GETTING THE AYATOLLAH WRONG: PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS OF IRAN’S REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Relations between Iran and the West have long been plagued on both sides by misunderstandings and misconceptions of the motivations and beliefs which drive the behavior of foreign policy elites. This paper focuses in particular on script-driven misperceptions of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and on how and why these changed over time. Why in particular did the Carter administration get Khomeini so wrong? It is argued here that a ‘cult of the Shah’ left the American intelligence community singularly unprepared to deal with any new regime after Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s fall, and that the prevalence of the Cold War strategic script in particular led many to downsize the importance of the Iranian clergy. Perceptions of Khomeini, it is suggested, passed through three stages: he was initially viewed as a figure of irrelevance by many in the West, or as someone who could not possibly influence the course of events in Tehran. This misperception then gave way by late 1978 to another: the notion that Khomeini was a ‘Gandhi-like’ figure with whom American leaders could bargain, but ignorance about Khomeini’s background and aims within the White House and other elements of the administration led to a disastrous attempt to court his moderate allies within the provisional government. Finally, after the Iranian hostage crisis began in late 1979, Western leaders like Jimmy Carter began to rely on the ‘mad mullah’ image, a stereotypical view of Iran's leaders as irrational madmen. This image has also had damaging consequences, not least because it obscured Khomeini's rather savvy and skillful manipulation of the Iranian political scene. The paper concludes that Western relations with Iran in general have always been plagued by a knowledge vacuum, which is often filled by simplistic Western stereotypes about ‘religious figures’ and other cognitive scripts which substitute for more rigorous or historically-based analysis.
Three Images of the Ayatollah

On New Years’ Eve 1977, President James Earl Carter famously raised a glass of champagne in Tehran, toasting the Shah’s leadership and praising Iran as “an island of stability in one of the more troubled regions of the world”. Rather foolishly – Iran was of course an Islamic state even then – the Shah reciprocated, doing so on live television. The intelligence upon which this overly fulsome praise was based was, of course, incorrect, and it was followed by yet more optimistic reports. In September 1978, for instance, a US Defense intelligence (DIA) report suggested the Shah was good for another ten years. The CIA felt the same way. “Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a prerevolutionary condition”, claimed an August 1978 report. Some of the British intelligence was less sanguine. UK Ambassador Sir Peter Ramsbotham had warned as early as 1972 that the danger of revolt could become “acute” in 5-6 years time (a remarkably prescient prediction). But such warnings were isolated, vague and did not predict an Islamic revolution as such. If there was to be a revolution in Iran, critics of the Shah believed, such opposition was unlikely to come from theocratic sources. And later British Ambassadors like Sir Anthony Parsons seem to have had far more confidence in the Shah. Parsons’ opined in January 1978 that the Shah remained in a strong political position, and his advice was mirrored around that time by that of the US Ambassador William Sullivan.

Tempting though it may be, it is difficult to fault the British and US intelligence communities - or anyone else - for failing to predict an Islamic revolution, however. Revolutions in general are notoriously difficult to predict, and we still have no satisfactory social scientific or academic theory capable of predicting tumultuous events in advance¹. The simple fact is that nobody in the West, either inside or outside the US or UK governmental systems, predicted an Islamic revolution in Iran or the rise of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; if the Shah fell, practically everyone expected that some kind of military government or nationalistic coalition would replace him (and in fact this was, from the perspective of all past experience, by far the most likely outcome).

¹ It is in that respect similar to failure to predict end of Cold War, or precise manner in which 9/11 occurred.
There was a general but understandable failure within the West to consider that an elderly man in a turban who wore women’s perfume could be a powerful political player in Iran. Khomeini simply did not look like the Western idea of a politician, and he did not fit our cognitive image or stereotype. And yet even those who were better informed about Khomeini were fooled by him as well: the Iranian clergy had long been dominated by the quietist, non-interventionist tradition within Shia Islam, and in modern times no member of the Iranian clergy had played a forceful role in politics. The opposition was almost all secular. One would have to admit, then, that the rise of Khomeini was very unlikely from the perspective of 1978 or 1979 – this was quite simply outside anyone’s experience. The Islamic revolution was in effect what a Nassim Taleb has termed a ‘Black Swan’. These are momentous but very unlikely and highly unpredictable events which only seem to have been inevitable in retrospect. It has been argued that revolutions occur when not only the necessary social, economic and political preconditions are present, but when a sufficient number of bystanders begin to ‘think the unthinkable’, that is, they come to believe that large numbers of people will act in concert with them (a mass psychological perception). But this is of course inherently difficult or impossible to predict in advance. Only afterwards did what happened in Iran appear likely or inevitable (what psychologists call the hindsight bias or the ‘I knew it all along’ effect). Nobody – apart perhaps from Khomeini himself – actually predicted it in advance, and it is questionable whether even he knew the course events would take.

It is admittedly difficult to try to forget everything that we know that has happened in Iran since 1979, but consider the forces arrayed against Ayatollah Khomeini before his return to the country early that year. The Shah, in power for the best part of forty years, must suddenly fall. He must be pushed out in part by a groundswell of support for an exiled clergyman in his late seventies. That man must then set up a system which emasculates not only the remnants of the Shah’s political forces but the whole liberal, nationalist, socialist, and Marxist opposition in Iran. Having outmaneuvered the

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secular forces, he must then outmaneuver the moderate clergy completely, establishing sharia law in a country which had been undergoing modernization programs since the 1920s. You would have been called crazy if you had predicted in the middle of 1978 that all this would soon come to pass, and yet it happened.

