding rapidly to accommodate a new generation of thinkers. Women entered fields like medicine, law, and government in significant numbers, becoming some of the most professionally active in the Muslim world at a scale unprecedented in the region. However, the White Revolution was a deeply contradictory project that "offered progress while denying freedom". While the physical and social infrastructure flourished, the Shah failed to build any legitimate political institutions to absorb the growing dissent of a population that was becoming increasingly globalized and politically restless.

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<sup>1</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (The New Press 2013).

<sup>2</sup> These were the respective code names for the covert operations orchestrated by the United States (CIA) and the United Kingdom (MI6) to overthrow the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. The primary motivation was Mossadegh's move to nationalize the Iranian oil industry, which threatened British economic interests as mentioned in Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (The New Press 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (John Wiley & Sons 2003).

<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive modernization program launched by Mohammad Reza Shah. It included land reform, literacy campaigns, and significant social changes, most notably granting women the right to vote and raising the minimum marriage age. While it spurred economic growth, it was criticized for "offering progress while denying freedom," as it was not accompanied by political pluralism as mentioned Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (Yale University Press 2017) 642–650.

<sup>5</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (Yale University Press 2017) 642.

<sup>6</sup> Family Protection Law 1967 (Iran).

This progress was inextricably linked to a "brutal underside" of state control. Even as the economy boomed, the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, ensured that modernisation did not lead to political pluralism, subjecting dissidents to systematic torture and disappearance.

The origins of SAVAK (*Sāzmān-e Ettlā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar*) reveal the brutal underside of the Shah's modernization efforts. Established in 1957 with the direct assistance of the CIA and Mossad, the agency was born from the formative trauma of the 1953 coup.<sup>7</sup> It served as a defensive wall for the reinstated monarchy, designed to ensure that the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people remained suppressed in favor of Western strategic interests. As the Shah implemented his ambitious "White Revolution," SAVAK functioned as the primary mechanism for maintaining his absolute power, transforming the state into a totalizing entity that prioritized control over participation.

The consequences of this shadow state were both physically devastating and politically transformative, defining a generation through systemic brutality. SAVAK became notorious for its use of systematized torture, enforced disappearances, and detention without trial, which together cultivated a suffocated political order.<sup>8</sup> In this environment, fear was ambient and dissent was pathologized, effectively silencing the public sphere. However, this crushing of legitimate political expression led to an unintended unification; socialists, Marxists, and orthodox Islamists—groups that shared almost nothing ideologically—found a common language in their shared hatred of the secret police.

Because the state left no room for dissent to be negotiated or absorbed by institutions, political pressure accumulated until it broke catastrophically in the 1979 Revolution. Yet, the most significant legacy of SAVAK was not its destruction, but its survival through structural continuity. The architecture of the secret police was not dismantled by the new regime; it was repurposed. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) emerged as the functional successor to SAVAK, inheriting its sophisticated methods of surveillance and the neutralization of opposition.<sup>9</sup>

The White Revolution succeeded in creating a sophisticated, Western-educated society, yet it left this population encased in an authoritarian structure that pathologized political participation and failed to build legitimate institutions to absorb dissent. This structural failure ensured that when the rapid pressures of modernisation met the absolute rigidity of the police state, the resulting rupture would be catastrophic for the Pahlavi dynasty. Ultimately, the history of SAVAK and its successors reveals a "cage" of state violence that proved too useful to discard; the 1979 Revolution functioned less as a liberation than as a change in management, where the new leadership simply swapped the Shah's secular mandate for a theological one. By

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<sup>7</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press 1982) 419.

<sup>8</sup> Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton University Press 2007) 384.

<sup>9</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Oxford University Press 2016).

maintaining the essential machinery of repression—effectively transitioning the functions of SAVAK into the IRGC—the Islamic Republic ensured that the logic of a "guarded state" would continue to dominate the Iranian political landscape long after the Shah had fled.

### III. The Faustian Bargain: The 1979 Coalition

The 1979 Revolution was born from a "Faustian Bargain"—a tactical, yet ultimately fatal, alliance between irreconcilable political forces. For decades, the Shah's rapid, top-down Westernisation and the brutality of his secret police, SAVAK, had alienated a vast spectrum of society. This created a vacuum where the orthodox Shia clergy, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, found themselves marching alongside the very Marxist, socialist, and nationalist groups the monarchy had traditionally persecuted.

This coalition, which included groups like the MEK, the Tudeh Party, and the National Front, was united by a single, desperate goal: toppling the Pahlavi dynasty. However, a catastrophic miscalculation lay at the heart of this union. The secular leftists viewed the clerics as "unworldly" figures who would provide religious legitimacy to mobilise the masses and then quietly cede actual governance to secular technocrats.<sup>10</sup> They believed they were using the clergy's popular appeal to achieve a pluralist or socialist state.

In reality, the clerical establishment had no intention of sharing power. They possessed a pre-prepared constitutional blueprint: *velayat-e faqih*, or the guardianship of the Islamic jurist.<sup>11</sup> Once the Shah fled in 1979, the clerics moved with "extraordinary speed and ruthlessness" to outmanoeuvre their liberal partners and seize control of the key instruments of state. The April 1979 referendum, offering only a "yes or no" for an Islamic Republic, was the first signal that the democratic hopes of the coalition were being extinguished.

