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## **The Tormented Year: Iran and Afghanistan in 1979**

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1979 was an eventful year in the regional history of the Middle East, marked by two significant events, namely the February 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> victory of the Iran's revolution, and the December 25<sup>th</sup> Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Both of these two historical events have had long term consequences for the people of both countries as well as the world in general; consequences that we are still dealing with today, thirty years later. Indeed, hardly a day goes by without a mention of either Iran or Afghanistan, or both, in the international media. This article reflects on and highlights key developments that led to Iran's Revolution and its aftermath and to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Iran and Afghanistan of course share a rich heritage reflected in, linguistic, religious, geographic, and other common attributes. Up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, what is today western Afghanistan had been in the same political unit with Iran based state formations. Islam is the common religion of the majority of both peoples. There are many Persian speaking Sunni Muslims who live in Iran, especially the Khorasan region, and many Persian speaking Shi'a Muslims who live in Afghanistan. Perhaps the most important bond between the two is the Persian language and its rich literary heritage,

The turmoil that engulfed Iran and Afghanistan 30 years ago was flared up the previous year, in 1978. President Jimmy Carter had spent New Year eve 1978 in Tehran and at a banquet in his honor had called Iran under Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi an "island of stability" in one of the more troubled parts of the world before leaving Tehran for his Middle East tour. The American president could not have been more wrong but neither could he be blamed for not seeing the invisible boiling rage ready to explode. No one seems to have foreseen it. Only nine days later, on January 9, 1978, the first demonstrations sparked what has been aptly called "the last great revolution."

While the shah was attempting to find ways to deal with the revolution in the spring of 1978, the so called "Great Saur Revolution" engulfed neighboring Afghanistan. On April 27, 1978, President Muhammad Daoud (Davoud) Khan was toppled in a bloody military coup by the Afghan version of communist party and its military supporters. It was the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA/the Afghan Communist Party) which coined the name "Saur Revolution" for an otherwise typical military coup. Daoud Khan, his family and supporters were all killed in the Arg (the old royal residence), yet the bloodletting of Afghanistan had just started.

Sardar Muhammad Daoud Khan had himself seized power on July 17, 1973 toppling his cousin, the king,

the mild manner and liberal Muhammad Zaher Shah, in a bloodless coup. Although a reformer in a modest line of 20<sup>th</sup> century Afghan reformers, Daoud was also an autocrat who suppressed both Islamic, Marxist and any other opposition that challenged his power. Up to 1978, a characteristic of Afghan reforms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been its limited scope, mostly confined to urban areas, and its slow pace. Attempts to speed up modernizing reforms and bring them deeper into the countryside had been resisted, sometimes violently. Another characteristic of Afghan reforms was that they were from top to down without much popular engagement. Without an outright alliance with either super power, Daoud Khan attempted to use the cold war rivalry between the USA and the USSR to secure goodwill, financial aid, and support for developmental projects for his otherwise landlocked and poor country.

This was not the case with Iran. Iran had had a longer and more profound history of reform and a major revolution (1906) under its belt. Iran was also a much larger country and, as an oil producing country, a much richer one. The shah had come to power in 1941 according to Iran's constitution and while the country was under allied occupation. But he had cooperated with a military coup perpetrated by the US and the UK to topple the popular nationalist prime-minister Dr, Muhammad Mosaddeq in 1953. The shah would rule Iran until 1979 as an autocrat with complete disregard for its constitutional laws. The bloody suppression of an uprising against his reforms in 1961-62 only added to his unpopularity and the illegitimacy of his rule. Nevertheless, the shah too was a reformer and with oil money and cold war alliance with the US he tried to change Iran into his own vision of progress and development. Land reform, industrialization, war on illiteracy, and female emancipation, are but a few of changes brought about during his tenure.

Yet the shah and Daoud Khan had one characteristic in common with catastrophic consequences for them and their nations. They both did not care much for consultation with others and certainly did not deem it necessary to acquire public support for their reforms. A malady of despotic regimes, this attitude inevitably results in growth of corruption, wastage, and most important of all, alienation of the regime from popular classes. Both men had managed to very much isolate their regime which left them both with almost no popular support; 1978-79 was the point history caught up with them.

The Afghan Communist Party as a fractured entity made up of two factions that, at times, were hostile toward each other but that both admired the USSR and its achievements. The Khalq (people) was considered the more militant or radical faction dominated by Pashtun communists. The Parcham (flag) was the more moderate faction where the Pashtuns has a strong presence, but where the Persians (Tajik) and other ethnic group of the Afghan mosaic had a more visible representation.

