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International Affairs

# U.S Tries Not to Interfere in Foreign Affairs Challenge (Impossible): The West's Disastrous Intervention in Iran

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The West has an unhealthy habit of dabbling in foreign intervention and subsequently wreaking havoc; Iran is no exception. Beginning as interference for profit, then developing into ideological intervention, the West, referring to Britain and the United States (U.S.), could not seem to keep its hands off Iran for much of the twentieth century. Their involvement in Iranian affairs reached a boiling point, however, in 1953, when the U.S. staged a coup d'état to overthrow Iran's democratically elected leader in favour of the pro-West Shah. This move led to a domino effect of events, eventually resulting in Iran's current political landscape, which has come under fire for its repressive religious laws and police brutality. The West's continuous interference and cultural suppression in Iranian affairs resulted in Iranians' resistance through religious expression, culminating in a drastic shift toward religious rule with the creation of the morality police and their repressive policies for women. The paper will first examine how the historical exploitation of resources, the anti-democratic coup and interference from the U.S. to further their Cold War agenda, and the enforcement of

Westernization policies in Iran and their resulting backlash laid the groundwork for anti-Western sentiment. Subsequently, it will delve into the effects of this resentment on the rise of religion as a form of resistance and Iran's drastic shift toward religious rule. The conclusion of the paper will focus on dissecting the repercussions of this shift for women, offering a critical analysis of the implications for gender dynamics and rights in the context of Iran's changed political and social landscape today.

The dynamics between the West and Iran before 1953 enabled Western exploitation and intervention to become routine, laying the groundwork for anti-Western sentiment. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain increased their influence and political interference in Iran to gain access to and profit from such a resource-rich state (Behraves, 2012). It was in Britain's best interest to maintain control of Iran to extract its natural resources, so they established a pseudo-colonial relationship with Iran (Behraves, 2012). Britain propped up political figures that would bow to British interests, such as the pro-British Hassan

Vosouq al-Dawleh government, weakening the already fragile Iranian parliamentary system (Klein, 1974). In pursuing their own economic ambitions, the British government compromised Iran's political infrastructure, causing long term damage to Iranian political stability. The 1919 Anglo-Iranian Agreement, made with Vosouq al-Dawleh, gave Britain control over a majority of Iran's resources, namely their newly discovered oil (Behraves, 2012). Britain ensured Iran was economically dependent on them through heavy foreign investment in the state, as well as exporting increased goods into the country (Gerami, 1989). With Iran's wealth being funnelled directly to Britain, Iranians grew to resent how much the country was prospering off their resources. By entrenching themselves deeply into Iran's economic and political systems, Britain set the scene for anti-Western sentiment to permeate while also ensuring there were few mechanisms for that sentiment to rise in a non-violent way. The altering of the Iranian political environment and leaders, a result of British interference, empowered Iran's leadership to concentrate power in themselves systematically.

The colonial-style relationship between Iran and Britain suited the British well until Mohammed Mossadegh came into power in Iran in 1951, which signaled a wave of change for the power dynamics working in Britain's favour up until this point (Gerami, 1989). Mossadegh, unlike his predecessors, was insistent on getting out from under the thumb of Britain by improving Iran's economic independence. The first step in building their economic infrastructure was to nationalize oil, effectively cutting Britain off.

Initially, the U.S. was supportive of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh's nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, as they wanted to avoid any conflict that would invite instability and thus a Soviet presence in the country. Britain, on the other hand, was very opposed due to the loss in profit from the privatized resource (Gavin, 1999). The United States urged both sides to negotiate a fair oil settlement, but they were in a stalemate. As the standstill wore on, Iran's administration and Shah started to view Mossadegh as an obstacle to resolution, motivating him to make increasingly radical moves to hold onto his power (Gavin, 1999). By the summer of 1952, Mossadegh amassed increasing levels of power by getting rid of moderates and appealing to the communist party, the Tudeh, resulting in the U.S.' opinion on him shifting (Gavin, 1999). During this time, in the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were in an ideological war between capitalism and communism. The U.S. then regarded him as not only an obstacle to settlement but also a danger to their anti-communist agenda. Fearing Mossadegh's increasing reliance on the Tudeh would eventually lead to communism taking power in the state, President Eisenhower reversed the decision to maintain neutrality (Behrooz, 2001). Concluding that there was no other way to protect the state from the rise of communism, the United States commenced a plan to overthrow Mossadegh in a coup d'état (Gasiorowski, 2013). This entailed empowering the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was then a predominantly ceremonial monarch (Gasiorowski, 2013).

