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The Great Satan Myth

Everything you know about U.S. involvement in Iran is wrong.

Abbas Milani December 8, 2009 | 12:00 am



The Iranian regime has never found itself more vulnerable. And, with this vulnerability, it has never leaned more heavily on its own narrative of history. This narrative, of course, has a central antagonist, a character conjured as the “Great Satan.” As this Koranic moniker implies, the Islamic Republic ascribes supernatural qualities to its adversary:

From far away in Washington, D.C., the Great Satan has the power to send hordes of stooges to shout in the streets and the remarkable ability to manufacture every ill in Iranian society.

The power of this narrative is that it goes beyond these mythological qualities to muster the stuff of history. It was the CIA, the story goes, that deposed a democratically elected Iranian leader back in 1953, and then spent 26 years propping up a despotic Shah while he mercilessly abused his people.

As Iranians protested the sham election last summer, the regime wielded this narrative to bolster itself. Its opponents were denounced as puppets

of the very meddlers who had done so much harm to the country over the past century. Ayatollah Khamenei rehashed this history in a November 3 speech, describing how the United States “embarked on hatching plots against the nation from the very early days.”

This is a seductive narrative, but what’s strange is the group that it has seduced: the very meddlers themselves in Washington. As the regime has teetered these past months, many in the United States (and especially at the highest rungs of government) have held their tongues. There has been a reluctance to voice solidarity with the green movement or to loudly protest regime abuses, for fear that any criticism from the United States will be perceived as the latest installment in this history. Obama, for his part, has voiced his support for the protestors in passive language. “The world continues to bear witness to their powerful calls for justice” is his strange formulation--a description that places the United States in the role of bystander.

There are, arguably, strategic reasons for the United States to keep silent on the fate of the democratic movement. But history is not one of them. Rather, the regime’s version of events (past and present) is self-serving and, at critical junctures, altogether baseless. Documents (some recently declassified) from various U.S. archives show a rather different version of foreign policy toward Iran. The Shah may have been a U.S. ally in the cold war, but the relationship was fraught. Behind closed doors, the United States pushed hard for the country to democratize. During the periods when the United States failed to stand on the side of the Iranian people, it paid a horrible price. It is worth revisiting this history, not simply because it debunks the Manichaeian theory of the past touted by the mullahs, but also because it contains important lessons for how the United States can navigate the current crisis in Iran.

If there's one event that has come to define perceptions of U.S. meddling, it is the coup that ejected the popularly elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh from power in 1953. Both Madeleine Albright and Barack Obama have acknowledged America's role in the coup in speeches that were widely taken to be apologies.

In no small measure, the American understanding of the event derives from a 1979 memoir published by Kermit Roosevelt Jr., Theodore's grandson. Roosevelt, a CIA operative, had indeed slipped across the border and spent considerable sums on black propaganda intended to inflict mortal wounds against Mossadegh. But Roosevelt's memoir inflated his own and, in turn, America's centrality to the coup. He tells the story with the relish of a John le Carré knock-off. Although declassified CIA documents would later confirm many details of his account, his version is exceptionally self-serving. Despite having little knowledge of Iranian society and speaking no Persian, he describes launching an instantly potent propaganda campaign. Eisenhower, for one, considered reports like this to be the stuff of "dime novels."

The Roosevelt book, however, has an enduring legacy. It depicts the coup as an American and British concoction and inadvertently absolves Mossadegh of his many missteps. But the backstory of his fall is far more complicated. Mossadegh had initially seen the Americans as his staunch ally. And the United States reciprocated this warmth. It was Franklin Delano Roosevelt who first paid attention to events in Iran. During World War II, American soldiers were stationed in Iran to manage the transnational railroad, an essential supply line for the badly bruised Red Army. And, as Roosevelt departed from the 1943 Tehran Conference with Stalin and Churchill, he met at the airport with his envoy, General

Patrick Hurley, and formulated a new Iran policy. Its primary goals included promoting democracy and ridding Iran of colonial forces. In rhetoric that might now be tainted as neoconservative, the policy clearly aimed to transform Iran into a showcase of democracy and the vanguard of the decolonized Middle East. As Hurley later distilled the new policy, “[Iran] can achieve for herself the fulfillment of the principles of justice, freedom of conscience, freedom of press, freedom of speech, freedom of want, equality and opportunity, and to a degree, freedom from fear.”

Mossadegh seemed to represent the promise of post-colonial Iran. Even as ardent a proponent of Pax Americana as Henry Luce felt comfortable making him *Time's* “Man of the Year.” But the idea of supporting a post-colonial democrat necessarily put the United States on a collision course with its allies. Winston Churchill despised Mossadegh for nationalizing Iran’s oil fields and refineries, which the British considered their rightful heirlooms. Back in London, the Brits mulled plans to seize those assets back militarily. For nearly two years, the Truman administration, particularly the diplomat Averell Harriman, worked furiously to broker a solution to this standoff. And, even though those efforts failed, they did prevent a British attack. The British grew so frustrated by the U.S. efforts to fashion a compromise that, according to documents in their archives, they came to believe that the United States was dealing with Mossadegh behind their backs.