Daoud Khan had become more conservative and repressive toward the last leg of his tenure and began to put his supporters in key positions. In 1978, Daoud's attempt to move against the PDPA by imprisoning its leaders and members backfired as the party, which had followers in the military, fought back and stage the coup. There is no clear evidence that the coup was supported or directed by the USSR, but once it was in place, the Soviet Union gave it full support.

Nur Muhammad Taraki of the Khalq faction became the president of the new Afghan republic on April 27, 1978 and Hafizallah Amin became his right hand man as prime-minister. The new regime immediately signed a treaty of friendship with the USSR and announced a sweeping revolutionary program, including land reform, the emancipation of women, and a campaign against illiteracy. These were radical social and economic changes never attempted in Afghanistan, certainly never in the countryside. To implement this program, the new Afghan leadership had to cross the forbidden 'red line' and step into the countryside

forcefully. By late 1978 Islamic traditionalists and ethnic leaders who objected to rapid social change and official atheism of the communist regime began an armed revolt. Collectively known as the Mujahedin, by the summer of 1979 they began to receive massive military aid from the United States

American policy toward Afghanistan was a continuation of its overall policy toward the USSR within the context of cold war and was about how to confront and contain the USSR. The rising civil war in Afghanistan was an unexpected opportunity not to be ignored. Accordingly, under President Carter and his National Security Advisor Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski the US began to covertly fund and train Mujahidin forces through the Pakistani secret service agency known as Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). A third component to this alliance was Saudi money and other forms of support.

Meanwhile, by late summer 1978, Grand Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini had become the undisputed leader of Iran's revolution. Khomeini was a high ranking Shi'a cleric and oppositional figure of 1960s. He had spent 14 years in exile and had built up a positive reputation as an uncompromising anti-shah leader. On October 5, 1978, under pressure from Iran, the Iraqi government exiled him yet again and Khomeini landed in France with central access to international media. From France, he called for toppling of the imperial regime in Iran and establishment of an Islamic republic. Khomeini's October 17<sup>th</sup> call for national strikes moved the revolutionary movement to a new and final stage and sealed the fate of the shah as the country began a period of crippling work stoppages which only ended with the end of the monarchy. By December 1978, the question for the US and other supporters of the monarch was no longer whether the shah should or would go but what would replace it.

The last shah of Iran left his country on January 16, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to his country on February 1, 1979, and the regime collapsed after a year of bloodletting and a brief confrontation with the remnant of the shah's loyal forces on February 10 and 11, 1979. Similar to Afghanistan, the bloodletting had only begun in Iran.

Iran's historical development in 1979 stands in sharp contrast to Afghanistan's. In Iran, under the popular Khomeini, the new leadership attempted to establish a theocratic state from scratch and without real historical precedent. The new state, as the new leaders envisioned, would be both "Islamic" and "republic." State building was to be done simultaneous to consolidation of power and neutralizing of a rainbow of opposition groups, from Marxist left, to militant Islamists, to nationalists, and national ethnic organizations. This was to be done in a country which by 1979 had urbanized and industrialized and had a substantial educated middle class. Furthermore, it became evident that the new Islamic leadership was fractured with two factions lining up against each other, namely, the Islamic liberals and the clergy domination Islamic Republic Party. Khomeini's popular and charismatic leadership was a key element in keeping the new state in power during the first year of its life.

In this context, finding a foreign enemy to unify the nation and consolidate the regime became the tactic of choice and the taking of American hostages in November 1979 was the event that made it possible. While between February 1979 and November of that year, internal factional struggle and tension between the new Islamic state and the opposition was on the rise, the single most important event that acted as a rallying cry and unifying force was the confrontation between Iran and the US over the hostages. In 1980, Iran would be invaded by Iraq and Saddam's Iraq would replace the US as the prime enemy but the need for a 'foreign enemy' would remain a characteristic of the Islamic Republic to this day.

At the time the new Islamic state was trying to find ways to consolidate power in Iran, in Afghanistan, an unpopular political party made up of urban, some may say well wishing, radicals and members of Afghan

intelligentsia had attempted to change the nation and consolidate power with the help of an international/ideological ally. By early 1979, this project was running into ground as opposition to communist rule was now accompanied by intense internal conflict within the PDPA. By the summer of 1979, the Khalq faction had already neutralized the Parcham faction, but by the end of summer factional dispute reemerged within the Khalq faction and was centered on President Taraki and Prime-Minister Amin. As radical and provocative as communist reforms were to the traditional segments of Afghan society, Amin argued for more radical reforms at a faster pace. Summer of 1979 was a time when rebellions were occurring all over the country and the Afghan national army was finding it difficult to contain. In this context, Taraki stood for moderation and coordination with the USSR as the situation on the ground was getting out of hand on weekly bases. Taraki visited the Soviet leadership for consultation but upon his return, in September, 1979 Amin and his supporters within the PDPA rebelled against the president and staged a coup. Taraki was deposed and later assassinated, at a time when the Mujahedin had established firm control over most of the countryside.

