



A Spiral of Distrust: Contingencies of US Decisions in 1978–79 and the Emergence of an Anti-American Path in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The anti-American inclination of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy-making is well established, and the bitter aspects of the two nation's history well known. However, to assert a simple causal relationship between history and foreign-policy structure portrays the Islamic Republic's anti-Americanism as inevitable, eternal and unrelated to actors' agency. This article disputes this simple structural understanding by drawing on Greener's method of applying path-dependency theory to political science. We first identify the ideas and structure of revolutionary Iran, benefiting in particular from the complementary insights of postcolonial theory. Following, we examine US policy choices in the Islamic Republic's formative period of 1978–79—specifically those related to human rights, the shah and direct US intervention—and how these were perceived and acted upon in Tehran. Our findings indicate that American actions and Iranian decisions both influenced the establishment of a path-dependent process of perception and perpetration that continues until today. Successive Iranian governments have asserted that America ignores Iranian's human rights, supports their enemies, and pursues direct intervention, while successive US government actions, motivated by Iranian counteractions, have generated ample evidence to validate such claims. This can explain how a spiral of distrust emerged between the two nations.

Keywords: Ayatollah Khomeini, Foreign policy, Iran-US relations, Islamic Revolution of Iran, Jimmy Carter, Path dependency, Postcolonialism

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1. Introduction

On January 8, 2021, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei surprised political observers by expressing his deep distrust of America in the context of its export of medical supplies. Amid the Covid-19 crisis and hurried international efforts to find a solution, he declared that “importing American and English vaccines into the country is forbidden [...] they are not trustworthy. I do not really trust them”. This lack of trust was reformulated in the same speech, where he discussed sanctions as indicative of “enmity not only towards the Islamic government or the administration but also against the Iranian people” (Khamenei, 2021). According to Article 110 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader has the final say in the determination of the country’s main policy direction including in the realm of foreign policy. Thus Khamenei’s distrust of the West and the enmity he perceives as emerging from it may have significant ramifications for regional and world politics, and the roots of his perceptions merit investigation. In probing this issue, this paper applies the theory of path dependency to the Islamic Republic of Iran’s anti-American foreign policy. In particular, we seek to respond to the question: How did an anti-American path emerge in the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy during the revolutionary period? As a result, the article does not consider the entire history of Iran-US relations, nor the key events of the 1953 coup d’état and the hostage crisis often cited in “history matters” arguments, but rather the beginnings of the state of the Islamic Republic: the revolutionary period of late 1978 and the first ten months of 1979. The investigation is based on the hypothesis that the actions and counter-actions of America and Iran during this time were formative for the anti-American path that emerged, was

“locked-in” during the hostage crisis and Iran-Iraq War, and continues to play out—such as in vaccine discussions—today.

This research is significant because in the vast literature on the tensions between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, interactions between the US and the Iranian revolutionaries in the lead up to the revolution and in the initial months afterwards are subject to less analysis than bilateral dynamics from the hostage-taking onwards. As Ghazvinian (2021, p. 9) points out, the 1953 coup and 1979–81 hostage crisis are often considered to have explanatory power in relation to the antagonistic relations between America and Iran. Despite the revolutionary period being a foundational one for the Islamic Republic, there is little meaningful attempt to understand why anti-Americanism became ingrained in its foreign policy. In the scholarship that does exist, postcolonial insights are not used to understand Iranian revolutionaries' perceptions of US actions. Rather, it is US perspectives, and US sources, that are often given priority. In the case of American officials' memoirs, such a bias is to be expected. Members of the Carter team discuss Iran policy to varying degrees, some focusing on the writer's own efforts in the country (Huysen, 1986; Sullivan, 1981) or during the hostage crisis (Brzezinski, 1983; Carter, 1982; Vance, 1983), others attempting to make sense of the Islamic revolution more generally (Stemple, 1981; Sick, 1985). While Sick and Sullivan in particular address revolutionaries' perspectives, they do so in the context of judging the effectiveness of US policy, not critiquing its policy premise in the manner of postcolonial approaches.

More problematic is that in the secondary literature, the perspectives of the revolutionaries are rarely critically presented and analyzed. For example, Ledeen and Lewis (1980, p. 39; see

also Moens, 1991) present an “attempt at reconstruction of American policymaking”, while Rubin (1980, p. 308) evaluates US policy critically but labels Iranian insights as beset by “inaccuracy” and “grand conspiracy” theory. Falk and Cottam may be more sympathetic to the revolutionaries’ position, but so too are they sympathetic to the American position: Cottam (1979, p. 12) characterizes Carter’s Iran policy as “both inadvertent and innocent” while Falk (1979, p. 33) acknowledges that the shah was a US “client” but fails to examine the implications of this situation. Contemporary scholars have access to more material, but newly-declassified White House sources are still American sources, and the US focus of the existing scholarship is largely retained. Emery (2013) charts the Carter administration’s goodwill towards the Iranian revolutionaries, examining the US approach to Iran in the light of its rivalry with the USSR, and Gil Guerrero (2016) recounts the events of the months leading up to Carter’s loss of the shah and US influence in the Middle East. Simpson’s (2017) analysis of the shortfalls in American understanding of Ayatollah Khomeini’s intentions—demonstrating the latter’s cunning capacity to “manipulate the United States” into preventing a coup while he worked to “coopt” native generals into accepting the revolution (Simpson, 2017, p. 253)—appears to delegitimize independence and anti-colonial movements in general as well as Iranian history and interests in particular.

