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Iran's 1979 revolution and its legacies today
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(MUSIC)

MALONEY: It was one of the formative experiences of the 20th century and it has had echo effects that continue to reverberate in U.S. policy and in regional security terms.

BYMAN: The Iranian revolution was incredibly consequential for what we think of as terrorism today.

RIEDEL: The firestorm of sectarianism that we see engulfing the Middle East today really owes its origins back to this period.

FELTMAN: Ideologically, Hezbollah is the one example of successful export of the revolution that Tehran can point to, but it's also a manifestation of the Iranian Revolutionary obsession with Israel.

KAMARCK: The public really had very little interest or knowledge of this until the hostages were taken. Now, once the hostages were taken this became an enormous, enormous, enormous issue.

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

In early 1979, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran and his family left the country and never returned; just weeks later, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile after more than 15 years, declaring that he would appoint the government.

Thus culminated a year of unrest, protest, and violence throughout Iran. And on April 1, 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran was established.

In this special episode of the Brookings Cafeteria podcast, five experts look back

on the Iranian Revolution 40 years later, From the revolutionary regime's early goals, to the US embassy hostage crisis, to Iran's support of extremist groups in the region, to contemporary US-Iranian relations, these experts reflect on what happened and how those events continue to reverberate in regional and global politics today.

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And now, the Iranian Revolution, 40 years later.

We'll start with context: what exactly was the revolution and what transpired in the tumultuous year before the Shah left and the Ayatollah returned.

MALONEY: I'm Suzanne Maloney, I'm the deputy director of the Foreign Policy Program here at Brookings.

The revolution began in late 1977 with increasing activism on the part of Iranian dissidents and oppositionists pressing for greater political freedom and greater opportunity to criticize the sitting monarch, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

The revolutionary mobilization really got under way in early 1978 with the publication of a newspaper article criticizing Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who was a senior religious figure who had been exiled from Iran 15 years earlier as a result of his protests against the Shah's modernization programs. That article led to demonstrations by seminary students. The pushback by the security forces produced violence and the deaths of several protesters, which incited a cycle of protests at religious mourning ceremonies every 40 days. And with further violence this cycle perpetuated itself well

into the spring of 1978. This of course came at a time when Iran was the foremost ally of the United States in the Middle East, an important security partner and an important partner for managing the energy sector at a time where oil prices had created severe economic strains within the United States.

There was very little appreciation during the early period of the revolution that this was in fact going to crescendo in the way that it would. There was a sort of sense that the Shah is a very reliable ally to the United States, could withstand pressure, could withstand some degree of popular dissent. In fact, the Carter administration with a focus on human rights in, at times, encouraged the monarchy in Iran to attempt to liberalize and saw the expression of public frustration with the Shah as potentially a net positive.

DEWS: The unrest continued throughout 1978. Maloney explains what happened leading up to the fateful moment of the Shah's departure

MALONEY: But of course over time the protests and the violence that ensued in their wake produced a burgeoning crisis in Iran. The Shah a little known to the world at the time was suffering from a terminal disease. He was very ill with cancer at the time. And he became increasingly incapacitated over the course of this mounting threat to his rule.

There were increasing numbers of protests over the course of the summer culminating in August with the deaths of hundreds of Iranians in an arson fire at a cinema in southern Iran. This then erupted and turned what had been a relatively slow boil in Iran into a much more intense and much more wider scale opposition movement. Throughout this period, Ayatollah Khomeini remained outside of Iran coordinating some of the revolutionary mobilization through representatives helping to press for an anti-

accommodationist position on the part of the rest of the opposition. At times when the shah reached out to the opposition trying to create some degree of calm, Khomeini pressed only for the change of the government.

And so as a result of this the numbers grew to protests that were larger than any that had been experienced in Iran or anywhere else in the region ever before in history, culminating in millions by December of 1978.

The Shah left Iran in January 1979. Khomeini returned and any facade of the monarchy collapsed in its wake. Over the course of the ensuing months Iranians voted for the Islamic Republic. The government began to coalesce around the Islamist faction of the opposition and Iran moved from a reliable American ally to an implacable adversary, one that has remained very much a determined foe of the United States until this time 40 years later.

DEWS: Here's Brookings expert Bruce Riedel, who was well-positioned in late 1978 to watch the crisis in Iran unfold.

RIEDEL: I'm Bruce Riedel, I'm director of the Intelligence Project at the Brookings Institution and author of "Kings and Presidents: the United States and Saudi Arabia Since FDR."

I had just started at the Central Intelligence Agency as an analyst working on the Middle East and in November of 1978 I was suddenly reassigned from what I had been working on to work on the Iran desk to become part of a new Iran Task Force. The former analysts on the desks were removed. They weren't shot. I'm happy to say we don't do that in the CIA, but a new team was brought in because frankly we hadn't predicted the revolution was coming and it was felt that new blood was required and I

had worked on Iran a lot in graduate school at Harvard so I had some expertise on what I was doing.

I think the real critical moment is when Ayatollah Khomeini returns to Iran in 1979 and then a few weeks later, maybe not even weeks, the imperial regime collapses literally almost overnight. It's on a weekend. These things always happen on a weekend. And I remember having to call my boss who was on taking the weekend off and say it's really looking serious, sir. I think you need to get in here right away. And he said, “You sure about that?” I said yes, the end of the Shah is here, a revolution is about to take over in Iran.

DEWS: Riedel added that he and his colleagues worked on the Iran Task Force nonstop over the next year to support the director of Central Intelligence and the first customer, the President of the United States.

Brookings scholar Elaine Kamarck also offers her account of what she was doing professionally as the revolution unfolded in early 1979 and how the revolution was perceived through the lens of US politics.

