



REGIME CHANGE IN IRAN: A REASSESSMENT

By Barry Rubin*

A quarter-century ago, Iran underwent a regime change, which became one of the main factors shaping the Middle East's subsequent history. What does this case study show us about regime changes in general and the nature of Iran's revolution itself?

TWO REVOLUTIONS THAT MADE THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

The politics and ideologies dominating the region can best be seen as the product of two great regime-changing revolutions: Egypt in 1952 and Iran in 1979, respectively. Explicitly or implicitly, these major innovations were taken as exemplars of the proper ideology and methodology for seizing and holding power. They were not merely political revolutions but also represented comprehensive worldviews and paradigm shifts.

Now advocates of a third revolution have appeared, though they are still far more prevalent in the United States than in the Middle East. This third revolution would be one which advocated as its main features: democracy, moderation, human rights and civil liberties, a more free enterprise economy, friendship with the West, and peace with Israel, among other features. It is the model that has basically triumphed in most of the world, but certainly not in the Middle East. The idea is that Iraq would be a starting point and would then become a model whose success would encourage others to follow in its path.

One could argue that the failure of the two old revolutions in their own countries would encourage--indeed, make inevitable--their abandonment as a model for other places. The fact that the Arab world and Iran have suffered so many failures and

defeats in the last half-century, while not attaining any of their major goals, should be very persuasive arguments. That this has not happened is due to many factors, though it can be most simply explained by the regimes' determination and clever strategy in maintaining the beliefs that justify their existence.(1)

What is undeniable, though, is that even today, the overwhelming majority of Arabs--though, ironically, not necessarily most Iranians--still see the two frameworks represented by these past revolutions as the very foundation of their political views and even of their personal self-image.(2) Although the product of these two revolutions--Arab nationalism and Islamism--can be seen as rival interpretations, they also have a great deal in common. They seek to answer the same question, solve the same problem, and share the same goals. Their sense of right and wrong, friends and enemies, methods and prescriptions, overlap far more than they conflict.

Both movements spawned by these two different revolutions attempted to answer the same basic question and provide the answer to it: Why were the Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims in general behind the West? How could they catch up and surpass the West? While the prescriptions were not entirely the same, both rested on revolt, mobilization, and conflict with the West.

While both could be said to embrace value-neutral technology, and Arab nationalism took the ideology of nationalism from the West (as well as other techniques from the Communist states), both also rejected the basic path taken by Western Europe and North America. A path which includes embracing such concepts as democracy combined with free enterprise, an emphasis on moderation and gradual reform, and a defense of the individual's rights against the state.

In this process of surpassing the West, democratic rule and moderation in general were largely discredited as useful tools for Arabs or Muslims in pursuit of their dreams. Cooperation with the West and with the existing political order was seen as illegitimate, though in practice often pursued. The proper goals of Arab politics were seen as being the expulsion of Western influence, the unity of all Arabs (and of all Muslims for the later Islamists), the destruction of Israel, mobilization of the masses from above, a statist and socialist-style approach to economic development, all under the aegis of a charismatic leader.

Of course, there were also important differences between these two revolutions and their successors. What happened in Egypt in 1952 was a military coup in origin and it brought to the fore ideas such as: the armed forces would be the vanguard in transforming society, Pan-Arab nationalism, the belief in a charismatic leader who would unite the Arabs and bring them to victory, and a statist economic system. This model took power in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, while, at times, threatening to do so in many other countries.

For intellectuals, activists, and others, regime change meant to transform a traditional system into an Arab nationalist one. And the goal of the oppositions in countries already ruled by such

governments was to produce an even more militant regime of precisely the same type.

But a quarter-century later, while still enjoying support from the majority of Arabs, this system could be judged a failure. It had not gained political hegemony in the Arab world, united the Arabs, brought rapid economic development, banished social problems, expelled Western influence, or destroyed Israel. But what was the alternative? Traditionalism and liberalism were discredited, and Communism never really caught on.

During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Islamic movements were seen as socially conservative, as pillars of the traditional order, which was largely true. Saudi Arabia promoted Islam as a counter to leftist movements; Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat backed it for a while in the 1970s for the same reason.