None of this means, however, that our intelligence was satisfactory or that the crisis from a Western perspective was well-handled. Even though our miscomprehension of what was occurring was in many ways understandable, it is nevertheless possible in retrospect to chart three general misperceptions which existed at various times within the Carter administration which affected US decision-making. Misperceptions about Ruhollah Khomeini went through three phases between 1977, when the West first began to take any notice at all of the man, and 1989. First of all, he was regarded between 1977 and mid-1978 as a figure of irrelevance, as someone who could not possibly influence the course of events inside Iran; secondly, many Western policymakers were inclined after the middle of 1978 to regard Khomeini as a ‘Gandhi-like’ figure, a cognitive image which persisted right up until the seizure of American hostages in Tehran in November 1979; and in the third phase, he became a ‘Mad Mullah’ and an irrational ideologue, a perception popular from November 1979 until his death in 1989. His very physical image seemed to convey some sort of unreasoning, even demonic, force. As one observer later put it, “to Westerners, his hooded eyes and severe demeanor, his unkempt gray beard and his black turban and robes conveyed an avenger's wrath”.

All three images were misleading at best, however, and at their worst simply flat wrong.

We may also conceive of these three images in terms of strategic or cognitive scripts. The notion of scripts has played an important role in the understanding of foreign policy decision-making since the 1970s, when cognitive psychologists – and later scholars of international relations – began to explore the role of cognitive short cuts in information processing. According to Robert Abelson, one of the leading advocates of this approach, scripts are “conceptual representations of stereo-typed event sequences”. Put more simply, a script may be thought of as a particular kind of schema or mental box

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which provides the typical default values for an event of some kind or an act which we are accustomed to performing, such as watching a movie or eating out at a restaurant. We usually experience little difficulty dining at a restaurant we have never visited before, for instance, since we simply rely on the default values stored in our memory to guide our behavior; we wait to be seated by the host or hostess, a server presents us with menus, we pick what we want to eat, we eat it when it arrives, and so on. By the same token, if a friend informs you that she went to see a movie last night, you can easily use the default values you keep in your head for typical visits to the cinema to guess how her evening probably went.

The concept of a script clearly draws upon the cognitive image of a movie or theatrical script in which events are played out one after the other, and can also be compared to a cartoon strip. This idea is consistent with the more general notion that human beings are ‘cognitive misers’, and the approach may be viewed as part of the bounded rationality tradition within political science which stresses the ways in which individuals depart from pure or comprehensive rationality. Rather than considering everything we experience sui generis, according to this view, we are usually far more economical in our information processing. We commonly fit new sensory data into established mental categories, both because this requires little effort and because it allows us to make sense of the outside world quickly and expeditiously. This is particularly the case under conditions of high uncertainty and ambiguity, where the individual is being bombarded with too much information, or where he or she possesses too little of this. As well as helping us to make sense of what has happened in the past or is happening now, scripts often play a strong predictive role in decision-making, allowing us to ascertain in advance with a reasonable degree of confidence what is likely to occur in the future (or at least what we think is likely to occur).

Scholars of foreign policy decision-making were quick to pick up on the political relevance of scripts in the early 1970s. ‘Balkanization’ and ‘the Trojan Horse’, for instance, are two strategic scripts often used in international relations, and scripts appear

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to play an especially prominent role in the analysis of strategic threats (Vertzberger, 1990). In American foreign policy, the ‘Munich script’ and the ‘Vietnam script’ have frequently impacted the deliberations of decision-makers, both during the Cold War and since, and provide a useful example of the manner in which scripts are used to predict future events. The generation of policymakers who had experienced WWII were particularly attuned to the memory of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain after the Munich conference of 1938, where he famously waved a piece of paper upon which Adolf Hitler had agreed not to invade Poland and Western Europe in exchange for part of what was then Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain famously emerged from the conference promising “peace in our time”. When this attempt at accommodation failed and was followed by WWII, many policymakers drew the wider lesson that any effort to ‘appease’ a dictator was bound to lead to disaster. The widespread use of the domino theory by U.S. decision-makers during the Cold War, for instance, was clearly based upon the cognitive appeal of this script. From this perspective, attempts to appease an adversary inevitably lead to well-intentioned but empty negotiations; verbal or written promises are followed by betrayal, causing a nation to fight a war against an enemy it should have confronted much earlier using its military might. The Vietnam script, on the other hand, stresses the dangers of confrontation rather than accommodation. Recalling the military and political errors which cost the United States so much blood and treasure, one popular interpretation of Vietnam suggests that a nation should exercise extreme caution when contemplating the use of military force. Images of ‘body bags’, ‘getting bogged down’ in enemy terrain and mass protests are all evoked by the Vietnam script, as well as the considerable human and political costs of a military intervention which effectively destroyed Lyndon Johnson’s presidency.

As we shall see in this instance, the neglect of Khomeini as a major player derived in large part from the dominance of a Cold War strategic script into which the Iranian clergyman did not really fit; the phase which followed, in which Khomeini was seen by many in hopeful (but ultimately very idealistic terms) was in turn influenced by a kind of Indian 1940s script; and finally, the third image of Khomeini was dominated by the

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emergence of what was then a new script in US-Iranian relations, that of the ‘Mad Mullah’.

1. Khomeini as a ‘Figure of Irrelevance’

The noted Iran scholar James Bill has noted that there still existed in early 1979 what he calls a “supershah myth” amongst Western intelligence operatives and embassy officials\(^{10}\). In other words, there was a widespread notion that Shah was simply invincible and could not fail. As a result, the non-collection of intelligence on Iran hampered any understanding in Western capitals of what was really happening in the country. The Shah himself seems to have encouraged this: prickly and prone to paranoia and conspiracy theorizing, there was a tendency to rely on his own estimations of where he stood, and a consequent deference to and reliance on his own secret police, SAVAK, for intelligence. This tendency also led to an overreliance upon the inevitably idiosyncratic impressions of the British and US Ambassadors in particular, impressions which may have been rooted in a long experience of diplomatic activity but were certainly not based upon any real experience of intelligence-gathering. There appears to have been an unshakeable conviction on the part of US intelligence during this period that the Shah was fully in control of events, and since the wheel which does not squeak rarely gets the oil, understaffing and budget cutting during the 1970s tended to de-prioritize the Iranian situation (only a small handful of CIA people remained in the Tehran embassy by the time the hostage crisis began). American reliance on one man for intelligence, Ambassador William Sullivan, meant that when he gave no hint until November 1978 that anything was wrong, President Carter was essentially compelled to rely on him.

