early forty years after Mohammed Reza Shah surrendered the Peacock Throne and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini announced the creation of a new Islamic Republic in what had been the Kingdom of Iran, the 1978-1980 Islamic Revolution remains the focal point of much contemporary research on modern Iranian history and the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Occurring at the moment when the long-lasting alliance between Tehran and Washington was rent asunder amidst popular revolution, the collapse of the Shah’s government, and the rise of an Islamic regime led by Khomeini, the revolution has generated a surfeit of analyses in the subsequent decades, particularly as more documentary sources become available. Of significant interest to historians has been the question of how the Islamic Revolution, which political scientist Theda Skocpol noted was unique in the history of modern revolutionary movements,¹ was viewed and interpreted by the government of the United States, formerly the shah’s greatest supporter and chief patron.

Mattin Biglari takes a unique approach in analyzing American attitudes towards the Islamic Revolution as it unfolded from 1978 to 1980. Using recently de-classified U.S. documents from the Carter Presidential Library and the National Security Archive at George Washington University, as well as the abundant secondary literature, Biglari analyzes U.S. policy during the revolutionary period from the point of view of the evolving American attitude towards Shi’ism, the dominant form of Islam practiced in Iran. As events in Iran began to escalate in early 1978, “Shi’ism came to the fore as an incredibly revolutionary, political force,” one which the U.S. intelligence and policy-making community struggled to understand (579). Their interpretations of the Revolution came to be influenced by an understanding of Shi’ism as “a religion of resistance opposed to secular authority and rooted in a populist system of leadership” (580).

Biglari makes a number of observations. The first is that American analysts were initially ignorant of Shi’ism, and in the wake of events in Iran scrambled to come to grips with the finer points of Shi’ite political philosophy. Biglari argues that Islam had traditionally been viewed in Washington as a conservative, quiescent political force, one that could be usefully deployed to counter communism. Under the Shah, religious authorities had generally been politically inactive: For American analysts, this seemed to indicate Shi’ism’s nature as a religion that encouraged “subservience to temporal, secular authority,” and generally encouraged their pre-existing belief in the supremacy of modernization theory (581-583). Biglari notes that the moments when religious leaders entered the modern political sphere, most notably during the oil nationalization crisis of 1951-1953, they were ultimately susceptible to American influence and drawn towards conservative politics, or at least away from communism (581-582).

This assumption was shattered by the events of 1978, when Shi’ism took center stage amidst the cycle of demonstrations and mourning periods, punctuated by violent clashes between religious groups and the Shah’s troops. Using the writings of Ali Shariati, an Iranian sociologist and revolutionary thinker, American officials formed an interpretation of Shi’ism as a religion influenced by revolutionary ideology. Shi’ism was characterized as a religion of emotional outbursts, which took the form of anti-state demonstrations, while devotees exhibited strong tendencies towards demagogic leadership. Shi’ism became a “particularist” religious sect, distinguished from the majority Sunni sect by its tendency to promote revolutionary ideology and demagogic politics, as exemplified by the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini. (588-590)

This interpretation was built very quickly, over the course of 1978, as the situation in Iran became more chaotic and the Shah’s grip on power became more and more tenuous. By February 1979, after the Shah’s departure, even President Jimmy Carter had been converted to the belief “that Shi’ism was a religion of resistance” (590).

The second point Biglari makes ties together U.S. attitudes towards Khomeini and the politics of the Iranian crowd. He argues that the connections drawn between Shi’ism as a revolutionary religion and the figure of Khomeini convinced U.S. officials that he could not be allowed back into Iran, even as they came to admit in late 1978 that the Shah’s government was probably doomed. The Iranian crowd was regularly characterized as a “mob” motivated by Shi’ite populism. Hence the declaration of National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski that American policy “had become captive to the demonology of the Iranian mobs.” Biglari goes further, arguing that such a statement indicated not only U.S. aversion to the politics of the crowd, “but also hints at a more fundamental aversion to the value-system that had apparently facilitated the crowd’s empowerment” (595).

Khomeini was initially connected to this mob mentality, but as the crisis continued, American thinking became more flexible: just as the perception of Shi’ism changed from quietism to revolutionary populism, so too did the view of Khomeini morph gradually over time. Biglari points to Ambassador William H. Sullivan’s famous “Thinking the Unthinkable” telegram of November 1978, in which he argued that Khomeini could emerge as a “benevolent, ‘Gandhi-like’ figure,” who wielded influence above the raw populism of the Iranian crowd (599).