Thus, Arab nationalism continued to be the dominant model--and still is today--but there was ample room for an alternative, which also expressed radical discontent, the demand for quick fixes, the possibility of wide unity, a vision of utopian solutions, and the promise of total victory. But where would that alternative arise?

IRAN, THE MIDDLE EAST'S SECOND FORMATIVE REVOLUTION

Given the near-monopoly of Arab nationalist forces in the Arab world--along with the distaste for liberal democratic or Marxist thought and the discrediting of Islamic orientations--the new political idea and its successful seizure of power had to come from outside. Just as Russia was the birthplace of both Marxist-Leninist doctrine and the first Communist state, coming from beyond a more industrialized Western Europe where other types of revolutions had already taken place, so too Iran became the source of the new revolutionary ethos by being outside the

mainstream ethnicity and the more "advanced" politics of its own region.

In Iran, the regime to be displaced was the "original" traditional one. The only previous serious challenge had come from a nationalist movement, that of Muhammad Mossadegh, a quarter-century earlier. While the Shah's victory over Mossadegh in 1953 is usually attributed to covert U.S. assistance, it should be noted, though, that the monarch also had the support of Islamic clerics, who saw the independent-minded prime minister as an enemy of the tradition they supported and especially distrusted his Communist allies. But militant nationalism had never really been a potent force in the Iranian empire. And while a variety of underground leftist movements arose by the 1970s, they were not capable of overthrowing the regime either.

At the same time, though, it should not be taken for granted that the radical Islamists would inevitably have gained victory in Iran. In that country, as in Russia in 1917, there was a wide spectrum of different groups and ideologies active during the 1978 upheaval. These included Marxists, Marxist-Islamists, Islamists of different orientations, Iranian nationalists, Kurdish nationalists, Azeri nationalists, and liberal democrats. The triumph of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (similar to the triumph of Lenin) was in no small part due to his individual commitment, clear ideology, ruthlessness, determination to seize state power, and refusal to compromise.

In a sense, it could also be said that Khomeini's revolution encompassed nationalism even while rejecting it explicitly. Radical Islamism was more likely to unite the country's various ethnic communities than would an Iranian nationalism, which could easily have turned into an ethnic Persian doctrine. However, he did offer an implicit Iranian nationalism. By projecting Iran as the vanguard of a world revolution which other

countries and peoples should follow, Khomeini was extolling its unique mission and justifying anything that would further its national interests. His Islamism also rejected foreign political or cultural influences.

At the same time, Khomeini subsumed a great deal of leftism's appeal by championing social justice and promising to mobilize people against imperialism. Moreover, he was in many ways a traditionalist, championing the Persian language and the old way of life, rejecting new or imported ways. And yet, the revolution also offered its own path to modernization, using what were supposedly "proper" Islamic routes to the goals of higher living standards and industrialization.

In short, then, Khomeini succeeded in large part because, despite his stern insistence that his way was the only acceptable one and everything else was anti-Islamic heresy and treason, the worldview and policies he proposed let Iranians have their cake while eating it too. While condemning the left, modernism, tradition, and nationalism, Iran's Islamic revolution claimed to give a blueprint to achieve equivalent ends. Of course, and this is a critical point, Khomeini was also ready to sacrifice any other consideration for his rigid vision of an Islamic state. This approach, along with serious repression and the unifying power of a manufactured confrontation with the United States and a life-and-death struggle with Iraq, sustained the regime for many years.

THE REGIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF IRAN'S REVOLUTION

For Khomeini and his followers, what they were doing in Iran was not merely a revolution in one country but provided the vanguard and predicted the future of the entire Middle East--and for all Muslims and even the whole world as well. But ultimately, as in Russia, they combined this

ideology (and covert revolutionary activity abroad) with a priority on preserving the regime, a strategy which required a combination of the most extreme rhetoric and sponsorship of subversion with overt caution and restraint.

Certainly, the revolution had assets. These included its own success in seizing power (against a seemingly powerful ruler backed by the United States); an ability to appeal to all Muslims; a critique of the unsatisfactory Arab nationalist or traditionalist regimes; a militant position on all the usual issues; and a base of operations in a country with a large population, geographic size, and financial assets.