After installing Pahlavi into power, the Shah acted in their interest and quickly came to an oil settlement with Britain (Gasirowski, 2013). Economically and ideologically, the U.S. had incredible incentives to interfere in foreign politics, despite their initial reservations. However, in disempowering the democratic leader, the United States severely damaged Iran's democratic system and planted seeds of resentment in Iranians' minds. American intervention, combined with British involvement in Iranian affairs, catalyzed incredible changes in the social landscape in Iran. In trying to reverse the repercussions of Britain's interference in the Iranian political landscape and economy, the U.S.' solution was to get even more involved.

It did not take long for the U.S.' interference in Iran to escalate, causing resentment to fester. Once in power, the Shah heavily promoted a "Western lifestyle," alienating traditionalism (Afary, 2022). This sentiment equated modernization with Westernization, and the Shah imposed that view on citizens. By 1961, Pahlavi spearheaded the "White Revolution," a set of principles to reform the economic, social, and cultural state of Iran (Shirazi, 2019). His policies included expanding education and women's role in the workforce, but also banning traditional Islamic coverings, promoting "kashf-e hejab," the unveiling (Shirazi, 2019). The forceful 'modernization' program disturbed agricultural economies, uprooted the wealth and power of landowners and religious leaders, and raised concerns over democracy and human rights (Afary, 2022). Iran's current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, called Pahlavi's policies "one of

the huge crimes" of the Pahlavi dynasty aimed at "destroying modesty in Iran" (Sinaee, 2022). Discontent brewed among Iranians, laying the groundwork for unrest. For many, religious practices and traditions were extremely interrelated to Iranian culture. Even for those who liked aspects of westernization, such as American influence on Iranian music, the West's imposition of those aspects caused dissent (Breyley, 2010). Citizens resented the westernization ideals and religious repression they were subjected to. Westernization was seen as cultural colonialism and quickly perceived as the erasure of Iranian culture (Breyley, 2010). Many women, for instance, wore headscarves to express their opposition to the monarchy and its policies, as a form of resistance to the government. In empowering the Shah and directing forceful Western policies, the U.S. took control of Iranian culture, inciting rising unrest.

By 1979, one extreme, westernization, eventually swung to another extreme, religious rule. The high-cost initiatives being put forward in Iran resulted in many citizens falling beneath the poverty line, creating heightened resentment (Ramazani, 1974). Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, an Iranian nationalist politician, appealed to the people, many of whom had been disenfranchised by the White Revolution, through populist rhetoric, commenting on the monarchy's actions regarding Western policies, "They have sold us and our independence" (Ramazani, 1974; Munson, 2003, p. 42). Khomeini used the negative feelings of the West's intervention and control over Iranian affairs to become a leader people could get behind against the

Western enemy and their figurehead, the Shah. He weaponized populism against the West, characterizing them and their puppet leader as the elite, garnering more support for himself and the 'people.' Khomeini stood for a return to religious values to restore Iran's glory and combat Western influence. Those focused on fighting the West's intervention believed Khomeini when he assured the masses that religion was the only way to triumph against Western influence. Opposition groups joined forces with the ulama against the Shah, giving Khomeini and the religious institution staunch support (Pesaran, 2008). Even as Mossadegh's regime met protests with violence, demonstrations escalated, and government workers began to strike (Pesaran, 2008). With so many factions uniting against him, it became infeasible for Mossadegh's regime to continue squashing rebellions one by one. After Mossadegh fled Iran, Khomeini took control of the state, solidifying his position as Iran's political and religious leader for life (Pesaran, 2008). With the public behind Khomeini's rise to power, little oversight stopped him from concentrating all the power within himself. His populist rhetoric then carried over to be used against all enemies and opposition, allowing him to maintain power (Alamdari, 2005). This unadulterated control over the state empowered Khomeini to bend the laws and policies to his will. Through its resulting religious suppression, widespread resentment, and populist rhetoric, the 1953 coup and its subsequent consequences were strategically used to catapult Khomeini into an autocratic leadership with no checks and balances. In the U.S.'s objective to

create a Western democracy in Iran, they ended up providing the perfect ladder to power for a leader to implement the antithesis to that objective.