None of these subtleties, of course, ever merits a mention in the regime’s version of events. Nor do the clerics mention a detail that grows richer in irony with each apology by an American politician. It was the clerical establishment’s animosity towards Mossadegh that laid the groundwork for his ouster. A broad swath of clerics--Islamists like Ayatollah Abolgasem Kashani, a mentor of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini--had initially supported Mossadegh. But, by late 1952, the clerics turned

against him after he bucked their demands. The Ayatollah Kashani unsuccessfully pressed Mossadegh for the right to appoint key ministers. Another top cleric called on the prime minister to purge the civil service of Baha'is--a bane of Shia clergy. The clergy's allegiance to Mossadegh weakened further as he allowed the communist Tudeh Party to gain ever more power, despite his own personal abhorrence of communism. Once Mossadegh squandered the allegiance of the clergy, the inevitability of his fate became increasingly clear. (He had also alienated the middle class, increasingly weary of ideological warfare; and the army had pleaded for his ouster.)

None of this is to defend America's role in the coup. But it was hardly the only or even the decisive factor in his fall. Indeed, in the most obvious instance of its meddling in Iranian history, the United States actually meddled on the side of the very religious establishment that now complains so bitterly about the Great Satan.

The history of U.S. involvement in the country doesn't make for a simple tale. On the one hand, the United States supported the Shah and helped him consolidate his regime. On the other hand, the United States quietly and persistently attempted to prod the Shah toward a more democratic system. The Americans helped the Shah create his dreaded secret police, the SAVAK, in 1957--and then, the next year, attempted to roll back his move toward authoritarianism. For the United States, these two objectives were not contradictory. Both the CIA and the State Department, which clearly preferred the Shah to any alternative, openly worried that the country would succumb to revolution absent substantial steps toward democracy.

This analysis, however, produced a state of constant tension between the Shah and the United States. During his weakest moments--particularly in the late 1950s and early '60s--the Shah would nod his head in agreement when the Americans extolled democratization. For example, in 1958, the U.S. ambassador told the Shah he had to engage in preventive measures such as an anti-corruption campaign and "fireside chats" with the people of Iran. Not long after, a new anti-corruption law was passed and the Shah gave his first public press conference. But the Shah never made these gestures with any conviction. Social change, he believed, could only be imposed with an iron fist. When the Americans would make their demands, he had an array of tricks to change the subject. The Shah would invariably insist that the pressure to democratize would merely empower the communists. Moreover, the anti-corruption law soon faded from memory and was used only to settle grudges.

The Americans grew increasingly frustrated with his authoritarianism. When the Shah faced a military coup in 1958, the United States essentially gave it tacit assent. It did nothing to relay word of General Valiollah Qarani's plot to the Shah. Indeed, the CIA station in Tehran arranged for the publication of anti-regime propaganda in the Iranian press--and then let the Shah know that the agency had planted the material there to highlight its wavering allegiance. As CIA Director Allen Dulles told a meeting of the National Security Council in 1958, "We still take a gloomy view of the Shah's future unless he can be persuaded to undertake some dramatic reforms."

The tension between the Americans and the Shah reached a crescendo during the Kennedy years, when the administration based its Iran policy on the views of, among others, Supreme Court Justice William Douglas. Based on his travels in Iran, Douglas concluded that the Shah was an

incorrigible despot and advocated ramping up the push toward democracy. (Bobby Kennedy also shared an aversion to the Shah.) An administration task force considered the fragile state of the Shah and questioned the very rationale of the relationship. This was, after all, the era of the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps. The administration had less patience for undemocratic allies. But the task force concluded that the strategic costs of abandonment were too great. Instead, President Kennedy focused on redoubling the Eisenhower efforts to reform the regime.

Fortunately for Kennedy, he had the perfect vessel for this approach--the reformist Prime Minister Ali Amini. Together, the Americans and Amini convinced the Shah to attempt a breathtaking transformation of Iran, including suffrage for women, land reform, and a reduction of the military budget. It envisioned a new class of technocrats to steward a modernized bureaucracy. (Eventually, the Shah convinced the Americans that he, better than any prime minister, could bring about these reforms.)

As the Shah set out to implement these ambitious changes--the "White Revolution"--he came into conflict with the Ayatollah Khomeini and his cohorts. The mullahs considered women's suffrage the first step toward harlotry and land reform a transgression against Islam's belief in the sanctity of private property. The mullahs denounced these changes as "dishonest slogans that will bring nothing short of corruption, prostitution, and other miseries."