Still, it also faced considerable drawbacks in spreading its direct influence or even the popularity of its program. Foremost of these was the fact that it was Persian, not Arab, and a Shi'a Muslim, not Sunni Muslim, revolution and regime. Many Islamists downplay these differences, claiming these divisions are Western-fostered ones. But they are nevertheless quite real and pose major barriers for Iran and the movement it backs.

In terms of its regional affect, the Iranian revolution had a half-dozen potential or actual effects.

First, of course, it was an Islamic revolution and this was a fact that colored every aspect of its influence and reception. For secular--meaning Arab nationalist or modernist--forces, it appeared dangerous and destabilizing. The same was true for the Islamic traditional regimes of the Persian Gulf, which Khomeini openly wanted to overthrow. On this level, then, the regime change in Iran heightened suspicions and antagonisms.

Previously, the Gulf Arab monarchies had gotten along quite well with the shah, whose protection might be thought slightly overbearing but nevertheless welcome. Now they were at risk from an Iran that

wanted to outplay them with the Islam card, which had always been their own strong suit. For these countries and many other Arab states, the revolution forced them to shore up their own Islamic credentials and to keep a close eye on domestic movements which might seek to follow the Iranian model.

Yet, whether the Arab rulers liked it or not, the regime change put the question of Islamist politics center-stage from Morocco to Pakistan. At last a new basis existed in practice for opposition movements to pose a serious threat to governments. Thus, the overturn of a government in one country overturned the entire political order in the region and sought--albeit ultimately unsuccessfully--to overturn all the political systems in the region as well.

For the various existing Islamist movements in the region--most notably, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, Syria, and other countries--the Iranian revolution provided an inspiration but not a leader. If their counterparts in Iran had succeeded, then they felt more confident of achieving the same outcome. Yet they did not feel any need to take lessons from Khomeini or to become his clients. In Egypt, the Brotherhood continued to seek a path of legal activity and gradual base-building, though some of its cadre would later break away to follow the revolutionary dream. In Syria, the Brotherhood was either tricked or tempted into a revolt in 1982 and was crushed by the government.

The power of the Iranian revolution was not that it took over existing movements but that it inspired the creation of many new ones. Those groups which would become the leading opposition forces--the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria; Hizballah in Lebanon; Hamas among the Palestinians, and so on--were new groups created in the Islamic revolution's wake. With the exception of Hizballah, which was Iranian-sponsored, these groups were Sunni.

While the revolution had little effect on old movements and inspired new ones, the most direct relationship was with some specific groups. The ones closest to Iran were also Shi'a, notably Hizballah. But other than that Lebanese group, Iran's clients were largely small and highly dependent on Tehran's subsidies and help. They were effective at terrorism but had no serious chance of becoming mass movements or seizing power in their countries.

In general, no one could ignore the Islamic revolution's critique of Arab nationalism. It openly proclaimed that radical ideology's failure and ascribed that failure to being too moderate and too soft on the West. What was needed, Iran's message said, was more militancy, more armed struggle, and the expulsion of Western influence on the political and cultural levels. Even the Arab nationalists were influenced in this direction. And by persuading so many Arabs that more extremism was the way to success, Iran's revolution also undermined the appeal of the other main potential alternative--liberal democratic movements--and set back the possibility of democratic change for many years, even decades, to come.

Second, the revolution's other most important factor was its location. Since it took place in Iran, the regime change had the disadvantage--in regional influence terms--of being Persian and Shi'a. A revolution in any major Arab state would have had more effect, though as noted above it also would have been far harder. Still, Iran was large, highly populated, and enjoying considerable oil revenues. In all three respects, the innate power of Iran magnified the importance and affective power of the revolution. An Islamist revolution in, say, Yemen--or as would actually happen when a roughly parallel event happened in Sudan--would be more easily ignored.

In addition, being in the Persian Gulf, Iran's revolution was going to produce stronger changes in that immediate neighborhood. Gulf stability was undermined decisively, a situation continuing to this day. Traditionally, Gulf security rested on balances among Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf monarchies, along with considerable external--first British, after 1970, U.S.--support.