The Central Intelligence Agency failed to predict the downfall of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, a leader allied with the United States who for a number of years had found it increasingly difficult to maintain his grip on the country. The Shah had been placed in office following a CIA-inspired coup in 1953 which deposed the democratically–elected Mohammed Mossadeq. Although by the 1970s the Shah’s hold

on the country was getting more and more tenuous – he had resorted by this time to the use of brutal secret police tactics to maintain that slippery hold – many in the U.S. intelligence community apparently believed up until the very last moment that the Shah would survive the profound undercurrent of discontent with his leadership. On December 12 1978 – relying of course on all that bad intelligence - President Carter stated that “I fully expect the Shah to maintain power in Iran … the predictions of doom and disaster that come from some sources have certainly not been realized at all”\(^\text{11}\). On January 16 1979, however – barely one month after Carter’s ‘doom and disaster’ quote and less than thirteen months after the President’s ‘island of stability’ speech – the Shah would flee the country and go into exile. On 1 February, the Ayatollah Khomeini arrived at Tehran airport to the jubilation of a fanatical welcoming crowd, estimated by some to number six million people. Khomeini’s arrival signaled the emergence of a new chapter in Iran’s history and the beginning of what is now commonly known as the Islamic Revolution in the region.

Decision-making about the Shah was characterized by flawed and dysfunctional interagency processes, and Carter generally received poor and intermittent advice on Iran\(^\text{12}\). And if the President did not exhibit much understanding of what was transpiring within the country, neither, at least initially, did the U.S. intelligence community. As then CIA Director Stansfield Turner later admitted:

> \ldots We let him down badly with respect to our coverage of the Iranian scene. We had not appreciated how shaky the Shah’s political foundation was; did not know that the Shah was terminally ill; did not understand who Khomeini was and the support his movement had; did not have a clue as to who the hostage-takers were or what their objective was; and could not pinpoint within the embassy where the hostages were being held and under what conditions. As far as our failure to judge the Shah’s position more accurately, we were just plain asleep\(^\text{13}\).

\(^{11}\) Quoted in Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p.259.


Many American intelligence officials who had spent time in Iran came to see Pahlavi as a permanent and unmoving fixture within the Iranian political system. To those who had done several tours of Iran and had seen the Shah shake hands with US presidents from Eisenhower to Carter, Bill notes, “the Shah seemed to have been around forever. They had witnessed his many close brushes with disaster and had come to view him as indestructible. They could not envisage an Iran without the Shah”\textsuperscript{14}.

Perhaps the most significant byproduct of this ‘cult’ of the Shah was a widespread ignorance of Ruhollah Khomeini and his objectives, which even seems to have been common among U.S.-based academics working on the Middle East. While some of them knew something about Khomeini, others had absolutely no idea who he was. Bernard Lewis, a Professor of Middle Eastern Affairs at Princeton University later to achieve renown as an informal adviser to former Vice-President Dick Cheney, has admitted that he knew very little about Khomeini before the latter’s return to Tehran. Lewis recalls that in early 1979 he went straight to his university library to look Khomeini up, finding a book by Khomeini he had never read before called \textit{Islamic Government}\textsuperscript{15}.

More importantly, US intelligence on Khomeini was practically non-existent before the middle of 1978. Although a June 1963 CIA study had noted that Khomeini potentially represented a dangerous threat to the Shah’s regime, personnel turnover and Khomeini’s exile from Iran meant that the US government had all but forgotten him by the late 1970s\textsuperscript{16}. The head of the Iran desk at the State Department, Henry Precht, recalls that “in May of 1978, there was a secret cable from the Embassy referring to Ayatollah Khomeini which had to identify him for readers. We were ignorant about the political potential of the clergy or even the National Front and their respective influences in the Iranian society”\textsuperscript{17}. Moreover, there was no full-time expert on Iran within the National Security Council until Gary Sick was appointed to the job in 1978. There were no governmental-level contacts between the Carter administration and either moderate or radical

\textsuperscript{14} Bill, \textit{The Eagle and the Lion}, p.403.
\textsuperscript{15} Quoted in the documentary \textit{The Road To 9/11} (PBS videos, 2006).
\textsuperscript{16} See Doug MacEachin and Janne Nolan, ‘Iran: Intelligence Failure or Policy Stalemate?’, Working Group Report, No.1, Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, p.5. Available at \url{http://www12.georgetown.edu/sfs/isd/Iran_WG_Report.pdf}. Bruce Riedel suggests that most of those who had made such warning in the 1960s were probably no longer with the CIA by 1978.
\textsuperscript{17} Interview with Henry Precht conducted by Fariba Amini, June 17 2003. See \url{http://www.iranian.com/FaribaAmini/2003/June/Precht/}
opposition members in the 1970s, and the opposition in general was as we have noted considered of little consequence in any case. Although a number of people became convinced by late 1978 that the Shah’s rule would soon end, the general assumption continued to be that liberals or moderates of some kind would prevail. Those who suggested that Westerners should talk to Ruhollah Khomeini, already isolated in number, were marginalized by fears that doing so would weaken the Shah. Also, why talk to someone who probably would not be a major player anyway? Having gone ‘all in’ on the Shah, however, the United States was left with nothing when he fell.