KAMARCK: I'm Elaine Kamarck, I'm a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and the author of “Why Presidents Fail and How They Can Succeed Again.”

When the Shah fell I was working at the Democratic National Committee, and there was frankly very little impact on American politics at all. In fact what I remember from that period of time is the Jules Feiffer cartoon where he has Shiites and Sunnis kind of lined up. And the gist of the cartoon is, who knows the difference? Right?

Americans, this was the first time they'd ever probably heard the term Shiites,

and the sort of differences here, what they meant to the region, were really absolutely mysterious to Americans, and none of them really thought about it until, of course 1979, November, when the Iranian students took 66 Americans hostage in the U.S. embassy.

And then this whole thing burst into the public's consciousness. If you'll remember, people were tying yellow ribbons around trees. There were songs, there was a burst of patriotism. These people were seen as evil, and also really kind of mysterious. So, that was the first time I think the public even realized that there was a country named Iran, that it had a revolution, et cetera.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: As Suzanne Maloney explained earlier, the unrest that led to the fall of the Pahlavi rule in Iran started in late 1977 and continued throughout 1978. But how did these tumultuous events change the way Iran was seen around the world, especially in America?

In her 2013 Brookings Essay, Maloney described a country in the 1960s and 70s where, quote,

> “millions of Iranians achieved a middle-class existence. The country became an international hotspot: Western bankers jostled for Iranian petrodollars; Harvard Business School opened a campus; tourists from around the world flocked to see the ruins of ancient Persia; diplomats clamored for a Tehran posting.”
>
> Unquote.
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> But, Maloney wrote, “Iranian society was in flux, and pockets of opposition were developing.” Here she is again, on the unexpected transformation of a country known to many westerners.

MALONEY: This is an event that shattered the preconceptions around modernization.

When Americans looked at the world, they expected a country like Iran where tens of thousands of Americans lived and traveled on a regular basis, a country that was beginning through the luck of oil revenues to jump the growth curve from a largely agrarian country to one that was far more modern and enmeshed in the international economy. That this would be a country that would inevitably embrace Westernization. And that appeared to be the case throughout the 1970s in Iran. And so to see millions of people come to the streets not simply to oppose their sitting monarch but in fact to embrace fervently an ascetic cleric who had no experience in governance and who advocated a very hazy idea of rule by the clerics, rule by the Islamic clergy, as an alternative to either secular government or some other form of rule that was more familiar to the Western world.

DEWS: Here's our fourth expert, with his take on that transition from monarchy to Islamic republic:

BYMAN: My name is Dan Byman. I'm a senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings and I'm also a professor in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

In the 1970s Iran is one of the most important regional allies of the United States in the world.

The Shah has made it seemingly a very prosperous, successful country. It's right on the border of the Soviet Union, and it's in a critical region. So the United States is considering it one of its pillars in the Middle East even as the United States itself is

trying to limit its own involvement.

So the collapse of Iran into revolution initially is not seen as a disaster that's going to last for decades. The hope is that this is a country that can be rescued from its own revolution, that the United States might be able to work with a successor regime to continue it as an anti-communist ally.

And in the first few years of the revolution that hope is alive a little. But the ideological fervor in the Iranian regime eventually drives it away because they're supporting revolution around the world, because of the hostage crisis in particular, because of constant anti-American rhetoric, Iran is increasingly seen as an enemy.

Now what's remarkable is the Iranians at the same time are repressing the Communist Party in Iran and are also very anti-Soviet. So at almost the height of the Cold War they've managed to alienate both superpowers which almost no other country managed to do during this period.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: In December 1978, millions of Iranians marched throughout the country to demand the Shah step down and Ayatollah Khomeini return. Just days before the Shah and his family left Iran for Egypt on January 16, he appointed a new prime minister, but the Ayatollah rejected any compromise and quickly appointed his own government. When the Shah’s government collapsed, the deposed monarch was by then in Morocco, and the Ayatollah had made a triumphal return from exile and begun consolidating his rule.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1979, the Ayatollah deployed his influence to undermine the transitional government, establishing the Islamic Revolution Guard

Corps and pushing for a new constitution that enshrined clerical rule. Meanwhile, with his health worsening, the Shah sought to come to America for treatment.

Here's Suzanne Maloney again on the outlook of the Ayatollah and his supporters as they cemented their power throughout the country, and why the Revolution quickly assumed an anti-American cast

MALONEY: The group that came to power in Iran in the aftermath of the revolution was united by very little other than their opposition to the Shah. The post-revolutionary coalition, of course, was led by the charismatic figure of Ayatollah Khomeini, but it incorporated a wide range of political philosophies including a large component of groups and individuals whose worldviews were shaped by anti-imperialism and the Marxist ideologies that were in fact quite prevalent during the time.

As a result, the new worldview of the leadership of the Islamic republic in its earliest days was implacably anti-American. It was determined to oppose what it perceived as backward and Western-dominated governments along its borders. And so sought through ways both explicit and implicit to cultivate revolutionary mobilization across the region to inspire and, in fact, to provoke opposition to the pro-western monarchies in the Gulf. To make common cause with militants in Lebanon, in the Palestinian territories, and elsewhere across the region. And to generally promote destabilization of its neighbors. And this is of course a policy that has evolved over time but in general Iran and the Islamic Republic, the post-revolutionary government of Iran, has found itself at odds with both the United States and U.S. allies across the region.

DEWS: Maloney explains further why the leadership was so implacably anti-American from the start.

MALONEY: Well, it was one of the few elements of the ideology across disparate elements of the post-revolutionary coalition that was a common thread. America had only begun to play a significant role in Iran beginning in the 1950s with the U.S. role in helping to facilitate a coup that ousted Iran's prime minister, a nationalist and popular prime minister who had in fact been responsible for trying to nationalize Iran's oil industry.