Of course, there are countless other works on US-Iranian relations, but most gloss over the revolutionary period in spite of the fact that it was a time of state formation. The literature about the period that does exist does not give weight to the question of how anti-Americanism became institutionalized in the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy. In addressing this matter, we first

consider Greener's application of path-dependency theory to political science and the method suggested in his analytical framework. The article then turns to the ideas of the revolutionaries and the structure of the revolutionary setting, identifying their anti-colonialism in general and opposition to specific US actions in particular. Following, the American human rights agenda, approach to the shah and contemplation of direct intervention are investigated as questions entailing various alternative possibilities, and the revolutionaries' agency in responding to the possibilities chosen are recounted. The manner in which the revolutionaries' experiences in this period of transition established an anti-American path in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, as well as more recent illustrations of this path, are addressed further in the discussion. The article concludes that the spiral of distrust that emerged during the revolutionary period established a path in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy that persists to the present day.

2. Path-dependency theory and method

Path-dependency theory is part of the broader theory of historical institutionalism. Broadly speaking, it recognizes the weight of the past in determining the present and in particular the institutional tendency towards inertia (Greener, 2005, p. 62). Applied in its simplistic form to anti-Americanism in Iranian foreign policy, one could argue that Iran's foreign policy position is anti-American because it has been from the beginning, because choices that were made historically established a pattern that is difficult to change. This explanation may be difficult to dispute, but its overly general nature limits its capacity to add meaningful insights to knowledge.

As a result, path-dependency theory tends to be modified to suit various disciplines (see Sydow et al. 2012) and applied using various methods even within the field of politics (see Pierson 2000). The method followed in this paper is consistent with Greener's (2005) application of path-dependency theory to political science. Greener (2005, p. 65) identifies Margaret Archer's morphogenic sociological approach as best complementing the basic tenets of path-dependency theory in terms of its application to politics, in particular, her analysis of the interactions between structure and agency. In contrast to Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (see King 2010), Archer recognizes the "cultural sphere" of ideas an analytical category that is separate from structure (Greener 2005, p. 65). Borrowing from Karl Popper's terminology, Archer (1995, p. 218) adds that the level of compatibility and unity of different interest groups impact the formation of structural and cultural "situational logics". Greener (2005, 66) notes that in combination with the contingencies of history, some such possibilities are more likely to lead to path dependence than others.

Greener (2005, pp. 68–69) proposes a framework for applying path-dependence theory to political science that offers methodological guidelines. First, he suggests that there must be "a number of viable alternatives" in terms of the policy in question. Second, and relatedly, he asserts that "contingent events" must have a demonstrable impact on the policy or institutional norm. Third, he borrows from morphogenetic theory in asserting that path-dependent systems are most likely to "lock in" when groups are united and when structural and cultural interests align (Greener 2005, p. 68). Greener refutes the argument of path dependency being driven by positive returns, instead showing how the situational logics and paths that emerge have costs as well. His

application of path dependency is also particularly useful because it contemplates the possibility of change if there is a coherence of ideas, structure and agency in favour of an alternative (Greener 2005, p. 69). This article applies Greener's analytical framework to the case of Iranian foreign policy towards America and the specific research question of how an anti-American path was established in Iranian foreign policy. This means that our interest is in the formation rather than the continuation of the path: for this reason, we modify Greener's method slightly by addressing the cultural and structural conditions of the revolutionary period before the contingent events of US and Iranian actions in 1978–79.

Before doing so, in keeping with Greener's first stage of analysis, it must be shown that anti-Americanism was just one possible outcome for state foreign policy in Iran. This matter is relatively straight forward. Many commentators have argued (see for example, Bazargan 1984, pp. 39–40; Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2004, p. 292; Snyder, 1999, p. 267) that before the hostage crisis and the multifaceted US maximum pressure campaign in response—described by Sick (1985, p. 217) as “probably the most extensive and sustained effort of its kind ever to be conducted in peacetime”—the Iranian government's active opposition to the US was not a foregone conclusion. This is not to say that the Islamic Republic of Iran was ever likely to become a loyal US ally: the revolutionaries' slogans and statements gave a strong indication that a non-US-aligned government would be formed in post-revolutionary Iran. But it is less certain that history and principled opposition is a sufficiently strong foundation to guarantee an anti-US government. When opposition figures are excluded entirely from the government decision-making apparatus, their capacity to make uncompromising political statements is much greater than

when they shoulder the responsibility of governance, and must consider the intricacies of politics, their constituencies and compromise in the national interest. Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that the Iranian revolutionaries would necessarily follow the same discourse before and after coming to power. However, it does help to unpack the structure and ideas of revolutionary Iran in order to understand the context of the actions and reactions of foreign policy contingencies in 1978–79.