Khomeini and his successor's strict religious laws increased the disparity in gender equality and created the modern political system in Iran, Islamic theocracy, enforced by the morality police. Once Khomeini had complete power in 1980, his Assembly of Experts, composed of his hand selected clerics, altered the Iranian Constitution to fit Islamic qualifications (Afshari, 2011). The regime made these qualifications deliberately vague to leave leeway for clerics to define the requirements themselves at any point (Afshari, 2011). Notably, this new Constitution was not based on the well-defined concepts of Shari'ah, but rather the Assembly of Experts' own interpretation of what religious law should be (Afshari, 2011). Under the guise of satisfying religious law, the Khomeini regime empowered themselves to write that law to suit their own political ambitions. Those ambitions became increasingly repressive due to the unequivocal power the regime had amassed. Khomeini took advantage of the wave of support behind him, using public approval to empower himself so that if the public no longer supported him, they would not be able to defy him. As he gained control through overthrowing his predecessors, he knew how to mechanize his power. The Khomeini government limited constitutional provisions that protected political and civil rights, making them extremely conditional and restrictive (Afshari, 2011). Between 1980 and 1990, Khomeini's administration backtracked on Western policies, many of

which advanced women's civil rights, such as The Family Protection Act, which granted women rights in marriage. He also decreed mandatory hijab-wearing for women, with the punishment of prison, fines, or lashings (Esfandiari, 1997). Amid these developments, the regime needed a police force to enforce these new restrictive dress laws and carry out punishments. This is where the modern Iranian morality police was born. Policing religious morality was not a new concept and had been present in several Islamic states; however Iran upped the ante with the historic revival (The Economist, 2022). To "promote the good and forbid the bad," Khomeini brought back the authority historically charged with enforcing morality, the Muhtasibs (Floor, 1985, p. 53). Throughout the 1980s, the regime became increasingly repressive, restricting basic freedoms and political activism. The morality force successfully repressed any rising resistance, evoking enough fear to dissuade almost everyone from rebelling (Afshari, 2011). After the death of Khomeini in 1989, Ali Khamenei replaced him in leadership; however, the morality force continued to develop (Afshari, 2011). Tasked with the mission of moral cleansing, clerics established groups and organizations that cracked down on anything they deemed unvirtuous, frequently targeting women (Afshari, 2011). Khamenei and the clerics used anti-Western sentiment in their favour to ramp up religious rhetoric and policing under the guise of cultural preservation. The current morality force in Iran, called Guidance Patrol but commonly referred to as the morality police, was established in 2005 (The Economist, 2022). Each domino

leading up to the creation and development of the morality police was enabled and facilitated by the original U.S. intervention. This morality force has gone on to police, threaten, and brutally punish Iranian women for how they dress.

In conclusion, Western intervention in Iran knocked the fateful dominoes that led to the repressive practices present in modern Iran. The United States played with fire when it orchestrated Iran's 1953 coup, and it has been burning Iranian women for decades. The coup led to resentment, which led to the 1979 revolution and Khomeini's empowerment, then the Islamic theocratic policies, which eventually ushered in the establishment of the morality police and their repressive practices. If there is anything to be learned from the failure of the pro-West government installed in Iran, it is that people will revolt against repression. It often has a way of coming back around in an opposing, but equally ugly form. Britain and the U.S. pursued their own interests to the detriment of the Iranian people, and whether or not they intended for the grave consequences they wrought, their interference catalyzed instability and oppression. Their recklessness and failure to foresee disaster make it essential to recognize the patterns of repression that positioned Iran and the morality police where they are today. Now, this police force terrorizes Iranian citizens, suppressing their human rights through violence and intimidation. In 2022, the morality police sparked mass protests after 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died in their custody following her arrest for allegedly violating the strict hijab regulations (Horton, 2022). Her story has brought attention to the

morality police's atrocities as well as Iran's authoritarian regime; the social tide that once supported the religious revolution has shifted. As the regime continues beating down rising dissent with brutal force and more human rights abuses, they fall into the

same pattern that led to the downfall of their predecessors. Between 1953 and 1979, the world observed Iran's social pendulum swing drastically; another swing is on the horizon.

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