From then on, the U.S. took a larger and larger role and Iran. More prominent in its support for the Shah, more direct in terms of its presence on the ground in a way that caused many Iranians to resent the United States.

This combined with some of the kind of anti-imperialist rhetoric of the time led those who were opposing the Shah to perceive that somehow the United States was attempting to keep him on the throne. There were many, for many months in the aftermath of his departure who anticipated in fact that Washington when engineer some kind of a coup just as of course elements of the U.S. government had done in 1953 to return the Shah to the throne. And so this sense of paranoia, this sense of conviction in fact that the United States would do everything to remove the Islamic Republic led to a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy where Iranian policies that were designed to alienate the United States provoked, of course, counter responses from Washington. And the best example of that of course is the seizure of the US embassy in November of 1979 in the aftermath of contacts between some elements of the new government in Iran and U.S. officials, and the admission of the Shah to the United States for medical treatment.

There was again a growing concern that the United States would somehow try to remove the Islamic Republic, and the seizure of the embassy was used by the more

radical factions of the revolutionary leadership to gain the upper hand to oust moderates and to thoroughly end the U.S. relationship with Iran.

DEWS: You'll hear more about the US embassy takeover and hostage crisis in a minute, but first, Dan Byman describes some of the Revolution's initial impacts on the region and how some governments, particularly Saudi Arabia, reacted

BYMAN: So, after the 1979 revolution, Iran looked around the region and saw regimes that it viewed as illegitimate, it saw them as weak, and they believed that what they did in Iran—mass protest, unrest, demonstrations, violence—that could succeed in other countries. And that could be Iraq, that could be Saudi Arabia. And so you had local groups there that were inspired by Iran in some cases aided by Iran starting to take on their government.

But when they're doing this their governments understandably are incredibly alarmed and they see Iran as a threat both in the immediate sense that it's supporting revolution but also Iran is attacking their legitimacy. So the Iranians declared that the Saudis are practicing American Islam. Right? So it's really a shot directly across their bow saying that they're not adhering to a fundamental principle in the kingdom that they are not a true Islamic state.

So this dynamic becomes incredibly aggressive and nasty with the Iranians supporting more and more violent group, and at times this goes directly to terrorism. They support assassination attempt against the Emir of Kuwait. They're supporting revolutionary groups in Iraq.

There there's demonstrations in Saudi Arabia, but in response the Saudis and other countries, but especially the Saudis, begin to support Sunni movements around

the world—they begin to proselytize. They support mosques, they support schools. And a lot of this is traditional religious education. But a lot of what we've seen in the last 15, 20 years where we've seen an array of radical causes, they used textbooks from Saudi Arabia that are drawing on mosques that are funded by Saudi Arabia, a lot of that has its seeds in the response to the Iranian revolution.

DEWS: Bruce Riedel expands on Saudi Arabia's initial response to the Revolution.

RIEDEL: Saudi Arabia saw the revolution as its own worst nightmare coming true. The Saudis had no affection for the Shah. They found the Shah to be arrogant. They don't like Persians in general and the Shah was a very arrogant Persian who always looked down upon them as stupid Bedouins. But they knew that the Shah was their partner in maintaining stability in the region in the face of more radical ideologies both from Islamists but also back in those days from the Soviets and communism. And they not only saw the rapid fall of the Shah as possibly something that could happen to them but they were even more worried that the Americans didn't seem to be able to do anything to stop it. After all they decided that they were going to count on America to be their security blanket and the Americans seemed unable to, A, prevent the Shah from falling and then, B, even rescue their own diplomats once they had been taken hostage by the Iranians. So it is a very, very scary period for the Saudis.

DEWS: And Iraq, too, on Iran's western border saw both threat and opportunity in the events of 1979 and thereafter, as both Dan Byman and Bruce Riedel explain.

BYMAN: When the Iranian revolution happens, Saddam Hussein looks over the border and sees both a threat and an opportunity. So the threat is that he's in a country

with a majority Shia population. That Shia population is hostile to his rule. He's a secular Sunni Arab who has been incredibly harsh and repressive. And the Iranians are openly calling for revolt and revolution in Iraq itself. Ayatollah Khomeini, the new very charismatic leader of Iran, he had studied in Iraq and had a lot of connections with clerical leaders there. So tremendous concern about the potential for unrest.

But at the same time the new government is in disarray. They've shot a lot of their military commanders. And so there's a real sense that this is an opportunity for Iraq to expand. There is a disputed border. There is oil rich areas right near the border. And the Iraqi government is hoping to seize those both for defensive reasons, to stop revolution to kind of push Iran back, but also as an offensive power trying to take advantage of a foe that at least temporarily is weak.

RIEDEL: The United States was surprised by the Iranian revolution, no doubt about that. But the people were the most surprised were the Iraqis and they live next door to Iran and they had harbored Ayatollah Khomeini for a dozen years. He operated out of Iraqi territory sending cassettes into Iran to foment the revolution. And then in October 1978, the Iraqis threw him out of the country. So they helped set in train the revolution and then at the moment of truth they alienated the guy who was going to run the revolution. So if you want to talk about someone who really got the intelligence wrong it's Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi government.

And of course the Saudis also supported the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 that set in train the worst conventional war in our lifetime. The only conventional war since World War II that even comes close to it is Korea in the 1950s. The Iran-Iraq war was a huge debacle that led to a quarter million dead, a half million seriously

wounded, and left Iraq very much poised to start the next war—the invasion of Kuwait.

DEWS: Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed that “We shall export our revolution to the whole world.”

He viewed himself as more than just the leader of Shia Muslims, but of all Muslims.