2. 1. Ideas about America in revolutionary Iran

Greener's application of path-dependency theory requires the consideration of ideas circulating in the "cultural sphere" of Iran in the revolutionary period. Naturally, we cannot address the entire range of such ideas here. Rather, consistent with the focus of this article on the period of 1978–79, the statements cited in this article were made by prominent revolutionaries of the same epoch, many of whom were members of the Council of the Islamic Revolution (formed in secret late-1978, disbanded mid-1980). Second, as the article's aim is to understand how anti-Americanism emerged in the Iranian state's foreign policy, we are naturally interested in those who played key roles in the institution of the state of the Islamic Republic. While some of the foremost revolutionaries of 1978–79 later became distant from the apparatus of government or were assassinated by anti-government extremists, others—most notably Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei as well as Rafsanjani—continued to occupy political leadership roles well beyond that period. Finally, it is of course necessary to select revolutionaries whose comments on the specific issue of the US are available in the public domain.

It barely needs stating here that the revolutionaries' perceptions of the United States were overwhelmingly negative. Their anti-American ideas can be seen as the contemporary face of broader, long-standing anti-colonial sentiment and movements in Iran. The nation had experienced the direct and indirect domination of foreign powers for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and despite not being formally colonized or permanently occupied, its contemporary history includes interludes variously described as "near-formal colonial domination" under the Anglo-Russian Convention 1907–1918 (Ricks, 1980, p. 274), invasion and occupation during WWII, the status of a "semi-colony" (Ashraf, 1981, p. 5) and "neocolonial domination" (Kamrava, 2014, p. 149). In examining how neocolonial attitudes and actions played out in the specific case of Pahlavi Iran, Samiei (2018, pp. 344–45) characterizes the relationship of the USSR and UK/US with Iran as "colonialism in the shadows." He describes Iran's experience of colonialism in the Pahlavi period—relevant to the revolutionaries' perceptions we examine here—as a form of colonialism being shrouded in a veneer of independence due to the colonizer-approved native kings having "limited power for political maneuvering. However, because of the extensive political and economic influence of the colonizing government(s), the interests of the colonizers take precedence over those of the colonized government" (Samiei, 2018, p. 345).

Unsurprisingly, then, resistance and anti-colonial movements have contributed to the intellectual and political landscape of modern Iran. Each of the three prominent ideologies of twentieth-century Iran (socialism, nationalism and Islamism), can be considered a dialectic of and response to colonialism, with Islamism the predominant anti-colonial discourse or "liberation

theology” of the Muslim world (Dabashi, 2010). While the analysis of a century of Iranian thought in all its diversity is beyond our scope here, and neither colonialism nor anti-colonial movements in Iran have been static or uniform, anti-colonial sentiment in Iran developed in response to the actions of the Russian and British empires initially, but gained an America focus after the CIA’s key role in the 1953 coup d’état. Ayatollah Khomeini’s earliest political publication in 1944 referred to the “European” influence over Reza Shah which not only manifested in the king’s promotion of inconsonant cultural imitation but hid the more serious exploitation of the country by the British (Khomeini, 1944, p. 224). However, American involvement in the 1953 coup and the dynamics of its subsequent relationship with the shah led to its inheritance of long-standing anti-colonial resentment, becoming the main colonizer in the shadows as well as the key foreign target of Iranian revolutionary opposition. In 1964, Khomeini singled out America as the particular cause of Muslims’ problems in the context of legal immunity being granted to US personnel in Iran, increasingly US-driven domestic policy and American support for Israel (Khomeini, 2008 [1964], pp. 414–18). Other prominent revolutionaries Bazargan (1984, p. 9) and Ayatollah Taleghani (1357 [1979 A.D.]) also characterize the Islamic revolution as the triumphant culmination of an anti-colonial, Islamic, national independence struggle against colonial powers, sparked in particular by their ousting of Prime Minister Mosaddegh in 1953.

2. 2. America in the structure of revolutionary Iran

In considering the place of America in the structure of Iran during the revolutionary period, we can point to its prominence in the shah’s regime. In accordance with the characteristics of

“colonialism in the shadows,” the shah’s reinstatement by the CIA in 1953 left no doubt he was colonizer approved. The “ominous shadow of American policy over the last 30 years” described by Khamenei (1979) was visible in particular in American political and economic influence. The shah acquiesced to acting as the US’s regional policeman (Sick, 1985, pp. 13–14), made political appointments pleasing to the US (Saghafi, 2005, p. 193), implemented the “White Revolution” in response to pressure from Kennedy (Stemple, 1981, p. 67) and allowed a large American including military presence in Iranian cities (Sick, 1985, p. 10). The US’s shadow was so pervasive it was perceived as total dominance. Ayatollah Motahari (2007 [1979], p. 160) characterizes the US practice of buying Iranian oil and selling the nation weapons to “protect its interests” as political dominance equivalent to slavery, and Khomeini gave the following response to Carter’s suggestion that the shah had made Iran independent:

Where is the independence in Iran about which you speak? Is the Iranian army independent? Is the educational system there independent? Is its industry independent? Is its economy independent? ...What kind of independence do we have? You know as well as we do what you are saying; you know as well as we do that you are lying! (Khomeini, 2008 [1978], pp. 103–104).