But with two radical states in the area, the balance was upset. And the fact that this very rise of radicalism made the conservative monarchies frightened about seeking outside, Western, help--at least at first--made things worse. The Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and a U.S.-Iraq war were only the most salient of many events which probably only took place because the Iranian revolution had happened. And from the war over Kuwait arose Usama bin Ladin, who protested both the resulting U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia and the sanctions against Iraq, and from that came the September 11, 2001 attacks on America, the war on terrorism, the American intervention in Afghanistan, and the second U.S.-Iraq war.

From 1979 onward, the Saudis, Kuwaitis, and other Gulf monarchies faced a new threat, Islamic Iran, which might also manifest itself in domestic disorder. They used their money, of which they had a remarkably large amount, to shore up their internal support and bought arms to defend themselves. Equally, they carefully maintained their links with the United States in case its protection would be needed. But they couldn't confront Iran directly or make its potential threat go away.

Ultimately and ironically, the country most dramatically affected by Iran's regime change was Iraq. Iraq became critical in several ways. The Gulf Arabs wanted this stronger neighbor to be their protector, and Saddam Hussein was eager to take up this role as part of his wider ambition of

leading the Arab world. Unlike any of the Gulf monarchies, Iraq had a large army. Believing Iran to be weak, Saddam was certain that he could quickly and decisively defeat Iran, ensuring his emergence as the Arabs' new hero. In that case, he, and not Khomeini, would be the one to reshape the Middle East.

But if Baghdad's opportunity was greater, then so was the threat it faced. Iraq, unlike the monarchies, had a long border with Iran. And, perhaps most important of all, it had a very large Shi'a community--even a majority--that might respond to Iran's siren call. Thus, the revolution gave him motives for war: the belief that his neighbor was a threat, the concern that inaction would lead to his country's collapse, the certainty his rival was weak, and confidence that victory would bring tremendous rewards.

Third, and very surprisingly, the revolution's unique method had little or no influence anywhere else. In Iran, the regime change came as a result of a mass movement, in contrast to the military coups and palace intrigues which had brought about all other regime changes for a quarter-century before and after the events in 1979.

Even the Islamist movements which tried to follow in Iran's footsteps never sought to use the mass movement method, preferring armed struggle and terrorist violence by a small number of cadres to a mass revolution. This was very much the case, for example, in both the Algerian civil war conducted by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and with the insurgency in Egypt by al-Jihad and the Islamic Group. None of these groups were protégés of Iran. Yet these terror/guerrilla tactics also characterized Lebanese Hizballah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which were Iranian clients. In this tactical sense, it was as if the remarkably mass-

based character of Iran's revolution had never happened at all.(3)

Fourth, while the way Iran behaved in the decades after the revolution stirred considerable regional turmoil, its simultaneous restraint also kept that response from being even more tumultuous. Either due to its priority on consolidating the revolution at home or as a result of its desperate situation brought on by international isolation and the Iran-Iraq war, Tehran quickly took an overtly cautious posture toward promoting revolution and destabilizing its neighbors.

The revolution in Iran would not be risked or sacrificed for the sake of spreading the revolution abroad. Again, this Iranian policy in the 1980s and 1990s can be compared to the Soviet Union's behavior when faced with problems of internal consolidation and external threats during its early decades. Tehran did not launch attacks on its neighbors or threaten them with aggression or a systematic, energetic campaign of subversion. Rather, Iran often put forward a dual strategy of seeking stable relations or even rapprochement with various countries while covertly helping local forces engage in violent revolutionary activity against the regimes there.

Yet, when necessary, it was also prepared to sacrifice its revolutionary program for Iran's nation-state interests. There were limits to this process--Tehran was prepared to pay the costs of continued hostility toward the United States, for example--yet it would not sponsor revolutionaries against Syria, a regime quite repressive of Islamists, in order to preserve the friendship of one of its few allies. Similarly, Iran needed good relations with Russia (and so did not get involved in Chechnya or push too hard to gain influence in Moscow's former Muslim provinces) and even sided, in practice, with Christian Armenia against Muslim Azerbaijan.