Hafizallah Amin tried to suppress the rebellion with the use of repression and resisted Soviet efforts to make him moderate his policies. By December 1979, Amin's position was untenable and his government was on the verge of collapse. The choice for the Soviet government under President Leonid Brezhnev had become either allowing Afghanistan to slip into the hands of its cold war rival or to intervene to save the situation with or without Afghan government's approval. On December 25, 1979, Soviet forces invaded at the 'invitation' of the Afghan government. Red Army units quickly won control of Kabul by storming Tajbeg presidential palace, the airport and other important buildings. Other important Afghan cities were also quickly secured. Next, on December 27, the Soviets executed Amin and installed Babrak Karmal, leader of PDPA's Parcham faction, as president. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was done in a clumsy manner and under the pretext of the 1978 Friendship Treaty. The irony of President Amin having had "requested" Soviet military assistance only to be toppled and killed could not be more comical.

In the years to come the Islamic Republic would eliminate all non-Islamic political opposition, and end its dreadful war with Iraq (1980-1988). With Ayatollah Khomeini's passing in June 1989, the country would begin a period of reconstruction. The post-Khomeini period also witnessed the emergence of the reform movement which has attempted, to date unsuccessfully, to strengthen the 'republican' institutions of the country in order to expand what it views as potentials in further developing liberty and human rights within the context of Iran's constitution.

Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989) was maintained by around 115,000 Red Army troops supplemented by 100,000 or so pro-communist Afghan national army troops.

Soviet occupation resulted in a mass exodus of over 5 million Afghans that moved into refugee camps in neighboring Pakistan, Iran and other countries. More than 3 million settled in Pakistan, around two million in Iran and many others in other countries. Afghanistan became to the USSR what Vietnam was to the US, an open ended war which drained the Soviet economy and resources. With a new leadership in Moscow under reform minded President Mikhail Gorbachev, the USSR began to contemplate cutting its losses in Afghanistan. Faced with mounting international pressure and the loss of over 15,000 Soviet soldiers as a result of Mujahedin opposition forces trained by the United States, Pakistan, and other foreign governments the USSR decided to disengage. The Soviet withdrawal was agreed to in April 1988; the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan on February 15, 1989.

The Afghan communist government collapsed in April 1992, a few months after the collapse of the USSR. In the years to come, Afghan Mujahedin would set up a dysfunctional state in Kabul and embark upon a

dreadful civil war, further devastating the country and setting the stage for the emergence of the Taliban. As if forgotten and left to its own accord, Afghanistan's bloodletting would in turn set the stage for the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US and occupation of the country.

Interesting comparisons can be made between Iran and Afghanistan at the vantage point of thirty years later. To begin with, ironically the two social upheavals in Iran and Afghanistan took two opposite directions. Metaphorically speaking, while the Afghan communist leadership put all their eggs in the basket of a socialist future in alliance with the USSR, Iran's Islamist leadership put its bet on an imagined religious past allied with no one, or as it came to be known in Iran with "neither East, nor West".

Both upheavals were the result of a reaction to reforms from above and were led by mostly traditional segments of society. Interestingly, both Iranian intelligentsia and Afghan communists played a significant role in igniting two social upheavals which eventually benefited the traditional and religious segments of the society. It seems that reforms by the shah of Iran, Daoud Khan, and Afghan communists were implemented with not much cultural sensitivity thus resulting in popular negative reaction. Perhaps the fact these reforms were from above and without minimal popular participation partially explains lack of sensitivity toward the more conservative segments of Afghan and Iranian societies.

Foreign intervention clearly played an important role in the development of both upheavals. The 1953 US/UK backed coup in Iran, US support for the shah thereafter, and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought about a negative nationalistic reaction which, when combined with other factors mentioned, proved to be both potent and lethal.

Finally, domestic leadership and mismanagement of socio-political affairs need to be taken into account. The leaders and the ruling elite of Afghanistan and Iran share significant responsibility for the upheavals that began thirty years ago and continue to this day. The shah and Daoud Khan, Afghan communists and their successors, and the leaders of the Islamic Republic were and are domestic and internal players. It is their colossal mismanagement of their countries which has allowed the mayhem to continue. Perhaps the mismanagement is most evident in the summer 2009 election in both countries, where accusation of voting fraud has tarnished the reputation of both governments making finding solutions for numerous social and political problems much more difficult.