Opposition to America thus became a key element of anti-shah revolutionary discourse, traversing both the spheres of ideas and of structure. The revolutionaries sought to create a new political structure that was not dominated by America. However, the exact form this took, in particular the foreign policy stance of the new state—in Beheshti’s (Bonyad-e Nashr Asar-e Shahid Beheshti 1979–81, n.p.) words, “I declare explicitly: from our point of view politically and in accordance with the Islamic Republic of Iran’s

foreign policy position, our primary enemy is America”—was dependent on contingencies of both US foreign policy and Iranian interpretations and actions in response to it.

3. Contingencies in US actions towards Iran 1978–79

As is evident from the existing primary and secondary literature (see for example, Carter 1982; Brzezinski 1983; Sick 1986; Stemple 1981; Ghazvinian 2021; Eisenstadt 2011), the issues of how much emphasis to grant to Carter’s liberal, human rights agenda, whether or not and how to support the shah, and how actively to become involved on the ground were among the most prominent Iran policy issues debated in meetings at the White House and Department of State in 1978–79. Various alternatives were put forward, and sometimes conflicting alternatives were pursued concurrently. However, in each case, one choice became dominant. On the basis of their view from Tehran, Iranian revolutionaries made interpretations and took decisions. In doing so, they relied on the contingencies demonstrated in tangible US actions in their efforts to gauge American policy intentions.

3. 1. Human rights or stability?

One of the questions dividing Carter administration officials was whether human rights and liberalization or the stability of its Pahlavi ally was more important to American interests in Iran. Each represented a clear alternative—support of human rights would necessarily contradict a policy aimed at the stability of the Pahlavi regime—and both were possible choices for the Democratic Carter’s administration. From the Iranian side, statements in support of human rights had conflicted with the

actions of and regimes supported by Western powers before (see Motahari, 2004 [1974]), so there was little reason to associate “human rights” with genuine humanitarian sentiment. Nonetheless, Carter’s statements in support of human rights, freedom and democracy led the Iranian opposition to see the Democratic president’s 1976 election as a potential political opportunity (Bazargan, 1984, p. 13; Ghazvinian, 2021, pp. 197–199). Indeed, the leverage of Carter’s election win and the shah’s resultant uncertainty can be considered among the facilitating factors leading to the increased activity of opposition groups in Iran such as the formation of the “Iranian Committee for the Defense of Freedom and Human Rights.” The US issued statements in support of liberalization and encouraged the shah, even in the last months of his rule, to grant greater freedom to citizens (Pahlavi, 1980, p. 163). This included regulatory changes, anti-corruption declarations as well as greater press and political openness including the release of political prisoners; Ayatollahs Rafsanjani, Taleghani and Montazeri for example were freed in November 1978 (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2004, pp. 115–16). Montazeri (2000, pp. 462, 856) acknowledges that Democrat Carter had helped to put pressure on the shah in terms of creating a more open political environment, but labels Carter’s promotion of human rights a pretension.

Other US actions implied its human rights discourse lacked sincerity, for example the reciprocal visits between the shah and Carter in late 1977. The shah’s tolerance for political opposition lessened after his visit to the US in November 1977 (Kurzman, 2003, pp. 303–304), with protests in the lead up to Carter’s Tehran visit on New Year’s Eve 1977 being dealt with to the extent that the president himself saw no evidence of the “currents of dissatisfaction” he had been advised existed (Carter, 1982, p. 437).

Carter's visit and his much-quoted "island of stability" comments about Pahlavi Iran on this occasion outweighed his indirect reference to human rights via a Saadi verse at the suggestion of Empress Farah (Carter, 1982, p. 437). It has been widely suggested that this speech, delivered in Tehran, sent a message to the Iranian opposition that discussion on human rights in Iran would be restricted to lyrical couplets so long as its authoritarian leader delivered Soviet-balancing stability (see for example, Asadi, 1391 [2012 A.D.], p. 126; Moens, 1991, p. 215). The visits reinforced the impression that the US's express statements may well turn out to be polar opposite to its practical policy.

A contradiction between words and actions was also evident in continued armaments sales. While Carter had announced a policy of restricting the military acquisitions of governments associated with human rights abuses, his advisors recall that the president had no illusions that in the case of Iran, the human rights agenda would be subsumed by the "strategic decision" to support the shah, including through continued armaments supplies (Vance, 1983, p. 317). As Ghazvinian (2021, p. 197) puts it, the shah was given an exception from Carter's "high-minded sloganeering about human rights". Carter paid only lip service to humanitarian concerns, asking Ambassador Sullivan to try to "persuade" the Iranian ruler to "improve his government's human rights performance" (Sullivan, 1981, p. 23). In late 1978, the US supplemented its earlier sales of policing equipment (Branigin, 1977) with that of tear gas and batons to deal with demonstrators, a sale frustrated but ultimately not prevented by the Department of State's human rights bureau (Stemple, 1981, pp. 133–134). This concrete step in addition to the White House announcement (Carter, 1978) that Carter had telephoned the shah to offer his support after the