At the same time, though, this strategy put a premium on terrorism as a covert, violent way to bring about regime change. But, like the USSR, Tehran usually found it could deal more easily with movements under its control rather than those that retained a large degree of independence. Thus, Iran, like the USSR with local Communist parties--has put much of its effort into small groups that are either extensions of Iranian intelligence or paper organizations. This was especially true with regard to activities in the Arab Gulf states. By the same token, though, these groups could not build much of a popular base. These types of tactics also contributed to the disillusionment of the Iraqi Shi'a opposition, which did not want to be under Iran's thumb.

The main exception to this pattern is Hizballah in Lebanon, which maintains a large organization along with its independence. Even Hizballah, however, has remained far too weak to take over Lebanon or even to gain hegemony in the Shi'a community there. During the 1980s, however, Iran at last--albeit too late for its historic ambitions--broke through to establish strong links to some Sunni groups, notably Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). By then, though, the Iranian revolution was no longer considered a vanguard by Islamists. Usama bin Ladin had replaced Khomeini as the hero of the day for many radical Islamists and a new inspiration for their doctrines and strategies.

Fifth, as in the Soviet case, the perceived failures of the Iranian revolution to produce an ideal society and successful economic development discouraged others from following its lead. In addition, the Iranian revolution--at least as the rulers were managing it--was rejected by a large majority of its own population in the 1990s. The high degree of social control, poor economic performance, corruption,

and other problems especially alienated young people who did not remember the previous regime. An attempt to reform the country from within the revolution, led by President Muhammad Khatami, was a dismal failure. By the turn of the century, the majority thus had a stark choice: maintaining sullen passivity or launching an extremely bloody revolt.

This situation undercut the appeal of Islamist movements in general to those who had not joined them; it also greatly reduced pro-Iranian sentiments among these groups' members. In addition, the revolutionary groups which had originally been encouraged by Iran's revolution failed to seize power in the 1980s and 1990s. While some individuals gave up the struggle, others developed a post-Iranian interpretation of the situation.

The Iranian revolutionary model placed the priority on overthrowing the "near enemy"--i.e., the regimes in various Arab states. They failed because the governments of those states were effective in using a mix of cooptation and repression, but also because the masses did not view the revolutionaries as the proper form of Islam and thus did not support them.

Bin Ladin's new school responded to this situation by arguing--inaccurately--that the struggle had not succeeded because the United States had kept the regimes in power. In addition, they claimed that a battle waged directly against the United States would be more popular than killing fellow Muslims. Although the bin Ladin groups remained small, their ideas did change the flavor of the ideological debate, especially after September 11, 2001. One might compare bin Ladin's function to that of the Maoist and New Left doctrines which had appealed to radicals in the 1960s and afterward, when the USSR had come to seem a tired and failed model.

IRANIAN REGIME CHANGE AND THE UNITED STATES

Sixth, the hostile attitude toward the United States of the government resulting from Iran's regime change had enormous impact on regional--as well as U.S.--policy and behavior. Khomeini's triumph made anti-Americanism a high-priority item in the region's ideological doctrine and as a target for terrorism. Many of the themes later evinced by bin Ladin already existed in Khomeini's worldview. In a sense, the new regime proposed a two-front strategy. While the principal emphasis was put on staging revolutions against local regimes (the "near enemy") there would also be direct efforts to attack U.S. influence or presence in the region (the "far enemy"), mainly through terrorism.

Ironically, though, this effort had the directly opposite effect from that intended by the Iranian Islamist rulers. Fear of Iran actually prompted the Gulf Arab monarchies, and even for a time, Iraq, to move closer to the United States. This was especially true during the Iran-Iraq war, which culminated in the request to reflag Arab tankers with the stars and stripes to put them under American protection. U.S. military sales and direct military presence in the Gulf increased. Iraqi actions, which had their origin in the regional alterations made by the Iranian regime change, continued and intensified this trend.

What happened in regard to the United States as a result of the regime change in Iran is one of the most remarkable developments in the entire history of American foreign policy. The Persian Gulf had been a backwater, an area where the United States had little involvement and about which the American people had little interest or knowledge. During the two decades following the revolution, the Gulf became a focal point--arguably the most important area of the globe--for the United States.