The neglect of Khomeini as a political figure was not just the byproduct of the obsession with the Shah, however. It also reflected the prevalence of the Cold War script in American thinking. As Bruce Riedel (a CIA officer working on Iran at the time) recalls, “our bosses couldn’t cope with the idea of an 80-year old Ayatollah, which they didn’t even know what an Ayatollah was, who lived on garlic and onions and yoghurt, directing a revolution that was about to topple America’s most important ally”\(^\text{18}\). He traces this shortcoming to the fact that Khomeini simply did not fit the Cold War strategic paradigm then prevalent in the thinking of the senior people within the Carter administration, especially that of National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski:

In 1978 we were at the height of the Cold War, and the people within the Carter administration who dealt with foreign policy issues – and I use Brzezinski as the classic example – were used to dealing in the world of Russian-Soviet imperialism. To them, Europe was the central arena, Russia was the central focus, and everything else in the world was viewed through the lens of the Cold War. Iran had been seen as a centerpiece of the Cold War since 1946, so to them the default option was that whatever was going on had to have a Soviet dimension. And in comes an Ayatollah …. speaking in terms of the rejuvenation of Islam, making references to obscure battles in early Islamic history and referring to America as the Byzantines and the Romans, and all this just seemed very, very hard to fit into the paradigm that they were comfortable dealing with. So the default answer was that Khomeini can’t really be the center of this revolution, he’s just the fall guy, he’s a front, there’s something else going on that we haven’t got a handle on. And it took time for that default option to be taken off the table. The hand of the

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\(^{18}\) Bruce Riedel, quoted in the BBC documentary ‘The Man Who Changed The World’, BBC Iran and the West series, first broadcast 7 February 2009.
Tudeh [Communist] party and the KGB was always being looked for. And when they did get their focus more properly on Khomeini, they found it very difficult to see how the America could engage with such a force\textsuperscript{19}.

Riedel points to October 1978 – when a new taskforce was belatedly set up within the CIA to examine Khomeini and the Iranian situation in particular – as the turning point within his own organization. Many of those working on Iran had been narrowly focused on its status as a Cold War pawn, but the new working group began to see Khomeini not only as the most important player within the opposition movement to the Shah, but as an active threat to US interests in the region. “In the Agency, we were saying that this is the real thing, this is the center of the revolution, and increasingly from October 1978 our view was that Khomeini calls the shots, he has an agenda – he is interested in personally keeping hold of power, he doesn’t want to shrink behind the scenes, he wants to be in control - and this is the man we’re going to have to deal with”, Riedel recalls\textsuperscript{20}. A report at the end of November 1978, for instance, warned that Khomeini was highly xenophobic, virulently anti-American and a threat to US interests in the region. He now represented a genuine threat to the Shah’s rule, and was determined to topple him. One ‘Alert Memorandum’ warned that the actions of Khomeini would be “the single most important factor in determining what will happen within Iran”\textsuperscript{21}. But there were many who could not or did not wish to heed such dire predictions. Initially at least, the dominant view within the administration (and especially within the State Department) was that Khomeini was a relatively benign figure with whom the United States could work.

2. Khomeini as a ‘Gandhi-Like Figure’

Western disregard of Khomeini accelerated in late 1978 when the ageing but charismatic cleric arrived in Paris, and the Western media descended upon him in their

\textsuperscript{19} Bruce Riedel, telephone interview with the author, 9 November 2011.
\textsuperscript{20} Riedel, interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{21} MacEachin and Nolan, ‘Iran’, p.15.
hundreds. The Ayatollah had been living in the holy city of Najaf in Iraq since 1964, but he was exiled by Saddam Hussein in 1978. He was then refused admission to Kuwait, but in retrospect this turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Invited to stay at a villa just outside Paris, Khomeini was for the first time in his life accessible to the world’s media. Journalists who would not have dreamed of flying to Iraq or Iran all of a sudden could visit the man just miles outside a fashionable Western European city. Many in the West began to realize that this oddity was actually playing a role in Iranian politics from afar, and he became a figure of great interest for the world’s press. As Richard Cottam notes, “there was a growing fascination in the media with this new and exotic world figure who gave interviews sitting on the floor of a modest house outside Paris, speaking with simple force and bluntness”.

In late 1978 and early 1979, there was a great deal of optimism about Khomeini’s intentions among the mass media. Dorothy Gilliam, for instance, described Khomeini as “the man of the hour, a holy man in waiting”. In early 1979, *Time* magazine wrote of “a sense of controlled optimism in Iran”. It expressed the view – exceptionally commonplace at the time - that “those who know [Khomeini] expect that eventually he will settle in the Shi’ite holy city of Qum and resume a life of teaching and prayer. It seems improbable that he would try to become a kind of Archbishop Makarios of Iran, directly holding the reins of power. Khomeini believes that Iran should become a parliamentary democracy, with several political parties”.

Even well into 1979, there was more than a little wishful thinking among scholars of Iran on this score as well. Richard Cottam, a Professor of Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh who had visited Khomeini in Paris before the fall of the Shah, described Khomeini as courageous and possessed of a “simple dignity”. More strikingly Richard Falk, a noted Professor of International Law at Princeton University who had

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22 Saddam – the cleric was considered a nuisance by the Sunni leader - apparently offered to assassinate Khomeini, but the Shah turned this down.


26 Richard Cottam, ‘Goodbye to America’s Shah’, *Foreign Policy*, 34: 3-14, Spring 1979, p.11.
also visited the Iranian cleric in France, wrote in a February 1979 Op-Ed piece in The New York Times that Khomeini had been “defamed” by the news media, not least because he had in fact given “numerous reassurances” to non-Muslims that they would not be persecuted in his Iran. Falk cast doubt upon the idea that Khomeini himself was some sort of devious Machiavellian, and on the notion that life under him would be unbearable for its citizens. “To suppose that Ayatollah Khomeini is dissembling seems almost beyond belief. Khomeini's style is to express his real views defiantly and without apology, regardless of consequences. He has little incentive to suddenly become devious for the sake of American public opinion”, he argued. In a highly optimistic claim he would later come to regret, Falk added that “…. the depiction of him as fanatical, reactionary and the bearer of crude prejudices seems certainly and happily false …. Having created a new model of popular revolution based, for the most part, on nonviolent tactics, Iran may yet provide us with a desperately-needed model of humane governance for a third-world country”. Khomeinism, moreover, was distinctive as a revolutionary movement for “its concern with resisting oppression and promoting social justice”, Falk argued27. In the Spring of 1979 he spoke of “Khomeini’s promise”, expressing a similar view in the pages of Foreign Policy while castigating the Carter administration for not being more proactive in reaching out to the Iranian cleric28.