shooting of demonstrators in Jaleh Square on September 8 (“Black Friday”), 1978 brought into further question Carter’s intention to support freedom, democracy and human rights in Iran. Montazeri (2000, p. 871) described the occasion as showing the “colonial role and extent of [foreign] domination” over the shah, asserting the shots fired on protestors were “American and Israeli bullets.” Ayatollah Saduqi, who was appointed by Khomeini as Yazd Friday Prayer leader after the revolution, wrote directly to Carter after the Muharram protests of December 1978, arguing that given international calls for human rights and the White House’s stated policy in this regard, Carter must reconsider his support for the Pahlavi regime which had carried out “successive massacres” and killings (Islamic Revolution Document Centre, 2020).

After the revolutionaries’ victory, and the US’s eventual recognition of Prime Minister Bazargan’s government, its officials promised continued arms sales, while also expressing opposition to “widespread violations of human rights” (Vance, 1983, p. 343). One alternative was for this concern to remain at the same level as it had during the Pahlavi era, i.e., a quiet private word, and if this alternative had been chosen, the revolutionaries may have tolerated it. However, it was not and they did not. In May 1979, the US Senate passed a resolution condemning executions in Iran, made in the context of the “brutal treatment of officials of the former regime... [being] extended to ethnic and religious minorities... Jews and others” (Vance, 1983, p. 345). However, the resolution’s sponsor and the man executed in Iran said to have spurred it had links to the shah and Israel (see Precht, 2004, p. 31; Kifner, 1979), while the resolution’s timing came one week after a death warrant was issued in Tehran for the shah himself. Khomeini (2008 [1979], p. 329) found the resolution unsurprising in the context of the

damage to US interests caused by the fall of the shah and the revolutionary government's cessation of oil exports to its ally Israel. He rationalized that US material interests dictated whether or not it prioritized human rights concerns: this was why torture and executions during the US-aligned shah's rule had received little condemnation while the execution of Pahlavi-aligned figures was publicly denounced by the US Senate as a breach of human rights (Khomeini, 2008 [1979], pp. 330–32).

As it seemed to the revolutionaries that the US had chosen the alternative of prioritizing interests and political preferences over human rights, the Iranian side exercised its agency in vetoing a request for prospective US ambassador Cutler to meet with Khomeini, and later rejected his appointment altogether. Tehran's intelligence that the man nominated by Washington had been involved in a US special committee linked to coup d'états in Africa (Mehrnameh, 1394 [2015 A.D.]) escaped the attention of officers Precht and Nass (1988), who note Cutler's rejection as a "major setback" and assert the Senate resolution was at complete odds with the Department of State's strategy. However, there was little visible evidence of any such strategy in contrast with the text of the Senate resolution, which not only condemned "lack of due process" in Iranian judicial affairs but also stressed that "the United States will act to prevent criminal or terrorist actions against persons in the United States" (US Senate Resolution 164, 96th Congress, May 17, 1979). Thus as well as demonstrating an inconsistent approach to human rights, the wording of the resolution also implied the assurance that US would take action to protect the Pahlavis and their supporters.

3. 2. Allegiance to or stepping back from Mohammad Reza Shah?

A second concern facing the US foreign policy team from late-1978 was whether to continue to support the shah, and if so, how. Again, both alternatives were possible and either could have been pursued. That this long-standing ally should be subject to such a question was confronting to policy-makers accustomed to providing unqualified support (see Sick 1986, 131), while the monarch himself found US measures in the last months before the revolution “confusing and contradictory” (Pahlavi, 1980, p. 169). The shah was disgruntled by Carter’s (1978c) response, “I don’t know, I hope so” to a media question posed in early December 1978 about whether or not the shah would remain on the throne in Iran, and suggestion that the decision rested with the “Iranian people.” Such statements, along with Carter’s desire to back whichever side was likely to win the struggle (Ghazvinian 2021, p. 207), and the frequent advice of anti-shah Department of State officials such as Precht (2004) and ambassador Sullivan (1981), demonstrate that the alternative of abandoning the shah did exist and could have been operationalized.

However, the US’s public statements and actions more often implied the US would stand by its old ally. In October 1978, Carter indicated that he thought the shah capable of leading democratic reform in Iran (Carter, 1978a); a month later he questioned whether accusations of the shah running a “police state” were justified and described him as a “friend, a loyal ally” (Carter, 1978b); a day after the massive Ashura march in December Carter commented that he “fully expect[ed] the Shah to maintain power in Iran ... The Shah has our support and he also has our confidence” (Carter, 1978d). The US was among the first to recognize Prime Minister Bakhtiar’s government, as reported in *Keyhan* newspaper on February 7, 1979.