This point is demonstrated by a simple list of the issues and crises emerging from the Iranian revolution: the hostage crisis in Tehran; the Iran-Iraq war; perhaps the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the upsurge in Islamist terrorism, the reflagging affair, the Iran-Contra scandal, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a gigantic series of arms sales; the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington; and the U.S.-Iraq confrontation of 2003.

What is especially important to note, however, is that during this period--and contrary to the beliefs of many in Tehran--U.S. policy toward Iran was never one seeking regime change there. The evolution of American means and goals can only be briefly presented here, but the basic starting point was that the United States hoped to see, or force, the revolution to act more moderately rather than to disappear altogether.

During the revolution itself, the United States did not give full backing to the shah to crush the revolt. Immediately afterward, President Jimmy Carter sought detente with Iran, in part to avoid the country allying itself with the USSR. Ironically, it was fear of the popularity of the United States, as well as to use anti-Americanism to reinforce and radicalize the new regime, that caused Khomeini and his followers to take the American diplomats as hostages in 1979. Carter even took the remarkable step of promising not to use military force on Iran, despite the kidnapping of American officials and their imprisonment for 444 days.

While Carter preached coexistence, his successor Ronald Reagan sought a secret rapprochement by selling some arms to Iran in exchange for Tehran's help in freeing Americans held hostage by its clients in Lebanon. The Reagan administration's alternative approach was not regime change but containment, achieved partly by a U.S. tilt toward Iraq in

the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. The goal was not to unseat the revolution but to ensure Iran did not become too powerful or able to expand the revolution.

Once Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Baghdad became the principal threat in the eyes of both America and the Gulf Arabs. After the war, the Bush administration still followed a policy of containing Iran but this was now called "dual containment," with the inclusion of Iraq as well. Yet precisely because the United States assumed that Iran's revolution was here to stay and the concern about other threats--earlier, the Soviet Union, after 1990, Iraq--American leaders were always ready for a rapprochement with Iran. This was a route tried by President Bill Clinton with no more success than his predecessors. The underlying problem was not only that Iran's hardline rulers did not want to change their policy but also because they feared reinforcing their reformist rivals and worried that the United States would be more popular with the Iranian people than they were.

In this context, it is important to recall the purpose of the U.S. sanctions against Iran. Sanctions were not an attempt to overthrow the regime but to isolate it internationally, ensure it did not become too strong in economic or strategic terms, and persuade it to turn away from the three objectionable policies: the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, subversion of Arab-Israeli peace efforts, and sponsorship of terrorism. Of course, obviously the fall of the Islamist regime--or at least of the hardline ruling faction--would have been warmly welcomed by the United States. But it would have been happy with modifications of specific foreign policy stands.(4)

One reason the United States did not promote regime change with regard to Iran was the intrinsic difficulty of such an effort compared with Iraq, since Iran was stronger, larger, and the American effort

against it was almost entirely unilateral. Another key factor here was that while believing the Iranian regime was very radical and the world's most important sponsor of terrorism, U.S. leaders also saw the regime as restrained in its behavior. It did not attack neighbors directly, the regime operated within a framework of *realpolitik*, etc.

This is in contrast to Iraq which truly was perceived over time as a rogue regime--as well as a weaker one. Whatever its extremist rhetoric, Iran had been invaded by Iraq in 1979, not vice-versa; and Iraq, not Iran, had invaded Kuwait. While Iran obtaining WMD was very dangerous, it might be constrained from using such weapons, unlike Iraq. International support for actions against Iraq was much stronger than against Iran--the former were UN sanctions while against Iran they were unilateral U.S. ones. Iraq had been defeated in war and undertaken commitments which had been broken, giving a strong rationale for U.S. military action even if many countries did not accept this argument.

Finally, of course, at least in the second half of the 1990s, it was possible to hope that Iran would undertake its own internal reform due to the moderates' electoral victories and the stance of President Muhammad Khatami. President George W. Bush's inclusion of Iran as one of the axis of evil trio (along with Iraq and North Korea) signaled not a turn to regime change but the end of the U.S. hope for Iran's "self-moderation."

