The Visual Narratives of the 1979 Iranian Revolution

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ABSTRACT: *This article analyzes a series of documentaries on the 1979 Iranian Revolution broadcast by Iran International and Manoto television channels. While covering the era of the Pahlavi dynasty, especially since the Second World War under Mohammad Reza Shah, the documentaries' main goal is to present the era as a progressive epoch interrupted by a disastrous revolution. At the same time, they explain the Islamic government as a deviation from the path of progress led by the Pahlavis. By doing so, they first dismiss the significant contribution of the Pahlavi state in creating the conditions for the revolution and then absolve it of the responsibility for its consequences, i.e., establishing an Islamic government. In contrast, this article highlights state politics as one of the main factors decisively shaping a historical process which culminated in the revolution. This makes the Pahlavi political order central to understand how the events in 1979 and afterwards unfolded*.

More than four decades of dictatorship have allowed the resurrection of a Pahlavi alternative, the dynasty which was overthrown by the 1979 popular revolution. The alternative is disguised in the form of certain historical narratives, which have been disseminated effectively and popularised by professional documentaries broadcast by Persian satellite television channels outside of Iran or factually baseless writings and clips in the same language through social media platforms. This article analyzes the documentaries and argues, in contrast to their aim to exonerate the Pahlavi state as a root cause of the revolution and the Islamic alternative to the monarchy, that the Pahlavi political order created the conditions for the revolution.

The narratives have been shaped and become ever more attractive because of widespread disillusionment with the revolution. They derive their forms and contents from the present conditions, going backward to identify the reasons for an "untimely" and disastrous revolution. The narratives vary according to their sources and the way they are presented. While some explicitly regard the revolution as sedition conducted by the superpowers and the

Iranian left, other, more factually based historical documentaries implicitly vindicate the Pahlavi state under Mohammad Reza Shah (ruled 1941-79). However, they have two main points in common. First, the "progressive" Pahlavi state effectively is excluded as a factor in the outbreak of the revolution. Despite some mistakes, the narratives go, the Shah had modernized Iran, women were free, and everybody had a good time. Second, the narratives lack historical accuracy and fall short of *historical awareness*, i.e., the historical understanding of an event by enlarging the inventory of causes. This approach has no place in the narratives, which rely on the fallacy of "after this therefore because of this" so that, nostalgically, the past becomes better and simpler.

This article discusses these narratives by analyzing the documentaries broadcast by two popular television channels. Methodologically, the article has used two primary sources for generating data. First, historical documentaries on the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which have been broadcast by two main Persian satellite television channels located outside Iran. Second, oral histories of Iran in the twentieth century, published by Harvard University's Iran Oral History Project. Iran International Television-IIT (Iran International n.d.), based in England, has been broadcasting two sets of documentaries: short oral history and *Miras-e Mandegar* (Enduring Legacy). The documentaries modify and redact hours of interviews conducted in Persian with "key figures of the Pahlavi era" by the Iran Harvard Oral History Project (1981). Also based in England, Manoto Television's long series entitled *Enqelab-e 57* (the 1979 Revolution) admirably and more meticulously than IIT's documentaries cover some aspects of the preceding decades of the revolution, followed by the revolutionary events, by using hours of films recorded during that process. In contrast to the more interesting *Enqelab-e 57*, Manoto's *Aryamehr* (light of the Aryans), a title used by Mohammad Reza Shah, a documentary of several long episodes, explicitly glorifies the life and the reign of the monarch by an interpretation of the facts which is influenced heavily by the present conditions. Through discourse analysis, this article shows how a Pahlavi alternative is popularised by the historical "documentaries" that these satellite television channels broadcast. The research also includes a critique of ahistorical views of the causes of the 1979 revolution, which are circulated rapidly through social media platforms, effectively shaping public perception.

The present conditions and the absence of a viable alternative to the Islamic Republic make the narratives presented by such documentaries very attractive. They seemingly aim to exonerate the Pahlavi state and the Shah for the disastrous outcome of the revolution, on the one hand, and condemn the left for its uncompromising stance, on the other. Moreover, the religious opposition to the Shah is represented as regressive without casting light on the reasons

for the ascendency of an Islamic alternative to the Pahlavi state. This article argues that in identifying the causes of the revolution and its undesirable outcome, the Pahlavi state must top the list. As historical works on the modern Middle East demonstrate, the authoritarian modernizations of the Middle Eastern secular-nationalist states created the conditions for an Islamic political alternative in a global context (Hefner 2010; Arjomand 2010). Iran proved to be no exception, where non-religious forces, including the left, were more harshly suppressed. Therefore, based on scholarly works on modern Iran, the article highlights many vital points to serve historical accuracy and awareness. Indeed, describing the revolution, in retrospect, as anachronistic, untimely, or a conspiracy only simplifies the root causes for one of the major events of the twentieth century. This simplification needs to be confronted by presenting a plethora of causes.