Suzanne Maloney and Dan Byman explain this expansive mindset.

MALONEY: The post-revolutionary leadership in Iran absolutely believed that in fact this was not a revolution in one country, to borrow a phrase from the Soviet experience, that this was in fact an Islamic revolution which would span the entire Umma, the entire Muslim world. They did not conceive of it in sectarian terms, despite the fact that of course Iran is a primarily Shia country, and over time has become in many ways alienated from much of the Sunni world as a result of this sense of sectarian policy.

Iranian leaders were convinced, in fact, that there would be sympathetic uprisings across the Middle East and across other countries in the Islamic world, throwing off the yoke of Western imperialism and embracing a new form of government through which Islamic principles and Islamic leadership would be paramount.

BYMAN: The clerical regime that takes power in 1979 is very focused on exporting its revolution.

And there there's a moment when we have economic problems in Iran, the economy is tanking due to a collapse in investment due to the migration of a lot of skilled workers. And Ayatollah Khomeini very famously says that the Iranian revolution was not about the price of watermelons. So there's economic cost, so be it, from his

point of view that people had risen in the streets because they wanted an Islamic government.

And his view was this is not an Iranian issue. This is a Muslim issue. And Islam doesn't stop at borders. So he looked around the Muslim world and believe that Iran was the first domino but shouldn't be the last. So a lot of his effort is trying to inspire others to revolt. And he has a rather naive view that this is going to be easy. That a few demonstrations, some unrest, and we'll start to see these very brittle, fragile regimes fall just as the Shah fell.

But that doesn't happen. But meanwhile, in Iran the taking on the world, the war with Iraq, the alienation of the United States, all this creates tremendous economic chaos. But for the first few years of the regime they are much more focused on ideological purity than economic success.

DEWS: Our fifth expert in this episode is Jeff Feltman, the John C. Whitehead Visiting Fellow in International Diplomacy at Brookings, and he explains the limits of the revolution’s appeal from his deep insight and experience about the one arena in which Iran, to some extent, did successfully export its revolution: Lebanon

FELTMAN: My name is Jeff Feltman and I'm a visiting fellow in the foreign policy pillar at the Brookings Institution. Previously for nearly six years I was the U.N. Undersecretary General for Political Affairs. Prior to that I was a U.S. foreign service officer including being Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs from 2009 to 2012 and I was U.S. ambassador to Lebanon from 2004 to 2008.

Iran was a revolutionary regime. And Iran’s appeal in its immediate neighborhood was somewhat limited. It was limited in Iraq because of Saddam Hussein's control of the

population even though Iraq was a Shia majority population. Certainly Saudi Arabia and Bahrain with their significant Shia populations had significant control that Iran was not going to be able to really exploit any grievances that the Shia might have had in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia. And because of this the Shia flavor of Iran's Islamic revolution, there's only so far they could go in the Sunni world.

The Sunnis looked at them as heretics.

So it, Lebanon, must have looked as though it had a spotlight on it when the Iranian leaders looked across the region to see where they could show that their revolution, their ideology, their methods could not only work in Iran, but they could work more universally. Iran was looking for places where they could assert the type of narrative that they were the rising power of Islam, that they were the center of gravity in Islam and the fact that the Shia had been so abused by their own government, by their own leaders, and by the Israelis that was the opportunity.

DEWS: More on Lebanon and Israel in a moment, but first, Bruce Riedel also talks about how the Iranian Revolution helped to intensify the sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shias.

Riedel, in fact, describes a long trajectory of Sunni-Shia rivalry that he says was always there, and how it plays out today across the Middle East in places like Iraq and Yemen.

RIEDEL: And they made it much, much more sectarian. The Saudis supported Sunni extremism and the Iranians supported Shia extremism. There was very little room for them to cooperate with each other and the firestorm of sectarianism that we see engulfing the Middle East today really owes its origins back to this period.

Sunnis and Shia have always been historical rivals. But what we're seeing in our time is an intensification of that into violence that we really haven't seen in the 20th century and unfortunately it's getting worse and worse.

This Sunni Shia rivalry now burns across the Middle East. You have it in Iraq, we've had it in Iraq for some time, Sunni-Shia violence against each other. We have it in Syria only here the there are no Shias, there are Alawis which are an obscure form of Islam that Sunnis regard as Shias. And perhaps worse you have it in Yemen where about half the Yemeni population are Shias, again they're not the same kind of Shias as in Iran. We don't need to go into the intricacies of the differences, but they do see themselves as Shias, and the Saudis are supporting the Sunnis. The Iranians are supporting the Shias. And we've ended up with the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our time. Literally millions of Yemenis malnourished, hundreds of thousands of them poised on the edge of starvation. Now, sectarian differences aren't the only reason there is a civil war there but they are one of the most important reasons and they're one of the reasons that pushes this conflict to its kind of nightmarish quality.

DEWS: The Sunni-Shia rivalry, and other factors, served to blunt Tehran's ability to export its revolution worldwide, much less regionally. But as Jeff Feltman, U.S. ambassador to Beirut from 2004 to 2008, as mentioned earlier, Lebanon appeared to be a fertile spot for Iran to gain a foothold. Feltman explains how the disaffected and politically weak Shia population of Lebanon was a ripe target for Tehran. Feltman reminds us that the Iranian revolution occurred in the midst of a civil war that had been wracking Lebanon off and on since 1975.

FELTMAN: The Lebanese Civil War provided an opportunity for Iran to show that

its own revolution, its own Shia Islamic fervor, could be exported. Its revolutionary Islam could be exported further.

In 1982, the Israelis invaded Lebanon, not for the for the first time, but for significant time. With the Israeli invasion thousands of residents, thousands of farmers, peasants in southern Lebanon fled north northward. The vast majority of these were Lebanese Shia. The Lebanese Shia had been a despised disenfranchised part of Lebanese society.