The bargain turned deadly when the new regime repurposed the Shah's tools of repression. The leftists who had marched for the revolution were soon hunted, imprisoned, and executed as enemies of the state. This betrayal culminated in the 1988 prison massacres, where thousands were executed on Khomeini's direct order.<sup>12</sup> The secularists had invited the clergy into the political fold to destroy a monarch, only to find they had enabled a theocracy that would eventually consume them.

<sup>10</sup> Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (IB Tauris 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist* (Hokumat-e Islami: Velayat-e Faqih) (first published 1970, Manor Books 1979).

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, 'Iran: Blood-Soaked Secrets: Why Iran's 1988 Prison Massacres are Ongoing Crimes Against Humanity' (2018) Index Number: MDE 13/9421/2018 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/> accessed 6 May 2026.

#### IV. Strategic Ambition: The Genesis and Impact of the Axis of Resistance

The creation of the "Axis of Resistance" is a central pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, driven by the clerical leadership's determination to ensure its own survival and export its revolutionary ideology. From its inception, the regime envisioned Iran as the vanguard of a global Islamic revolution, necessitating the projection of influence far beyond its national borders to reshape the regional order in a way that entrenched its own power. By cultivating a network of proxy entities, Iran successfully developed a mechanism to project power at minimal direct cost to the state.

A primary motivation for this regional network is the logic of permanent confrontation, which serves the internal politics of the regime. The leadership utilizes the existence of perpetual external threats to mobilize domestic support and justify its continued existence as a high-security state. This strategy allows the Islamic Republic to frame its domestic repression as a necessary component of a broader struggle against regional and global enemies.

The cornerstone of this strategy was the birth of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1982. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) moved into the Bekaa Valley to organize and train Shia militias into a hybrid organization.<sup>13</sup> Hezbollah was designed to be inseparable from the Shia civilian community, blending a political party and welfare network with a formidable armed militia. This ambiguity provides Iran with significant strategic leverage and military reach while allowing it to maintain plausible deniability regarding its direct involvement in regional conflicts.

The consequences for Iran's neighbors have been transformative and often destabilizing. The Axis of Resistance has expanded well beyond Lebanon to encompass the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, the Assad government in Syria, and the Houthi movement in Yemen. For neighbors like Israel and Saudi Arabia, the primary consequence is encirclement by capable, hostile forces that share Iranian material support and strategic direction. This has led to decades of conflict, including guerrilla warfare, rocket campaigns, and major military escalations like the 2006 Lebanon War.

Furthermore, the presence of these Iranian-backed non-state actors often undermines the sovereignty and stability of the host nations. Because these groups are embedded in the democratic and social institutions of countries like Lebanon and Iraq, they are extraordinarily difficult to defeat militarily or manage politically. This creates a regional environment characterized by asymmetric warfare and persistent instability, serving Iran's goal of preventing a stable, Western-aligned regional order from emerging. Ultimately, the Axis of Resistance functions as both a shield for the regime in Tehran and a sword that keeps its neighbors in a state of perpetual conflict.

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<sup>13</sup> Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton University Press 2014).

## **V. The War on the Body: The Reversal of Women's Rights**

Nowhere was the revolutionary rollback more devastating than in the treatment of women. The gains of the Pahlavi era—the right to vote, the Family Protection Law, and increased marriage ages—were systematically dismantled. Within weeks of the revolution, the minimum marriage age for girls was reduced to nine lunar years, and women were barred from serving as judges.

Mandatory veiling was imposed and codified, and the Gasht-e Ershad (morality police) was established to enforce dress codes. This institution became a hated symbol of the state's authority over women's bodies, serving as a daily demonstration of who held power over private life. The death of Mahsa (Zhin) Amini in police custody in September 2022 ignited the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. This uprising was remarkable because it united men and women across all 31 provinces in a demand to end the foundational logic of a state that claimed sovereignty over the bodies of its citizens in the name of God.

## **VI. Conclusion: The Permanence of the Cage and the Spirit of Resistance**

The history of modern Iran is frequently narrated as a series of jagged ruptures, yet the transition from the Pahlavi monarchy to the era of Ali Khamenei reveals a haunting, durable symmetry. The 1979 Revolution, promised as a liberation, functioned more as a "change in management" of a pre-existing authoritarian architecture. The massive machinery of the state never truly crumbled; instead, the gears of control were polished, the symbols swapped, and the language of power translated from monarchical grandeur into revolutionary zeal. In this light, SAVAK and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) appear not as ideological opposites, but as two sides of the same coin—expressions of a state logic that views the policing of women's autonomy and the manufacturing of external enemies as essential levers for domestic survival.

This "durable state logic" has created a political landscape where the cage of state violence proved too useful for the new regime to discard. The instruments of oppression—surveillance, the pathologization of dissent, and the control of the body—remained constant, even as the justification for their use shifted from the secular to the divine. The revolution essentially repurposed the Shah's tools of repression to consolidate a theocracy that eventually consumed the very coalition that brought it to power.

However, the true protagonist of this trajectory is not the state, but an unbroken thread of defiance. From the early twentieth-century constitutionalists to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protesters of today, the spirit of resistance has outlasted every regime that sought to extinguish it. While the state has refined its techniques of coercion, it has failed to silence a citizenry demanding a government that

serves rather than consumes them. This quest for dignity remains the most resilient force in Iran's modern history—a testament to the fact that while a cage may be repainted, the human desire for light remains uncontainable.