But, to a large extent, the White Revolution was a success. The Iranian economy transcended its semi-feudal state and grew rapidly. Women entered the political domain and workforce, and even the savak suspended its program of torture and generally liberalized.

The greatest sources of Islamist ire--the empowerment of women and other trappings of modernity--were hardly issues that could unite a broad coalition, especially one that included communists and discontented swaths of the middle class. Instead, Khomeini and his followers attempted to cloak themselves in the language of the left, or at least provide the language of the left with a Shia gloss. The Islamists translated classic concepts from Marxism into their own discourse: The “proletariat” became the “Mostaz’af” (the weakened), the “bourgeois” became “Tagut” (rebels against God), and “imperialism” became “Estekbar” (arrogance).

For all its work pushing the Shah in the direction of democracy, the United States also did its part to inadvertently abet his opponents. In 1964, the Pentagon pushed the Shah to sign a basing agreement that would have offered Americans in Iran diplomatic immunity from prosecution. For a century, Iran had been a battleground for the Great Powers--and this agreement reeked of colonialism. The fact that the Shah accepted this agreement allowed the Islamists to turn it into a rallying cry.

Richard Nixon provided another impetus for revolution. He ostentatiously stopped pressuring the Shah to move toward democracy. To be sure, this pressure had only limited effects under previous administrations. It certainly didn’t result in a European-style constitutional monarchy. But it improved conditions on the margins--and, to some extent, checked the Shah’s authoritarian instincts. Nixon and Kissinger, however, didn’t place much of a premium on such mushy values. And they had concluded that the Shah was now in full control of the country. Therefore, it was unnecessary to worry about revolutionary challenges. So U.S. intelligence scaled back its Iran reporting to World War II--era levels. And the Americans ended their contacts with the

opposition. Perhaps this is why the CIA was so completely blindsided by the events of 1979.

Absent U.S. pressure, the Shah entered a new monomaniacal phase. Flush with cash from the oil-price spike of the early 1970s, he went on what the CIA called a “lending binge.” He gave money to nearly anyone who asked, including Western countries that had once assisted Iran. The Shah often described democracy as more befitting the “blue-eyed world.” Now, he acted on those sentiments. In 1975, he declared--by royal fiat--that Iran would become a one-party state, replete with pseudo-fascist trappings. The rise of an urban guerrilla movement against the Shah created an atmosphere that spurred the SAVAK to unleash a wave of censorship in society and torture in prisons.

This authoritarianism, of course, sparked widespread discontent. By the time that Iran had boiled into a revolutionary state, in the winter of 1978, Jimmy Carter commissioned the old State Department hand George Ball, who had traveled to Iran a half dozen times, to present an independent assessment of the country’s situation. The Nixon Doctrine, he concluded, had created disastrous conditions. Only a rapid move to democracy could avert a crisis. Yet Ball saw few candidates who could usher in this change. The United States used its considerable influence with the Iranian armed forces to dissuade coup plotters. But these efforts, made behind closed doors, did nothing to change the climate--and, certainly, nothing to diminish the anti-Americanism that ultimately resulted in the siege and occupation of the U.S. Embassy.

In other words, the actual history of U.S. involvement in Iran is far more complicated than the mullahs present--and most Americans

realize. It wasn't an unambiguous cold war travesty, like Vietnam. For much of the era, the United States supported the cause of Iranian democracy. And, when it failed to push the Shah in that direction, it suffered.

Will the United States stand on the side of Iranian democracy now? The worry one hears most often in Washington is that such a stand will backfire; it will bolster the mullahs by annoying the innate nationalism of the Iranian people. But this misunderstands the regime. No matter what the United States does--even if it maintains a studied silence--the regime will describe its opponents as U.S. tools. This accusation is a political necessity for the mullahs and deeply embedded in their worldview. Besides, no matter how much the regime denounces the Great Satan, Iranians, on the whole, remain positively disposed to the United States, at least relative to the rest of the Muslim world.

This doesn't mean that Obama should abandon the idea of engagement. Iranian democrats have long supported this policy. But they have also worried about it being badly implemented. Negotiations with the clerics that ignore human rights and democracy are indeed a form of appeasement. When the Obama administration speaks to the mullahs about nuclear weapons, it must bring these concerns to the fore--just as the Reagan administration did in its later dealings with the Soviets. It can use these meetings to send a profoundly inspiring message of support to Iranian democrats. In the end, these Iranians are the international community's best hope for solving the current nuclear impasse.

But, whatever policy the Obama administration adopts, it must not let a tendentious narrative of history tie its hands. The past must not weigh the United States down with guilt. Rather, it should provide an object

lesson of the cost incurred when it fails to stand on the side of democracy.

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