Hence, an active effort to achieve regime change was never U.S. policy toward Iran and this has not changed at all. Despite some scattered voices calling for a comprehensive U.S. policy promoting regime change, the U.S. attack on Iraq makes such a stance toward Iran less likely. The United States is preoccupied in Baghdad and does not want to provoke an Iranian attempt to destabilize a post-Saddam Iraq. Ironically, this step will also

show how the Iranian revolution's paranoia about America became a self-fulfilling prophecy: the U.S. presence in the Gulf and the Gulf Arab states dependence on America will be greater than ever.

THE THIRD REVOLUTION?

What did the Iranian case, along with the Egyptian one, show about regime change? Clearly, that the change in regime of a major Middle Eastern state can have an extraordinarily large impact on the region both through the example of a new type of regime and through the specific policies of the new government in power.

Certainly, the specific nature and strategic situation of the state in question is a key element here. As a non-Arab state, Iran was more limited in providing a model for the Arab world. As a non-Sunni Muslim state, Iran was less able to be an ideal to the majority of Arabs who follow that denomination. Yet the results were still impressive. A whole era of Middle East history was influenced by this event and also, despite predictions to the contrary, the shift proved to be a lasting one.

By the same token, at some point a revolution is going to be judged a success or failure by its neighbors and its own citizens. If it does not provide stability, better living conditions, and other things, the impetus of the early days will wear off. It will face internal challenges and be less attractive as a model for foreigners. But even then it can have a powerful attraction. Beyond that, repression, demagoguery, and material incentives can extend its life for many decades.

There is no question that the Middle East has been facing a particularly potent blend of deadlock and stagnation. The old concepts and methods have not worked; expectations have been disappointed. Either the region is ready for a new model of revolution or it is awaiting even more variants on the failed doctrines of Arab

nationalism and Islamism that militants and masses can believe will succeed.

The most optimistic assessment of the effect of regime change in Iraq is that it will be, in effect, the Middle East's third revolution. Instead of Arab nationalism or Islamism--which have many things in common--the new model would be one of democracy, human rights, moderation, free enterprise, and good relations with the West. This is, after all, the model that has prevailed in every other part of the world. Such a model, however, must be perceived as workable and successful. And even then, the existing regimes, their mobilized supporters, and adherents of the two other revolutionary models will do everything possible to ignore, subvert, and defame their new competitor.

This, then, is an ambitious undertaking on a level--and even then only if accepted as such by the Arabs themselves--equal to that of the wave of regime and political changes which began in Cairo or Tehran and went on to become strategic and ideological revolutions for the Middle East as a whole.

But will such broader acceptance and local imitation come for a U.S.-initiated regime change in Iraq? So far, the signs are not so hopeful on a regional level. Only time can show the trend, though this also presupposes a successful democratic transition in Iraq, among other things. On all levels, this is a hazardous, complicated, and long-term undertaking and a great deal can go wrong.

These developments should be studied and analyzed with an open mind, knowing that precedent is not always a reliable guide and with skepticism toward grand plans and easy promised solutions. Actually predicting what will happen, as Iran's modern history shows, is extraordinarily difficult and deservedly daunting.

*Barry Rubin is director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, at the Interdisciplinary

University. His latest books include The Tragedy of the Middle East (Cambridge University Press) and, with Judith Colp Rubin, Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East (Oxford University Press). Their biography of Yasir Arafat will be published by Oxford University Press in September.

NOTES

1. This issue is explained in detail in Barry Rubin, The Tragedy of the Middle East (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
2. Obviously, Arab nationalism was never a model for Iran, which, of course, is one reason why the revolution there followed an Islamist course.
3. The Palestinian intifadas, which in both cases reverted quickly from mass activity to armed action, do not seem to have any direct relationship with the events in Iran, but even if it did that was a sole exception. For a detailed discussion of the Egyptian case, see the author's Islamic Fundamentalists in Egyptian Politics (Palgrave/St. Martin's: NY, 2002).
4. One of many statements that discuss these goals is Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright's Remarks at the Asia Society Dinner, Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, June 17, 1998. <<http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980617a.html>>