Ebrahim Yazdi (1984, p. 3) describes the shah's appointment of Bakhtiar as "the last trick of foreign domination against the anti-tyrannical and anti-colonial movement of the people of Iran" and Hashemi Rafsanjani (2004, p. 146) considers Bakhtiar was forced upon the shah by "foreign supporters of the regime, in particular the American and British ambassadors," who were involved in organizing a march in his government's favor. Concurrent with US recognition of another government Ayatollah Khomeini had denounced as illegitimate, Carter was indirect in his comments about the shah's movements, stating that he had "no way to determine" the shah's schedule, which would depend on "future events and his own desires," but confirming that the shah would enter the US "later" (Carter, 1979).

The US delayed acknowledging Bazargan's government after the revolution, and unlike other Western countries, avoided sending its ambassador to pay a "courtesy visit" to the new administration (Ghazvinian 2021, p. 221). Even after the US did formally recognize Bazargan's government, its officials were unable to assure their Iranian counterparts of their genuine support for the revolutionary leaders and lack of support for the shah. At the first meeting between foreign ministers Yazdi and Vance at the UN in early October 1979, Vance (1983, p. 371) raised the issue of admitting the shah as a "test" to gauge the likely Iranian reaction. While Vance (1983, p. 371) suggests that Yazdi was "non-committal," his assistant Saunders (1985, p. 65) recounts that throughout the conversation Yazdi "returned again and again to the theme of American culpability for all that Iranians had suffered under the regime of the Shah." Documents seized from the US embassy in Tehran indicate that then general secretary of the Islamic Republican Party Ayatollah Beheshti informed US officials

that the foremost bilateral concern was the US's admission of the shah, and responded to their verbal indications of support for the revolution with the reminder that "instead of words, action is needed" (Political Studies and Research Institute, 2008). Beheshti comments generally that in all his official meetings he communicated revolutionary goals and rejected any calls for "moderation" or for clerics to step back from decision-making. He derided such proposals, suggesting that the US clearly preferred an Iranian government like the shah's that would allow foreigners to determine its policies (Bonyad-e Nashr Asar-e Shahid Beheshti, 1979–81, n.p.).

When Iranian ministers Bazargan, Chamran and Yazdi repeatedly requested the shah be delivered to Iran for trial at their Algiers meeting with National Security Advisor Brzezinski (Barsqian, 2008), the latter refused: "the shah is not a political factor; he's a sick man and he will be treated according to our laws and our principles" (Brzezinski, 1983, p. 476). Recalling its human rights approach, the citation of US "principles" could hardly have been reassuring to the ministers, and neither was the timing of the meeting to the domestic audience. As highlighted by Gheisarri and Nasr (2006, p. 94) as well as Ghazvinian (2021, pp. 225–26), the shah's admission to the United States coincided with the Algiers meeting to the extent that Iranian television viewers saw Tehran protests against the US decision and Brzezinski shaking hands with provisional government ministers on the same news bulletins. Unsurprisingly, this intensified distrust and discredited the provisional government. From Ayatollah Khomeini's perspective, the shah's ailments could not have been the true reason for his US travel plans. A week before the hostage-taking, he cited medical advice that the shah's illness could be treated elsewhere, reasoning

therefore that the former monarch's entry to Iran's number-one foe "America—enemy of the nation and mankind" was more likely part of a US plot (Khomeini, 2008 [1979b], pp. 261–262).

3. 3. Impartial observer or partisan player?

A related question facing US policy makers was how active a part to play in the unfolding events in revolutionary Iran. The interventionist view that the Iranian military could be pressured into propping up the shah, putting down protesters and/or carrying out a coup translated into a threatening message being delivered. However, at the same time, the US ambassador, representing the view of the Department of State, tried to convey impartiality. Carter frequently proclaimed that "we have no intention... to interfere in the internal affairs in Iran" (see for example, Carter, 1979). There were thus two alternatives for the US, both pursued to some extent by different players and even the same players on different occasions. In addition to messages conveyed in Paris, Yazdi (Mehrnameh, 1394 [2015 A.D.]) mentions that the US embassy also reached out to revolutionaries in two separate configurations in Tehran. The signals coming from the embassy seemed more accommodating, such as Sullivan's (1981, pp. 236-237) visit to Bazargan and Ayatollah Mousavi, which took place while Bakhtiar was still in power, to discuss how bilateral relations might play out post-revolution.

However, Huyser's mission contradicted these signals. While the revolutionaries may not have initially been aware of Huyser's secret arrival (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2004, p. 148), his meetings with Pahlavi generals came to be known publicly through media leaks (Huyser, 1986, pp. 203, 208; for example, *Keyhan* reported

on February 7 that Huyser's "secret mission" had ended) and when he finally requested a meeting with an opposition member, he was reportedly convinced that the revolution could not be stopped (Political Studies and Research Institute, n.d.). Specific details about the meeting are unclear. Beheshti for one explains that he was never introduced to Huyser, but conveyed a revolutionary message to all—including Americans—he met (Bonyad-e Nashr Asar-e Shahid Beheshti, 1981, n.p.). The Huyser mission came at a time when the bloodshed that a more than likely unsuccessful coup would cause was "the most important [matter] preoccupying the minds of members of the Council of the Islamic Revolution" (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2004, p. 149). At the same time, the French president conveyed a message from Carter that if the Khomeini side refused to support Bakhtiar's government, "military intervention and a coup" would be among the consequences (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2004, pp. 147–48; see also Mehrnameh, 1394 [2015 A.D.]).