One can easily dismiss Richard Falk’s statements about Khomeini as atypical, or at least unrepresentative of the thinking of those inside the Carter administration (Falk was of course an outsider). Nevertheless, he did capture a view that was all too common at the time inside the American government as well. Most notably, US Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young famously called Khomeini “some kind of saint”, suggesting that “it would be impossible to have a fundamentalist state in Iran” because Western influence was supposedly too strong there29, and Ambassador William Sullivan explicitly compared Khomeini to Gandhi in a famous memorandum called ‘Thinking the Unthinkable’ sent to Washington from Tehran on November 9 1978. Sullivan – who had earlier been seen as pro-Shah by many – advocated opening talks with the Iranian cleric.

As Gary Sick later related, from Sullivan’s perspective “Khomeini could be expected to return to Tehran in triumph and hold a ‘Gandhi-like’ position in the political constellation”30.

In similar vein, State Department Iran expert Henry Precht is said to have often described Khomeini as “another Gandhi” during the same period. Ledeen and Lewis relate one especially revealing story in which Precht is supposed to have attacked members of the media who had claimed that Khomeini would be a despot:

There was considerable consternation and disgruntlement in the State Department and the CIA when three American newspapers published extensive accounts of Khomeini’s writings. The articles showed that Khomeini’s books revealed him as a violently anti-Western, anti-American, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic individual, who offered an unattractive alternative to the shah. Yet as late as the first week in February 1979, when Khomeini was returning in triumph to Tehran, Henry Precht [the head of the State Department’s Iran desk] told an audience of some two hundred persons at the State Department “open forum” meeting that the newspaper accounts were severely misleading, and he went so far as to accuse Washington Post editorial columnist Stephen Rosenfeld of wittingly disseminating excerpts from a book that Precht considered at best a collection of notes taken by students, and at worst a forgery. Precht was hardly an isolated case, for the conviction was widespread that Khomeini’s books were either false, exaggerated, or misunderstood31.

This view was not shared by Gary Sick or by his boss, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski; the latter openly doubted, as he later put it rather sarcastically, that the Iranian cleric would return to Iran as some sort of “venerable sage”32. Nevertheless, Brzezinski continued to cling to the Cold War script well into 1979, attempting to negotiate with Iranian moderates like Mehdi Bazargan and Ibrahim Yazdi who were not the real centers of power. Moreover, the Indian/Gandhi script was extraordinarily popular at the time. This kind of cognitive error may occasionally derive from

straightforward ignorance, and statements like Young’s about Khomeini’s supposed ‘sainthood’ have long provided fodder for right-wing bloggers in the United States attempting to show that the Carter administration was simply incompetent. However, cognitive science has shown us that such mistakes also commonly derive from the way in which the human mind works. We put people, places and objects into categories, employing simple scripts, schemas and analogies to cope with the often bewildering amount of information with which ordinary people are bombarded every day.

It seems highly likely that in implicitly comparing Khomeini to Martin Luther King, Young was simply doing what we all do; he was making sense of something novel and unprecedented by falling back on what he knew. As a young man, Young had been a close associate of MLK and had played a prominent role in the civil rights movement, a factor which doubtless contributed to Carter’s decision to make Young America’s first ever Ambassador to the United Nations. Unfamiliar as he undoubtedly was with Iranian politics, it must have been all-too-tempting to see Khomeini as ‘another MLK’, another religious figure who would promote all that was right and decent in the world. We also know from cognitive consistency theory and other motivational approaches that wishful thinking is a very human tendency; we see what we want to see, not necessarily what is actually there. Having been divided over what to do about the Shah and then ‘losing’ Iran, many in the Carter administration desperately wanted to believe that his replacement would be a friend to the West. Having agitated for an end to the Shah’s regime, surely Khomeini could not be any worse than the man he had replaced.

In retrospect, it is fairly clear that comparisons between King/Gandhi and Khomeini were almost entirely inapt, of course. Most obviously, the Ayatollah condoned (and probably explicitly ordered) the execution of large numbers of his political opponents, especially anyone who had supported the Shah or been associated with SAVAK, while violence of this sort was anathema to King or Gandhi. MLK, for instance, deplored the killing on all sides during the Vietnam War. While both Khomeini and Ghandhi were motivated by religious factors, the former believed that Islam was the one true faith to which all must adhere, while the former sought peace between the Hindus and the Muslims in India. King was similarly tolerant of other religions in a way that Ruhollah Khomeini patently was not. For Gandhi, human rights and social justice were just as
important as religion, while Khomeini showed little concern with issues like these or with equality in general. King was explicitly focused on the latter, of course, marching for peace and calling for racial equality.

One cannot fully understand Carter’s outrage at Khomeini’s behavior in endorsing the embassy takeover in November 1979 without first comprehending the source of his original hopes and expectations about the Ayatollah’s likely conduct as Iran’s de facto leader. Carter’s presidential memoir Keeping Faith is unfortunately not very forthcoming on this issue – like many such memoirs, cognitive errors tend to get airbrushed out of the story – but it is likely that Carter’s initial perceptions of Khomeini derived from two main sources. First of all, stock images about the behavior of ‘holy men’ in general tend to reinforce the notion that such figures largely confine themselves to spiritual rather than temporal matters; there is often widespread consternation in the United Kingdom when the Archbishop of Canterbury occasionally speaks out on what are seen as partisan issues, for instance, and there are role expectations in the West which tend to circumscribe the political activism of religious figures. Probably more important than such stock characters in Carter’s case, however, were those religious/political figures who had spoken out on temporal matters and who had exerted an impact on Carter’s own political thinking, most notably Martin Luther King and Mohatma Gandhi. King in particular had played a formative role in the formation of Carter’s own attitudes as a relatively progressive young legislator in Georgia, and the Carter family had espoused the cause of civil rights for black Americans at a time when such positions were deeply unpopular in the South. Both King and Gandhi evoked liberal cognitive scripts, in which a religious figure pushes hard for social justice and progress. The notion that a religious leader might advocate something other than the progress of mankind in a Western or liberal sense was simply outside of Carter’s experience.