In dealing with the well-known attempts by the Carter Administration to make contact with Khomeini in Paris in January 1979 and subsequent moves to reach a rapprochement with the new government in Tehran after February 1979, Biglari tries to square the circle of U.S. policy. He argues that while attitudes among
U.S. policymakers towards Khomeini could change, they remained fundamentally opposed to what they perceived as “empowerment of the mob” through Shi’ite philosophy (599).

This ties to the third major point Biglari makes: that little American thinking or policy could be separated from the context of Cold-War politics. It was not religion that worried the Americans, though Biglari points out that Carter was uncomfortable with the mixing of faith and politics (591), but the deployment of religion as a force for chaos. “It was anarchy that most worried the government,” and U.S. officials assumed that an Islamic Government would provide Communism with the opportunity to seize control of Iran (596).

When it became clear that the Shah’s government was doomed, U.S. attention focused on the possibility of a new government led by a moderate such as like Mehdi Bazargan, Iran’s Prime Minister from February to November 1979, with Khomeini wielding unofficial authority: religion could function as “a common basis for a continued anti-Soviet alliance,” and this thinking soon inspired talk of an “arc of Islam” along the southern flank of the Soviet Union, running through much of the Third World (602-604). Resistance to Khomeini, notes Biglari, was still strong during the February-November 1979 period, before the Hostage Crisis began, and U.S. attention was focused on moderates like Bazargan (604).

Thus, American attitudes towards Shi’ism proved surprisingly flexible, as policymakers reacted to events in Iran and processed their feelings through the praxis of the continued anti-Communist campaign. Biglari’s conclusion alters his thesis somewhat, in that he notes that Shi’ism played a role in guiding American policy, but that the role changed and was usually secondary to Cold-War considerations.

Biglari’s analysis shows a deft understanding of Shi’ism, the historiography of U.S.-Iranian relations, and ideology within U.S. foreign relations. One gains the impression that State Department country specialists drafted memos according to the needs of the moment: Sullivan’s “Thinking the Unthinkable,” with the proposition of Khomeini as a “Gandhi-like” figure, shows a particular brand of flexible thinking that appears throughout the documents cited by Biglari. That Shi’ism could be regarded as a quietist philosophy preaching obedience to the state for years before the revolution, then suddenly be characterized as a revolutionary ideology, illustrates the flexibility of American analysis, which could change month to month, depending on circumstances.

In the characterization of Khomeini as a figure who could potentially rise above the chaos of Iran’s crowd politics, American analysts mirrored a form of interpretive elasticity exemplified in Ambassador Julius Holmes’ exuberant endorsement of the Shah’s White Revolution in early 1963: the tendency of some American foreign service officers to tell the higher-ups what, it was thought, they wished to hear.2

There are moments when Biglari appears to contradict himself. While initially pointing out President Carter’s unease over mixing religion and politics, Biglari later points to Carter’s belief in Islam and Christianity sharing unique “Abrahamic” traits as the basis for a new US-Iranian alliance after February 1979 (603). That religion in politics could deter Carter one year and encourage him the next seems somewhat counter-intuitive. Yet the changes Biglari points to are apparent in the documentary record: there does indeed appear to have been a tendency among Americans observing events in Iran to change their views.

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Biglari’s most salient point, that Cold War concerns trumped all other considerations, is a convincing approach, particularly in the context of Iran’s important pre-1979 role in U.S. containment policy. Beyond the threat of Islamic fundamentalism spreading beyond Iran (which, because of Shi’ism’s uniquely revolutionary nature, the U.S. thought unlikely), the most immediate impact of the Islamic Revolution was on the calculus of American strategic thinking. With his speech in January 1980 announcing a formal U.S. commitment to the security of the Persian Gulf, President Carter was bringing the U.S. in to fill the vacuum left by the Shah’s departure and the apparent threat to the region, made all the more real by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

With this argument in place, Biglari undercuts his analysis of Shi’ism by effectively arguing for its secondary significance to American thinking. Nevertheless, his focus on the ideology of American foreign policy represents an important contribution to the on-going study of the U.S.-Iranian relationship. It is one that demands to be expanded to cover other areas of the historiography: one hopes that a new analysis of “Pahlavism” first explored by James Bill and given additional insight by Roham Alvandi is next on the agenda.³

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