The Maronite Christian elite, the Sunni elite tended to look down their noses at the Shia. And then you have the Shia who are being displaced by the by the Israelis. The Shia themselves had suffered during the time of the PLO's, the Palestine Liberation Organization's, basically occupation of southern Lebanon. The PLO was firing missiles trying to trying to attack Israel from southern Lebanon and that affected the freedom of movement of the Shia population. So the Shia were full of grievances by 1982. The Israelis. The previous problems from the Palestinians. The fact that their own government, their own elite, had basically ignored them and kept them in a sort of a feudal like serfdom. So they were ripe for exploitation.

The Iranians realized this. And the Iranians of course are Shia as well. So you start to see signs in the early 80s of the Iranians trying to build a constituency inside Lebanon for this sort of revolutionary Shia Islam. The rumors are that there were a thousand, 1,500 of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards who were doing training and getting financing to build a Shia movement inside Lebanon using the Shia majority areas of Lebanon such as southern Beirut, south Lebanon, and the northern Beqaa Valley, Hermel area.

And the world first notice of this with the suicide bombings. Things like the spring 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. The autumn 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks, 241 Marines killed. The Italians, the French were attacked. The U.S. Embassy annex, the temporary embassy, was attacked the following year.

This obviously caught the world's attention to what was happening, where revolutionary Iran was building a movement inside Lebanon that could show that this was not a Persian or Farsi-only phenomenon. That this could affect the Arab population as well, the Arab world as well. And it was sort of an anti-imperial, anti-occupation movement.

But what's important to realize is that it was the disenfranchisement, it was the feudal status of the Shia population in Lebanon, how much they had suffered, that opened the door to the Iranian money, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard influence. The type of services that Hezbollah was able to provide the local population, the Shia population, because the Shia had been despised by their own elite for decades.

DEWS: Feltman expands on the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s, a consequence partly of Iran’s post-revolution involvement in that country.

FELTMAN: What created Hezbollah was this was the status of the Shia population inside Lebanon prior to the involvement of Iran after the revolution. The fact that the Shia tended to be uneducated, tended to be at the bottom of the class structure in Lebanon, the fact that the Shia had no outlets for their own political aspirations.

Earlier there had been a very charismatic cleric who had Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, combinations as many as many the Shia do named Imam Musa al-Sadr. And Imam Musa al-Sadr was the first to really try to build a political movement for the Lebanese

Shia to assert their rights as equal partners in this Lebanese political and social system that has 17 recognized confessions, religious confessions in it.

Imam Musa al-Sadr started this movement. It became the Amal movement. The Amal movement still exists but it's moved into a much more secular movement. But it was the Israeli invasion in ‘82 along with the military deployment of the Americans, the French, et cetera, that I think inspired Iran to say, “hey, we can go in there and we can take this, we can take this over.”

The other thing is that Imam al-Sadr disappeared himself as charismatic leader, disappeared in Libya, presumably in Libya. It’s still unknown his fate. But there was a vacuum. There was a vacuum inside Lebanon of where the Shias role would be that Iran was able to help create the movement that evolved into Hezbollah. Hezbollah did not declare itself publicly until I think it was 1985 with sort of a manifesto in 1985. But the suicide bombings, the methods the Iranian money, the IRGC training, had started you know a few years earlier.

DEWS: Dan Byman illuminates how the rise of Hezbollah and intensified terrorist activity in the region began to shape Washington’s approach to Iran.

BYMAN: But for the United States the terrorism concern starts to shape the broader view of Iran. So there is occasional hope such as during Iran-Contra that the United States might be able to engineer an opening with Iran. But they’re constant backing of violent forces, so the Lebanese Hezbollah for example which does devastating terrorist attacks in Lebanon against U.S. diplomats and U.S. Marines. That sort of activity convinces many Americans that it's not just that around an enemy but that it's an enemy that can't be reasoned with, that it's violent, it's fanatical, and as a

result the United States is going to have to oppose it indefinitely. And this continues after the Cold War where you have this image you have this legacy of hostility and it's on both sides were both view the other with tremendous suspicion. And when the United States would try to reach out with an olive branch there was a strong sense that Iran wasn't interested.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: For many Americans in 1979, the Iranian Revolution was little noticed, much less understood, until November 4th. On that day, an organized group of Iranian students breached the gates of the US embassy in Tehran and occupied buildings in the embassy compound, and seized over 60 embassy personnel.

It was actually the second attempt by students to seize the US embassy, and came shortly after the Shah's entry into the United States for cancer treatment in late October and a meeting between senior White House officials and representatives of the provision government. Ayatollah Khomeini called it evidence of America's plotting.

How did the hostage-taking relate to the aims of the revolution, and what were the impacts on US-Iran relations then and now?

Here are Suzanne Maloney and Elaine Kamarck with their initial thoughts on the hostage crisis

MALONEY: I think the hostage crisis in many in the minds of many Americans is synonymous with the Iranian revolution itself. This sense that a government that had been such a longstanding and close American ally had suddenly morphed into one that threatened the very safety of our diplomatic representatives on the ground was produced a kind of cognitive dissonance among much of the American public and

certainly within the U.S. government, which had in fact been trying to maintain at least a low level relationship with the new government in Iran.

The seizure of the embassy by students who were not affiliated with the government but who appeared to have had some prior coordination or even encouragement from elements of Ayatollah Khomeini's inner circle provided a catalyst for Iran to move in a much more radical direction. But it also clarified for the U.S. government that this new regime in Iran was not going to be a country with which the United States could deal in the way that it would with other types of countries.