As a result, it appeared both before and after the revolution that the US had chosen the intervention alternative, and its mixed messaging was interpreted as an attempt at trickery: shortly after the revolution, in March 1979, Taleghani warned that the danger of "colonial elements and tyranny and Israel and their spies" was even worse than it had been in 1953:

Their teeth are sharper and their complexities greater. Completely enraged against us, they are lying in wait with all their conspiracies and military and non-military means ... (Taleghani, 1357 [1979 A.D.]).

Ghazvinian (2021, p. 220) comments that the memory of 1953 is "almost impossible to overstate" in the revolutionaries' 1979 perceptions, and even Vance (1983, p. 369) acknowledges that

“every faction” in Iran was worried the US would arrange a coup. However, he nonetheless describes “discreet” contact with Bazargan, a gradual thawing in relations, and the boosting of embassy staff (Vance, 1983, p. 369), a strategy Ghazvinian (2021, p. 221) characterizes as self-defeating since it discredited the very personalities the US was hoping to empower. Sullivan (1981, pp. 272–275) reports similar US actions in the post-revolutionary period: efforts to build relationships with revolutionaries, particularly interim government members, and tentative arrangements for future economic and military cooperation. Sick (1986, p. 188) stresses that most meetings were organized between US representatives and “moderate” and “secular” members of Bazargan’s interim government rather than “clerical factions around Khomeini.” However, such efforts were resisted strongly by personalities such as Beheshti, who stated that for the Americans, “moderate” simply meant pro-American (Bonyad-e Nashr Asar-e Shahid Beheshti, 1981, n.p.). Given its previous record in Iran, American actions could certainly be construed in that way. In the same vein, Khamenei’s comments in an October 1979 speech cited the US as the main among other superpowers seeking to challenge the revolution: “The enemy against us today is plotting political conspiracies, economic conspiracies, publicity conspiracies. Today the enemy is trying to keep us dependent on it... this is an organized apparatus... they are mobilizing the global political atmosphere against us” (Khamenei, 1979).

4. Reinforced perceptions and the establishment of an anti-American path

As we have shown, anti-Americanism was dominant in both the structure and ideas of the revolutionary period. The concept of

“colonialism in the shadows” provides a framework for making sense of the revolutionaries’ ideas, preconceptions and their interpretations of US actions in 1978–79. General opposition to imperialism and colonialism translated in practice to specific resistance to US power and influence in Iran from 1953 to 1979 because Iran was in the shadow of US colonial influence during this period. Thus inconsistent and at times aggressive signals from the US in 1978–79 were received by revolutionaries who had both the history of the 1953 coup and their own modern anti-colonial struggle in the forefront of their minds. In this context, there would seem little possibility or even logic in any optimistic interpretation of the US’s mixed messages. Attempts in the literature to demonstrate that the revolutionaries’ suspicion of the US was mistaken would have been more convincing if the US had been an impartial equal of Pahlavi Iran. But the US was the colonial patron of a regime that the revolutionaries had been actively opposing, and in many cases jailed by, over the last 25 years. This matter cannot be overlooked in any meaningful analysis of US-Iran interactions in the revolutionary period. Rather, understanding the US as the colonial power in the shadows of Pahlavi Iran not only dispels assumptions of equality and impartiality between the two nations but also leads to clearer insight into why scattered US efforts to engage the Iranian opposition bore little fruit in 1978–79.

However, it is not just preconceptions but also events that are requisite to a path becoming established in favor of a particular policy, in the case of our main question, the anti-American posture of the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy. In this sense, American actions in 1978–79 not only failed to make a positive impression on the revolutionaries but strengthened their negative preconceptions. While they had initially sought to use Carter’s stated human rights

agenda for their own advantage domestically, the US's privileging of the stability of Iran's authoritarian leader to the detriment of protesters convinced the revolutionaries that "American human rights" (Islamic Revolution Documentation Centre, 2020) amounted to little more than a slogan. It thus appeared hypocritical when, after the revolution, US authorities took formal measures in relation to ethical and human rights concerns about the welfare of shah and Pahlavi-connected persons. Given the centrality of overthrowing the shah to the goals of the revolution, it is obvious why US support for their arch-enemy discouraged the revolutionaries from accepting America's claims of impartiality. The victory of the revolution was an opportunity for the US to distance itself from the shah, and indeed, it seems Carter (1982, p. 453) was personally not averse to doing so. However, he was unable or unwilling to counter pro-shah elements at home, and ultimately prioritized the shah's health over the chance of détente with revolutionary Iran by permitting the shah to enter US territory. It was this action, not the difficulty of his choice (Carter, 1982, pp. 454–457), that was seen from Iran.