Deborah Larson notes that Harry Truman was initially fooled into thinking that Stalin could be trusted in the aftermath of WWII, in part because the Soviet leader physically resembled his own mentor from Missouri politics, Boss Pendergast. Truman apparently reasoned that Stalin would be a man of his word, just like Pendergast had been – a kind
of cognitive process similar to analogical reasoning which Larson terms a ‘persona’. In similar fashion, the use of the Gandhi persona had a significant cognitive impact. While there was no real physical resemblance between Gandhi and Khomeini, those who used this image reasoned that the Iranian leader would be a force for peace and non-violent change. He would also play a symbolic role in politics like modern European monarchs, but would not try to shape policy in an instrumental sense. The Iranian cleric might even preside over an Islamic democracy which would in the end be relatively friendly to the United States and the West in general.

The image of Khomeini as a benign apolitical figure was probably not purely cognitive but emotional as well; those who bought into wanted it to be true in a motivational sense. This kind of wishful thinking was not shared in the National Security Council or the CIA as we have already noted, but it probably was in the Oval Office. Like many former state governors with little or no foreign policy experience and relatively little knowledge about this domain, Carter frequently fell back on intuitive but stereotypical images about how given actors could be expected to behave. Jimmy Carter undoubtedly felt a kinship or link with Khomeini as a fellow spiritualist and knew that Islam is a religion of peace, so he probably expected the Ayatollah to behave like his own cognitive image of how Western ‘holy men’ typically conduct themselves.

While it is easy to be wise after the event – an instance of hindsight bias again, perhaps – it is worth noting that this image of Khomeini was widely shared in 1978 not just among ordinary Iranians but among the Iranian leader’s own immediate circle. Many around Khomeini both in Paris and in the early months after his return to Iran have confessed that they were essentially duped by the Iranian cleric in this respect. For instance, Mansour Farhang, the revolutionary government’s first Ambassador to the UN, has confessed that “at the time, I saw him as the Mahatma Gandhi of Iran.” What most did not appreciate at the time (or even now) is that Khomeini was deliberately cultivating this image. Knowing that the source of his political power lay in being all things to all men, a sort of anti-Shah about whom people would assume the best, he quite consciously

34 Quoted in the Al Jazeera documentary I Knew Khomeini, first broadcast in 21 January 2009.
made himself an empty vessel, helping to fashion the misperception himself\textsuperscript{35}. Since the Shah had been an autocrat, the anti-Shah must be a democrat. In his messages from Paris, he focused on attacking the incumbent Shah without saying much about what he stood for himself (rather similar, ironically, to standard US presidential campaign strategy). Even moderate figures like Abdolhassan Bani-Sadr, Ibrahim Yazdi and Sadegh Ghotzbadeh – those seemingly closest to Khomeini in Paris - were completely fooled by this, and Bani-Sadr had admitted as much many times in later interviews. Khomeini deliberately lied to Bani-Sadr in Paris, for instance, saying that he had abandoned the doctrine of \textit{velayat-e-fakir}. He later admitted that he had told a “white lie”\textsuperscript{36}.

The Western intelligence community admittedly should have known what \textit{velayat-e-fakir} was, not least because it formed the core of Khomeini’s political and religious viewpoint as articulated in his book \textit{Islamic Government}. This collection of the Iranian cleric’s lectures had been in the public domain since 1970. \textit{Velayet-e-fakir} – which literally means ‘rule by the jurisprudent’ - was essentially a justification for political rule by the clergy\textsuperscript{37}. Derived more from Plato’s \textit{Republic} than it was from the Quran, the doctrine was especially radical in Iran, where a long-established quietist tradition had generally refrained from political activities; indeed, Khomeini’s doctrine had often been rejected by most other ayatollahs as virtual heresy. Many of the students who seized the embassy in 1979 were largely ignorant of who Khomeini was, however. We possess no reliable polls on this point, but Michael Metrinko (a former teacher in Iran and one of the hostages himself) discovered that most younger people had little idea in 1978 who Khomeini was, though older Iranians had certainly heard of him\textsuperscript{38}. The Shah’s secret police had banned Khomeini’s writings, and so even an Iranian who wanted to read \textit{Islamic Government} would have found it difficult in the 1970s to do so.

In this sense, the Shah’s restrictive political laws played directly into the Ayatollah’s hands. Being an empty vessel was politically useful, and it caused Iranian moderates who

\textsuperscript{35} This argument is similar in some ways to that made about Dwight Eisenhower by Fred Greenstein. See the latter’s \textit{The Hidden-Hand President}.
\textsuperscript{37} As Bruce Riedel points out, the book is also filled with riddles and obscure allusions to Persian history which make it hard for most people, even many Iranians, to fully understand. Riedel, interview with the author.
\textsuperscript{38} Quoted in the BBC documentary ‘The Man Who Changed The World’.
should have been wary of the old cleric – and who perhaps wanted to believe that the Khomeini of 1979 was not the Khomeini of Islamic Government – to let down their guard. As Abbas Milani notes, “selective public amnesia, prodded by a masterful public-relations campaign - including the audacious claim that his profile had appeared on the moon – made of him an ambiguous symbol, a tabula rasa, allowing each element of the radically disparate coalition against the Shah to see him not for what he was, but for what they dreamt he would be – for some, a pious reincarnation of Mossadeq; for others a Kerensky who would pave the way for their planned Bolshevik revolution”39. In Paris, he struck the pose of a liberal and a democrat, and velayet-e-fakir was rarely if ever mentioned. Indeed, it is said that moderates like Ibrahim Yazdi – acting as interpreters outside the French house - would also routinely ‘soften’ the words of their leader for Western ears. If even those around Khomeini were deceived by the man, it is perhaps little wonder that several key Carter officials (and, indeed, Carter himself) were as well.