KAMARCK: Well, here were people in the U.S. government who warned President Carter that it was going to be a mistake to bring the Shah to the United States for medical treatment. But he did so anyway. And that was kind of a precipitating event in the minds of the Iranian students.

But the public as I said really had very little interest or knowledge of this until the hostages were taken. Now, once the hostages were taken this became an enormous, enormous, enormous issue. And President Carter tried to negotiate. But they were negotiating with a government that was kind of a very weak replacement of the Shah. And Khomeini was the person that the students were listening to. So the Carter administration negotiations went nowhere. And that's why in the spring he decided to mount a military rescue the of the hostages.

DEWS: In April 1980, President Carter authorized a mission to rescue the hostages, still held captive in the US embassy in Tehran. The complex plan involved elements from the US Navy, US Air Force, US Army Rangers, Delta Force, the CIA. A variety of aircraft, too, were to be employed, including helicopters, refueling aircraft,

transport planes, and gunships.

On April 25, 1980, at a staging site in the remote Iranian desert, Desert one, a helicopter collided with a tanker plane full of fuel. The resulting explosion killed 8 servicemen and injured 4 others. One Iranian civilian was also killed. The mission was scuttled, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who had opposed military action, resigned.

Elaine Kamarck expands on the domestic political fallout in the United States, particularly for then-President Jimmy Carter, of the crisis and especially of the failed rescue mission, operation Eagle Claw.

KAMARCK: It had enormous political consequences as you can imagine.

First of all, before even before the hostage crisis, Jimmy Carter was seen as a weak and feckless president. The economy was going extraordinarily badly. His approval ratings were in the toilet. And he drew a challenge from Senator Ted Kennedy, maybe the toughest nomination challenge any Democrat has had in many, many years, because Kennedy was kind of a lion of the Democratic Party.

So, things were not going well when the hostages were taken. So then in an effort to kind of get out of the diplomatic morass, the military launched Operation Eagle Claw. And, as we know, that was a disaster. And I can personally remember, I was at the Democratic National Committee. I was a bit player in the Carter administration's political team. And one of his more senior aides, Rick Hernandez, called me in the middle of the night and said, “we just lost the election.” This was in April of 1980. And I said, “What are you talking about?” And he described the helicopters crashing in the desert. And this, this, not only the failure of the hostage rescue mission, but the total

screw up of it. Right? With Americans dying. Planes crashing into each other in the desert. I mean the whole thing being basically one big mess.

And that happened at a very crucial time because voters were just tuning in.

Now the other thing to put in context here is that American voters had been enchanted with the story of the Israeli raid on Entebbe in 1976. This is one of the First Special Ops missions that burst into the public consciousness. In fact they made a movie out of it. OK? Television shows, movies, et cetera. And you had this stunning Israeli rescue mission of hostages that had been taken by Palestinians and landed at the airport in Uganda in Entebbe. And that was that was mega cool. All right? That was mega cool.

So on top of that being in the public consciousness the United States tries its own daring rescue mission and falls flat on its face. That was devastating. It was devastating to Carter. And I believe to this day that my friend Rick Hernandez was right. We lost the election that night. Carter lost the election that night.

DEWS: The Iranian students held their captives for 444 days, until January 20, 1981, when the hostage-takers released the final 52 hostages at the exact moment when Ronald Reagan was completing his inaugural address.

Kamarck remarks on the timing.

KAMARCK: There's no doubt that the Iranians timed it to be at the start of a new president. They were not going to reward Jimmy Carter, who had after all taken in the Shah. I mean that that was his original sin in their eyes. Taken in the Shah and then tried to do a military rescue mission. They just weren't going to reward him.

Obviously by the time Carter went down—and he went down rather

spectacularly, he lost every single state in the union I think with the exception of the District of Columbia. Maybe Massachusetts, I can't remember exactly, but by the time Carter lost that election they the Iranian students had played out their hand. You know, I mean they had held the hostages for a long, long time and it was time to let them go and they did all come home.

DEWS: The hostage-taking perhaps more than the Revolution itself had long-term and damaging effects on US-Iran relations that continue to this day.

Suzanne Maloney offers this perspective.

MALONEY: The seizure of the embassy also, I think, with the sort of fallout that it had for the Carter administration and the Carter presidency, left an enduring sense of frustration and impotence on the part of the U.S. government in trying to manage the challenges that emanated from Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini said after coming to power that America cannot do a damn thing. That’s a kind of slogan that's emblazoned in various forms of revolutionary propaganda even today in Iran. And I think that that sense of sudden powerlessness on the part of the United States government watching its diplomats and other personnel be paraded in the most humiliating fashion on TV, waiting out 444 days siege while these individuals were mistreated an in many ways kept under very difficult conditions.

It was a searing experience for all those who went through it.

It has lasting effects on the way that the U.S. conducts its embassies abroad and frames its foreign presence abroad. The hostage crisis also created an impetus on the part of the U.S. government to find new mechanisms for advancing U.S. interests in the region. Because it was clear that simply relying on longstanding allies was not going to

be sufficient to protect the United States, its personnel, or its interests in the region.

DEWS: Kamarck adds that the disastrous rescue mission not only essentially ended Carter's presidency, but it also had tremendous consequences for reform in the U.S. military. It should be noted that at the time of the attempted hostage rescue mission in 1980, there was not a unified Special Operations Command in the U.S. military to coordinate the various commands and agencies involved in special operations warfare. In fact, these elements of U.S. military power were, after the wind down of the Vietnam War, generally underfunded and mistrusted within the military establishment. The failure of Operation Eagle Claw at Desert One changed that.