Further, although Carter insisted that the Iranian people had the right to choose their leaders, seeking to present the US as an impartial observer of developments in revolutionary Iran, the shah as well as other political and military opponents of Ayatollah Khomeini received US support. This support seemed particularly worrying given the Iranian oil nationalization movement's encounter with the US in the early 1950s. While Prime Minister Mosaddegh had initially considered the US a peace broker in the dispute between Iran and Britain over the British oil concession, his trust proved misplaced. In order to prevent the loss of its own highly lucrative oil revenue from countries in which it held British-like concessions, the US eventually agreed to carry out a coup

d'état in Iran. In investigating the hostage taking incident, Houghton (2006, p. 267) points out that "to expect that history [the 1953 coup d'état] would repeat itself was ... an understandable position for the students to take at the time given the fact that none of this information [recently declassified White House and CIA records] was available to them". The same analogical logic can be used to understand how US attempts to rebuild ties with Iran after the revolution were interpreted by Ayatollah Khomeini. The Iranian revolutionaries, who considered regional dictators like the shah to be servants of the US (Khomeini, 2008 [1980], pp. 338–339), applied the experience of 1953 to conclude that the US would not welcome or tolerate the revolution or the loss of the shah, because to do so would be to risk the loss of its other servants in the region as well. Thus the US's "discrete" pursuit of a business-as-usual resumption of economic and military cooperation in 1979 logically led to concern about the extent of the cooperation sought: the worst-case scenario was the shah's reinstatement via a coup d'état, but the resumption of the client relationship that the US had enjoyed with the Pahlavi monarch would have been a betrayal of the revolutionary struggle for independence.

The choices of Carter, and the responses of the Iranian revolutionaries-leaders, can thus be considered as contingencies that augmented the revolutionaries' ideas and situation, establishing an anti-American path in the new state's foreign policy. While the next stage of Greener's approach, an examination of how anti-Americanism—once established—became "locked in" in Iranian foreign policy, is beyond our scope here, we can cite a few brief examples. In the short-term, the anti-American path proved highly detrimental to the US, likely contributing to Khomeini's post-facto support of the student hostage takers (Yazdani & Hussain, 2006, p.

270). In response, the US launched its first maximum pressure campaign against the Islamic Republic, including by influencing the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to eschew article 24 of the UN Charter by failing to acknowledge Iraq had invaded Iran in September 1980. This in turn reinforced negative Iranian perceptions of international bodies and the US specifically (Ramazani, 1992, pp. 85–86). The cycle of perception and perpetration thus continued, strengthening the anti-American sentiment of Khomeini and others whose status as revolutionary heroes grants them enduring reverence and leads to frequent citation of their speeches and opinions.

In view of the specific concerns discussed in this article, the Iranian government continues to assert that the US lacks any real concern for the rights of the Iranian people, supports opposition leaders and movements as well as regional rivals, and takes steps towards direct intervention in Iran. While often dismissed in the West as propaganda, like the Carter administration, subsequent US governments have also provided ample tangible evidence to validate such claims. Contemporary examples include multiple sanctions regimes recognized as affecting the “Iranian people” more than the political elite, official condemnations of human rights and democracy in Iran concurrent with silence on the lesser opportunity for political participation and greater human suffering in US-allied nations in the region, support for anti-Islamic Republic figures and movements such as the delisting of Mujahedin-e Khalq as a terrorist organization, loyalty to nuclear-armed Israel, which has been repeatedly associated with attacks on Iranian citizens and property both inside and outside its borders, and direct strikes on Iranian assets and persons in the region such as the assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani (see also, Anderson, 2019, pp.

335–340). While evidence for their assertions is not only accessible but continually generated, there appears no reason for the Iranian government to abandon its anti-American sentiment or for the Supreme Leader to trust a vaccine Made in America.

5. Conclusion

The period of 1978–79 was a formative period for the Islamic Republic of Iran during which anti-Americanism was established in its foreign policy. This study identified the theory of path dependency as a way of understanding this policy, and set out a method for investigating how anti-Americanism emerged in the Iranian state's foreign policy in the revolutionary period. First, we saw that the structure and the ideas of revolutionary Iran were anti-American. There was strong anti-colonial sentiment in twentieth-century Iranian political thought and the US became the foreign focus of opposition movements after the 1953 coup d'état. The situation of the Pahlavi government vis-à-vis America further contributed to revolutionary anti-Americanism. However, as a state policy, anti-Americanism took shape when the contingencies of 1978–79, in particular the Carter team's actions in relation to its human rights agenda, support of the shah and deliberation of direct intervention in Iran, indicated that of the various possibilities available, the US had made an aggressive choice. US actions reinforced revolutionaries' pre-existing perceptions about the US's untrustworthiness, lack of genuine humanitarian concern, support for their arch-enemy, and willingness to intervene directly. As a result, Iranian leaders exercised their own agency and made anti-American choices, building anti-Americanism into their nascent state's foreign policy and continuing the cycle of perception and perpetration that has dominated US-Islamic Republic of Iran

interactions in the decades since. Further research could apply an understanding of the Iranian revolutionaries' anti-colonial mindset to other episodes of US-Islamic Republic of Iran confrontation and investigate further examples of the Iranian state's anti-American foreign policy path or contingencies that may lead to the possibility of change.

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