3. Khomeini as a ‘Mad Mullah’

If it is not entirely clear just how long the misperception that Khomeini was ‘another Gandhi’ reigned in the corridors of Foggy Bottom and the White House, it is relatively easy to pinpoint the precise moment at which that particular illusion ended. When the US embassy was seized in November 1979 precipitating the 444-day long hostage crisis – or, more precisely, when the Ayatollah sided with the students who had taken the embassy - President Carter and many of his colleagues shifted 180 degrees, and began to see Khomeini as an entirely irrational figure. The most common response within the Carter administration initially was to dismiss both the radical students and the Ayatollah in whose name they were acting, as insane: what could they possibly hope to achieve by such an action? In his memoirs former President Jimmy Carter claimed that the Iranian leader “was acting insanely”, though he notes that “we always behaved as if we were dealing with a rational person” (my italics)40. It is at about this time that the all-too-

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familiar ‘Mad Mullah’ stereotype is invented and takes hold of the popular imagination in the West.

William Beeman has provided an apt description of the ‘Mad Mullah’ image, which has its parallel in the ‘Great Satan’ image held by many Iranians:

Suddenly, in 1979 Tehran seemed filled with turbaned, bearded, old men espousing a combination of religious and political philosophy that was strange to Westernized ears. When confronted with individuals whose actions are incomprehensible, the natural human tendency is to assign them to a “residual” category within the culture. “Crazy”, “irrational”, “evil”, “incompetent”, “moronic, and “incomprehensible” are just a few of these categorizations …… Just as the Great Satan was born, so was the Mad Mullah, whose crazed and wild-eyed image became the stuff of editorial cartoons” ⁴¹.

Why is the Mad Mullah stereotype wrong, though, or at least misleading? In short, because it downplayed or simply misunderstood Khomeini’s vast pragmatism and ruthless determination to succeed. If anything is clear about the man with the hindsight of thirty years or more, it is that Khomeini was highly political and highly rational about the goals he wanted to achieve. He was especially adept at turning crises to his advantage. Ironically, it was the State Department – many of whose members had earlier engaged in wishful thinking about Khomeini - who saw what the Iranian cleric was doing most clearly. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance argued that the hostage taking was being manipulated for domestic political reasons; the Ayatollah was by no means fully in control of Iranian politics in the immediate aftermath of the Shah’s fall, and so he took advantage of what the students had done in order to mobilize Iranians against the common foe, the ‘Great Satan’ ⁴². The hostages, in other words, were simply useful pawns in an internal power struggle. Gary Sick has similarly argued that Khomeini consciously exploited the hostage crisis for his own domestic political purposes, since

“the real issue was Khomeini’s constitution and the realization of his vision of an Iranian republic”\textsuperscript{43}.

Khomeini knew how to seize the moment. Far from being an unrepentant ideologue, he often bent ideology to the needs of the situation (purchasing arms from the Americans during Reagan administration in 1985-86, for instance, when they were needed to fight war against Saddam). Far from being trapped in the 7\textsuperscript{th} century, Khomeini was more than willing to use Western 20\textsuperscript{th} century technology when it suited him. While in Paris, he proved technologically savvy, using cassette tapes and modern communication systems to broadcast his ideas and send out messages to his followers. And when he confronted the problem of how to get back into Iran from exile in Paris – members of the military still loyal to the Shah had vowed to shoot his plane down – Khomeini rather cleverly decided to take along a number of Western television and print journalists, including the late Peter Jennings of ABC, Elaine Sciolino then of Newsweek and a German TV crew. Khomeini correctly calculated that the Iranian military would not shoot down a plane full of Western civilians. The plane was allowed into Iranian airspace, and then landed without a hitch.

Domestically, Khomeini then played an especially skillful and savvy role in maneuvering his rivals out of the way. He knew that his government would have to include a large number of moderate figures who did not agree with velayet-e-fakir at all; indeed, he would have to include a number of members of the nationalist and pro-democracy movements. He did just this, but at the same time he put his own man in each ministry. Rival institutions holding the real power were created alongside the official ones. Alongside the army, for instance, was the Revolutionary Guard. Alongside the police force were the Komitehs. Alongside the provisional government was the Revolutionary Council, which exercised the real power. Eventually the Guardian Council would vet candidates for office, ensuring that only ‘sufficiently Islamic’ figures could run for office and vetoing ‘unIslamic’ legislation. More generally, Khomeini created a system of parallel government with many superficial trappings of democracy but where real power resided with one man, the Supreme Leader. Khomeini also later used failed the

\textsuperscript{43} Sick, \textit{All Fall Down}, p.251.
failed US rescue mission, the 1980 invasion by Iraq and Salman Rushdie affair to strengthen the revolutionary government and rally his forces.

The ‘Mad Mullah’ image was misguided not just because it failed to see the element of strategic thinking behind Khomeini’s actions, but because it also failed to recognize the historical grievances which had given rise to the students’ actions in seizing the US embassy in 1979. Massoumeh Ebtekar’s explanation for why the hostage crisis began in the first place is especially useful to historians. Ebtekar, who acted as the spokeswoman for the students through most of the hostage crisis, emphasizes the overriding importance of the 1953 analogy as a determining force behind the embassy takeover:

When the man whose long rule had brought riches beyond all description to his immediate family and associates, and impoverishment and cultural subjugation to the Iranian people, was welcomed in the United States, we believed that the West was once more determined to subvert our newly won independence. Were the fate and future of our country once again going to be decided in Washington D.C., which had first brought him to power in its 1953 coup? How could we voice our concern, our indignation? To whom could we protest? From the media establishment and from international bodies, the response was a deafening silence. Iranians, whose immense sacrifices had finally brought down a corrupt dynasty, were once again being ignored.