KAMARCK: The failure of the Iranian hostage rescue was the straw that broke the camel's back when it came to military reform. Remember, this happened in 1980. Carter lost the election resoundingly to Ronald Reagan. And in 1985, the Senate began to look at a big military reform bill called Goldwater-Nichols. Now when the Senate began to look at that there was intense opposition within the military, particularly from the Navy. And even intense opposition from Reagan's Secretary of Defense.

But it was clear that the failure of Operation Eagle Claw, plus Vietnam, plus a bunch of other smaller failures—the disastrous invasion of Grenada which was just a mess—all contributed to a point in history where people said, it's time to do something with the United States military, we're the greatest country in the world and they are flopping everywhere on everything.

So remarkably after 40 years of trying in 1986 Congress passed the Goldwater-Nichols Act and Reagan signed it. And what's going on during that time politically is very interesting because Reagan and his national security adviser are letting it be known that

if Congress can actually pass this they will sign it, even though they're not out front on this. And of course Barry Goldwater and Sam Nunn were lions in the Senate when it came to military policy. Nobody could accuse either one of them, but especially Barry Goldwater of wanting to be soft on communism, or soft on the military, you know, this was this was a real Nixon going to China moment. And so the most important thing that happened as a result of that of this whole business in Iran was the passage of Goldwater-Nichols. And the second most important thing, and we've seen this now, has been the continual shift in the military away from more conventional warfare towards a special operations. And all you have to do to encompass that big stretch of times, decades, is look at the failure of Operation Eagle Claw and the success of finally getting Osama bin Laden.

And it's a night and day military.

(MUSIC)

DEWS: Forty years ago this January and February, the unrest in Iran that had roiled the country for over a year came to a boil when Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi left the country, and revolutionary cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile. In the ensuing months, the Ayatollah consolidated the rule of clerics, attempted to export the revolution, and allowed students to seize the US embassy and its staff.

What are the continuing and lasting effects of the Iranian Revolution today? Both from the U.S. domestic and foreign policy perspective, and for Iran itself?

Here's Elaine Kamarck with the Revolution's impacts on how Americans see Iran.

KAMARCK: Americans harbor deep wells of suspicion about the Islamic

countries in the Middle East. And I would say that by this time the effect of the Hostage taking may have worn off were it not for 9/11 and repeated terrorism that is linked to radical Islam. And so you can definitely say it started with the Iranian revolution.

And remember this is the Iranian Revolution also—and the hostage taking—introduced us to something that was kind of new. This was terror, for the sake of terror. As opposed to use asymmetric warfare and trying to get something in return. The students just wanted to take down the evil America. This was a kind of it's kind of different than trying to take hostages and getting something in return. And it grew into when we saw this of course in some of the terrorist attempts leading up to 9/11, violence for the sake of violence, as opposed to violence for the sake of a political objective. And that's been very hard for the U.S. government to deal with. And it's made Americans very suspicious of a whole class of people.

But the fact of the matter is that the country has, starting with the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis and going right up through 9/11, a lot of Americans see Islam and Muslims with great suspicion, and, of course, President Trump plays that up all the time, he basically equates Muslims with terrorism. President Bush to his credit who was in office in 9/11, remember that right after 9/11 President Bush to his credit went to a mosque. OK? So President Bush tried to push against this stereotyping of Islam. And most presidents have tried to do that. Then of course Trump actually goes right into it and engages and enhances the stereotyping.

DEWS: Dan Byman explains how Iran’s foreign policy, especially its support of what he calls violent substate groups, has been met by U.S. diplomatic and military policy makers.

BYMAN: Iran has over the last 40 years been cemented as one of the bogeyman of U.S. foreign policy, and this is true of both Republican and Democratic administrations. So, the image of Iran after the hostage crisis of this fanatical revolutionary movement is still alive and well, even though in reality Iran's foreign policy has become less ideological. It's still very ruthless, and they still have used a lot of these violent substate groups that have killed Americans.

So, this isn't often considered in a terrorism context but Iran supported a number of local groups in Iraq that were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Americans.

And this sort of activity is something that has led to hostility towards Iran, not just among the American public but among a lot of military leaders or others who have had to deal with the day to day of U.S. policy in these countries under very trying conditions.

Iran is seen as strongly opposed to the United States and there is a sense among American leaders that negotiations are not likely to work. That these were tried under Clinton briefly, they were tried briefly under Bush and that Iran has pushed back. Now the Iranians probably have a very different view of things, but this is a rare area of bipartisan consensus in Washington, which is that there is a limit to how much you could work with Iran. And even President Obama, who did a successful nuclear deal, he couched it in the language of suspicion, that we don't trust the Iranians, and that the deal is designed to detect their cheating, not that it's designed to open up a new era of brotherhood.

And the Trump administration has decided that the deal isn't worthwhile because we can't trust Iran. They've simply said it's a bad actor and you don't do deals with bad actors.

DEWS: Suzanne Maloney connects the past to the present.

MALONEY: We hear Secretary Pompeo and others in the Trump administration appeal to Iran to become a normal nation. This is the language that the Trump administration has repeatedly used and I think that that's a kind of echo of this sense that emerged in November 1979 that Iran was a particularly unique and problematic actor, one whose leadership would undertake actions that were by any standard of normal diplomatic engagement a highly unusual and, in fact, irrational.

DEWS: And finally, forty years on, how has the Iranian Revolution continued to shape Tehran's foreign policy, in its relations with other states in the region, and with the United States?

Bruce Riedel comments on the revolution's endurance and its continued effects on Iran's neighbors

RIEDEL: The Islamic Republic of Iran has proven to be remarkably enduring and today's regime is very much the child or the grandchild of the revolution. When the revolution happened by the way, I think the preponderance judgment of experts in and outside of the government was this won't last. I mean, these people don't know how to run a country. How are a bunch of Ayatollahs actually going to run the country?

And I think one of the things we did at CIA was to say, "don't underestimate them. These people are a lot more clever than you think." And as we studied how they'd actually carried out the revolution working from abroad with cells inside, with cells outside not just in Iraq where Khomeini was, but with major cells in Germany, the intricacies and complexities underscored to me and others that these people really know what they're doing, and we turned out to be right.

The fact that they've survived so long, they have the upper hand and the rivalry with the Saudis. It's Iran that exercises more influence in Iraq than any other country. It's Iran that has basically saved Bashar Assad's regime in Syria. It's Iran and Hezbollah that run Lebanon. And it's Iran and its ally the Houthis there run most of North Yemen. If you were to judge this conflict on who's ahead and who's behind we're in the fourth quarter and the Iranians are way way way ahead.

DEWS: Here's Dan Byman again, on how Iran still influences politics in the region through its support of proxies and militias

BYMAN: One of the lasting impacts of the Iranian revolution is that it continues to use violent substate actors as part of its foreign policy. So, if you look around the world today in Iraq, and Syria, in Yemen, in Lebanon, you see Iran active but there are often active with groups below the state level they're working with militias, they are working with small groups, and there are at times sending their own paramilitary forces in at times working with by with or through the Lebanese Hezbollah. But they see this as an instrument of foreign policy and that's something that begins with the revolution.

But in the last 40 years the Iranians have gotten really good at this. So they have large bureaucracies that are designed to kind of train and fund these groups. They have interest groups in Iran that are committed to them. And Iran in general is a weak state. Its economy at best is a mid-level economy. It doesn't have much political support as a government. And militarily, it's conventional military is quite weak, but it does have the ability to influence politics in much of the region through its support of these groups.

DEWS: Jeff Feltman explains Hezbollah's continuing, and evolving, relationship with Tehran and their involvement in terrorist activities

FELTMAN: I would say that Hezbollah at the beginning was kind of a subsidiary of revolutionary Iran. Hezbollah today is more of a partner rather than a subsidiary. And there are several components. One is, we've seen examples, perhaps less so now, but we've seen examples where Hezbollah has essentially been the subcontractor for Iran in two aspects—one, doing the sorts of training, technical training, almost like Beltway bandit in the more lethal terrorists sense in training other militias, training Iraqi militias, during some of the worst of the of the Iraq bloodletting after the U.S. invasion. Training—improving the capabilities of Houthi militias in Yemen. There was a sort of a training element where they're sort of again the subcontractor for Iranian goals because they've got the capacity. We've also seen many allegations, lots of evidence of Iran carrying out terrorist actions outside of the Middle East. The Israeli embassy, the Jewish center in Argentina in the 90s, 2012 attack on a tourist bus carrying Israelis in Bulgaria. So there's an element of Hezbollah carrying out activities outside of the Middle East presumably at the Iranian request.

Tehran maintains a strong interest in Hezbollah even today, even Hezbollah has acquired its own financial resources, are no longer so dependent on Tehran subsidies as they once were. Because it allows Tehran to play a deep role in Arab politics and it allows them to maintain a front against Israel.

Ideologically, Hezbollah is the one example of successful export of the revolution that Tehran can point to, but it's also a manifestation of the Iranian Revolutionary obsession with Israel.

The 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel. Iran wasn't hurt, but thousands of rockets were fired into northern Israel. Another Lebanon-Israel a war would probably

result in greater pain against Israel. These are in Iran's advantage. You can show the validity of your anti-Israel theology ideology via Hezbollah without incurring much pain yourself for doing so.

The other part the other part that's worth noting is Syria. Hezbollah has acted in Syria as the protector of Bashar al-Assad and the combination of the IRGC trainers, Hezbollah fighters, and Hezbollah trainers, and Russian airpower, has turned the battle decidedly in Bashar al-Assad's favor. Bashar al-Assad's survival was a key interest of Tehran because of the whole nexus via Damascus to the Mediterranean and then to the front with Israel and Hezbollah was a central player in that survival of Bashar al-Assad.

DEWS: Here's Suzanne Maloney with a final word on Iran's contemporary perspective on its revolution and its role in the Middle East and the world.

MALONEY: From the Iranian perspective the 2011 uprisings in other parts of the Arab world were seen very much as an Islamist movement and an echo effect of the Iranian revolution. And even though in most cases those uprisings did not produce either Muslim governments or longstanding change in the fundamental pro-western authoritarian system that dominates much of the Arab world, the perception on the part of the Iranians is that there is a general trend in history that is leading toward some kind of triumph for Islam. That is, of course, the perception of the government. And yet at the same time Iranian leaders have always proved themselves pragmatic enough to work with non-Muslim powers and to manage their relations in such a way that they put Iranian interests ahead of the interests of the Islamic world.

The Iranian revolution remains, I think, sort of the primary frame through which its leadership understands the world. They see themselves as embattled on the

international stage. They believe that there is a conspiracy led by the United States, perpetuated and propagated by their neighbors and America's pro-Western allies in the region, to try to eliminate the Islamic Republic and reduce its influence. The ideology of the revolution and the state structure that was created in the aftermath of the revolution in many ways continues to dictate the way that Iran engages with the rest of the world. The experience of the revolution is still the kind of formative myth for a country most of whose population were too young to experience it themselves.

(MUSIC)

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To learn more about the Iranian Revolution 40 Years Later, visit brookings.edu to find blog posts, essays, and multimedia content featuring voices from across the Institution that examine various facets of the revolution and its continuing relevance today.

“The Brookings Cafeteria” podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, including audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. The producers are Chris McKenna and Brennan Hoban. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews, and Jessica Pavone and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this semester is

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.