Later on in her book, Ebtekar recalls that “this was not the first time Iran had lived through harrowing times. In August 1953, a coup d’etat engineered by the CIA that overthrew the democratically elected government of Dr. Mossadegh and restored the Shah to power had dashed all hopes of establishing an independent democratic system. The price of genuine independence was heavy”. She insists that “our reading of our own history told us that we had to act quickly … action was our only choice”. She is suggesting, in other words, that the students genuinely believed that the United States was about to mount another coup – this time against the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Mohammed Mossadegh became Prime Minister of Iran in 1951. While he was by instinct a forceful nationalist rather than a Communist, the Iranian leader was

increasingly forced to rely upon more radical leftists as his political coalition weakened. His policies increasingly came into conflict with the priorities of the Eisenhower administration and with the economic interests of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which had been doing business in Iran for most of the twentieth century. Mossadegh was overthrown, as Ebtekar notes, in a coup engineered in part by the Central Intelligence Agency and encouraged by the British. The Iranian monarchy and Muhammed Reza Shah were reinstated, and would rule Iran until the Islamic revolution of 1979.

In the years after 1953, the CIA's role in Mossadegh's overthrow would be much analyzed and debated, becoming the stuff of legend\textsuperscript{46}. The CIA's manoeuvres probably could not have succeeded had Mossadegh's popularity not been declining and that of the Shah ascending. As former CIA Director Stansfield Turner notes, “covert actions to overthrow governments work best when the situation is unstable and only a small push is needed to change it, as was true with Mossadegh”\textsuperscript{47}. Nevertheless, whatever the weight one attributes to American actions in the downfall of Mossadegh, to most Iranians this was an unforgivable interference in their domestic political and economic affairs by an outside party, and a clear violation of Iran’s political sovereignty.

Generations of Iranians were brought up in the shadow of 1953, and it became a defining experience and national rallying point – a mixture of historical fact and exaggeration - in their lives. Consequently, when another Iranian leader whose political priorities clashed markedly with Western interests appeared on the scene after the fall of the Shah, it is easy to see why that historical script should have become activated in such a striking way. There was little concrete evidence at the time (and none has emerged since) to suggest that Jimmy Carter himself had any serious plans to mount a second coup; according to available records, National Security Adviser Brzezinski was alone among Carter’s advisers in seriously considering such an action\textsuperscript{48}. Moreover, even if Carter had wished to take this action, the CIA lacked the human assets on the ground to make this viable, and the records show that the president strongly resisted pressure for the Shah’s admission initially (something which is hard to explain if his admission on

\textsuperscript{46} For one of the best studies of this event, see Stephen Kinzer, \textit{All The Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror} (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2008).


medical grounds was in fact the pretext for a second coup). Nevertheless, perceptions mattered as much as, if not more than, reality. To expect that history would repeat itself was, moreover, an understandable position for the students to take at the time given the fact that none of this information was available to them. We are now fairly certain that Khomeini had no foreknowledge of the students’ actions, and he apparently debated whether to support it afterwards; nevertheless, he came to see the political utility of what the students had done, and capitalized on this in order to solidify his revolution.

Conclusion

A lot of things had to come together to produce Khomeini’s rise, but it was very unlikely in the sense that any one of ten or fifteen slight changes to history could have altered the outcome, and it was very hard to imagine in any case at the time. There was apparently a substantial increase in religiosity in Iran during the 1970s. According to one estimate, more mosques were built between 1968 and 1978 than in the previous 200 years. The number of Iranians visiting Mecca for pilgrimage rose from 12,000 to 100,000 during the same period. The Shah’s modernization efforts were seen as having failed, and other projects (notably Panarabism, socialism and Marxism) were seen as having failed elsewhere in the Middle East. And yet none of this preordained a political role for Islam in Iran or the emergence of a politized clergy in a country which lacked a tradition of this. Hardly anyone at all predicted this turn of events, and it took an extraordinary series of events to bring it about.

It was, in that sense, one of those ‘Black Swans’ of which Taleb talks. It was the outcome of an incredible mixture of Machiavellian fortuna, skill and sheer luck on Khomeini’s part, but it could so easily not have happened. For instance, in 1978 Saddam Hussein offered to assassinate Khomeini. What if Shah had said yes? It could easily have happened. What if the Shah had not miscalculated and ordered the publication of a defamatory article about Khomeini in early 1978? This single act drew more attention to a ‘forgotten man’ than Khomeini himself ever could. What if Khomeini had remained in

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Najaf – or gone to Kuwait - and had not attracted the attention of the world’s media? That too could have happened. What if the Iranian military had gone ahead and shot down Khomeini’s plane? Again, by many accounts it almost happened.

If the failure to anticipate the Islamic revolution in Iran was partly a failure of the imagination, the question becomes whether it will ever be possible to predict Black Swans. This question probably misses the central point that Black Swans are never anticipated because they are inherently unpredictable, but some misperceptions on the American side were probably avoidable. For instance, of the three images of Khomeini presented here, the second (‘Gandhi-Like Figure’) was undoubtedly the most damaging of all to the Carter administration. The first (‘Figure of Irrelevance’) seemed reasonable at the time, and by the time the third emerged (‘Mad Mullah’) it was too late to avert the course of events in Iran; the hostage crisis had begun, and there was little Carter could do to get the US diplomats back until their political utility to Khomeini had dissipated and circumstances changed. However, the second image led the administration down a disastrous course. Until November 1979, it led Carter and others to believe that normalization of relations with Iran, now led by a fellow ‘holy man’, was a real possibility. It led embassy officials to put out feelers to moderate Iranians in a way that provoked suspicion that the destruction of the revolution by a foreign power was again imminent. Unwittingly, this played directly into Khomeini’s hands, but his real views – especially his virulent anti-Americanism - should have been known to the CIA from his actions in 1963, when he led protests against the US presence in Iran which eventually led to his exile by the Shah. His views should have been known from the doctrines espoused in Islamic Government, and they should have been known from the cassette lectures he was circulating in Iran. Why none of this ever really percolated up to the top levels of government in 1978-79 after it became clear that Khomeini was a force to be reckoned with is still a mystery, but we do know that wishful thinking is a powerful and very human failing.