Historians of Iran have written extensively about the roots of the revolution (Abrahamian 1982; Arjomand 1988; Keddie 2003; Amanat 2017). These include a lopsided experience of modernity in general, the failure of the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, perpetual foreign interventions in the internal affairs of Iran, colonialism through the occupation and foreign possession of Iran's natural resources, the 1953 coup against a democratically elected and economically independence-seeking government, authoritarianism and, finally, a rapid (westernizing), uneven modernization in the decades preceding the revolution. As for the Islamic government, the convincing argument is the change in the religion-state equilibrium--which existed in some form or another since the emergence of the Safavids in 1501—but altered during the modernization of Iran, beginning in the 1920s under the first Pahlavi shah (Amanat 2017).

However, because of the prevalence of a highly simplified public perception of the revolution, it is doubtful that the above-mentioned scholarly works have shaped an in-depth understanding of the revolution. In contrast to the IIT's and Manoto's documentaries, which tend to strengthen a simplified perception of the revolution, there is a conspicuous absence of the presentation of more responsible historical works in Persian (or other Iranian languages) through the visual means of communication. And this is where historians should become conscious of the chasm between their academic environment and the society for which they write. This perhaps explains the contribution of this article to studies of modern Iran, i.e., while the literature is sufficiently critical of the Pahlavi state's authoritarian modernization, historians always need to pay attention to the extent which their ideas have shaped public perception, in this case, of Iran's pre-1979 history. Regarding visual studies of Iran and documentary making,

the study argues that they make historical studies of modern Iran their primary historical sources to shape a critical understanding of the past.

Two main causes for the revolution epitomize the simplified perception of the revolution put forward, implicitly or explicitly, by the narratives. First, that foreign powers played a significant role in instigating the revolution and eventually bringing an "unknown" man, i.e., Khomeini, to power. After all, the narrative goes, that is what they have always done in Iran. They had become infuriated by the fact that the Shah had increased the price of oil in the early 1970s and aimed to make Iran a competing, advanced country. Second, among the revolutionary forces, the left most of the time is blamed more harshly than the religious forces for its opposition to a supposedly secular state that had modernized Iran, and later for its belief in the new Islamic regime's anti-imperialism. Repudiating such statements should not be difficult. Ironically, according to their ambassadors' memoirs and other documents, the United States and Britain were not expecting any major political upheaval in Iran, with a demonstrable lack of imagination despite the evidence that change was on the way (Parsons 1984; Sullivan 1981; Emery 2013). On the other hand, the left's revolutionary culture only can be explained in relation to the state's politics in the context of state-led modernization. Expectedly, the narratives do not guide their viewers to explore these explanations.

Such narratives of the revolution are disseminated rapidly through social media platforms, whose users seem to be enchanted by the simplified explanations of the roots of the revolution. Thousands of short pieces, pamphlets and images are circulated and shared regularly, and they confirm the above narratives. What makes the narratives attractive is their simplicity and the subject they criticize, i.e., a regime which has appalling records regarding, for example, human rights, gender equality, ethnic oppression, and socioeconomic conditions.

In these circumstances, Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late Shah, has been promoted as a popular figure. Significantly, the Persian-speaking YouTube or Internet television channels have given considerable voice to this man whom they call "the Prince." Directly and indirectly, such outlets have shared the narratives and magnified the son in the eyes of the millions of Iranians who watch such programs (cf. Iran International 2018, 2019). English-speaking channels continue to interview the son with a description of the revolution in the background (I24NewsEnglish, 2020). The historiography behind the popular narrative attempts to re-legitimize the monarchy and present it as a political alternative. Historical narratives are not impartial. However, the documentaries' reconstruction of history amounts to the abuse of history.

Iran International's oral histories

IIT's short oral histories cover the life and work of an individual by selecting parts of the interview conducted by the Iran Harvard Oral History Project to create a historical documentary. The short history is introduced based on films and images recorded during the Pahlavi era. Consciously or unconsciously, the producers strengthen a progressive and benevolent image of the Pahlavi state either because of their uncritical approach to the modernizing policies of the Shah or by misrepresenting both the secular and religious oppositions during his reign. Undoubtedly, the life and works of such individuals as Alinaqi Alikhani, the minister of industry (Iran International 2022b), or Mohammad Taqi Barkhordar and Reza Niazmand, who helped industrialization and expanded the private sector, provide valuable perspectives to understand the era in question. Similarly, stories told by other political figures, military men, or writers such as Darioush Homayoun, Mohsen Mobasser, Fereydoun Jam, Reza Niazmand, Mahmoud Foroughi, Abulhassan Ebtehaj, and Gholamhossein Saᶜedi cast light on many interesting aspects of life in those decades which preceded the revolution. Nevertheless, Iran International's short oral histories or *Miras-e Mandegar* fall short of introducing a multi-dimensional narrative, wherein the reviewers are invited to deal with various agents of change, including the state and the Shah, as critically as possible. Such a multi-dimensional narrative can be found in the Project itself, whose hours of interviews with an individual are modified, hindering the conveyance of historical perspectives to viewers. The concluding remarks of most of the IIT's histories are evidence of that statement. The oral histories round off their mission by showing scenes from the revolution in which the narrator explains the religious leaders' appearance as an event which disrupted such key men's important missions to modernize Iran. Referring to Alikhani's significant contribution to creating the "golden age" of Iran in the 1960s, the short oral history paraphrases (which appears like a direct quotation) the minister of industry saying that "In his first tenure [1941-1953?], the Shah appeared more as a progressive and reformist leader. The courtiers did not have much influence [on him]. However, the life of this man and, subsequently, the destiny of the people of Iran seems like a Greek tragedy that should end in a very bad and vicious way" (Iran International 2022b). Interestingly, the full quotation in Iran Harvard Project does not end there:

> *In his first tenure [1941-1953?], the Shah appeared more as a progressive and reformist leader. The courtiers did not have much influence [on him]. Those around him did not dare to request or have unreasonable demands from the [state] apparatus. The Shah himself did not like such behaviours*

very much. The Coronation took place successfully among the elated population. And if the Shah had wanted and been willing to have understanding with his own people, to discard outdated and erroneous ideas of giving importance to foreigners [more than to individuals like us], he would have been able to create solid foundations for [both] the Iranian monarchy and an endurable government and gradually arrange for people to have more rights of participating in their own affairs. However, the life of this man and, subsequently, the destiny of the people of Iran seems like a Greek tragedy that should end very badly and viciously. Everything should be ruined. Instead of using all the opportunities which had arisen for him, instead of shaking the hands of millions of people who had stretched their hands to him, the Shah preferred to embrace the method of one-man rule, inappropriately interfering and supporting his entourage and the courtiers. Moreover, the Shah was cautious not to allow anyone to become important, and if he had the slightest feeling of danger [from such an individual], he would have arranged for his change of profession […] In this regard, Hoveyda [the Prime Minster] was not innocent […] His only goal was to remain in power and keep the Shah and his approved individuals happy (Lajevardi, 1984**).**

Alikhani (Lajevardi 1984) reiterates the Greek tragedy elsewhere in his Harvard interview, asserting that "*The Shah with his own hands orchestrated the ruination of all these victories and successes that he and others had worked to achieve at great costs. [He] ruined all that*" (emphasis added). IIT's modification of the Harvard Project does not seem to be quite unconscious; it is downright unprofessional. Furthermore, an uncritical approach to the monarchy and a careful modification of the Project can be seen in the prominent case of Abulhassan Ebtehaj, the head of the Plan Organization between 1954 and 1959. An IIT's *Miras-e Mandegar* documentary on Ebtehaj correctly depicts him as a scrupulous statesman who patiently followed rigorous planning, eventually infuriating his rivals who attempted to divert funds to their ministry or themselves (Iran International 2022a). During his tenure, he opposed the military spending of the Shah and spoke against corruption. He demanded that 60 to 80 percent of the state's revenue be spent on construction and reconstruction programs. As a result of his conflicting views with the state and the Shah, he resigned from the Organization. In later years, he was detained without trial for eight months on corruption

charges which were never proven. This story is followed by the documentaries asserting that while he regained his dignity, “the 1979 revolution did not allow him to return to economic management” (Iran International 2022a). The IIT's oral history documentaries are, at best, only implicitly critical of the treatment of such individuals by the Shah. However, the factor of the increasingly dictatorial rule of the Shah, which led to sidelining others in the country's economic management, does not enter the list of the reasons why the revolution “interrupted” the process of the modernization of Iran.

Manoto's Enqelab-e 57

This uncritical approach to the Pahlavi state is also the case with a series of documentaries called *Enqelab-e 57* [the 1979 Revolution], broadcast by *Manoto* satellite television. This is even though the episodes are beneficial to see how the revolutionary events unfolded in 1978 and 1979. Unlike Iran International's short documentaries of *Miras-e Mandegar* and *Tarikh-e Shafahi*, *Enqelab-e 57* admirably uses many films and images to cover patiently many events since the early 1960s and during the revolution. In the first episode of Serie 1, selected pre-revolutionary events implicitly are presented as the root causes of the revolution (Manoto 2015). The episode starts by highlighting the “stable period” after the unrest of the early 1960s, on the one hand, and the increase in the price of oil by the early 1970s by the Shah and OPEC, on the other. The latter event infuriated the superpowers—the price of oil increased from around $3 to $12 per barrel between October 1973 and March 1974, and Iran's revenue increased from $5 billion to $19 billion. According to the narrative, this plunged European countries into an unprecedented energy crisis. Furthermore, due to spiralling oil revenues and the rapid transformation of Iran, the Shah gained new confidence, believing he could make Iran one of the world's wealthiest countries in a short time. The energy crisis, which seems to have increased the pressure of the Western countries on Iran, is implicitly presented as a factor in understanding the genesis of the revolution. However, contradicting the above-implied assertion, the documentary also mentions the increasing respect of such countries for Iran in the following years. An example is the French President's meeting with the Shah in the latter's Ski holiday spot in Switzerland. Moreover, Britain (more than $1 billion), the International Monetary Fund ($700 million), and the World Bank ($350 million) received loans from Iran.

Simultaneously, according to the narrative, Iran was experiencing a rapid socioeconomic transformation. However, “based on research”, the narrative rightly asserts this is the case, that while Iran lacks suitable infrastructure, its economic capacity is limited and it suffers from weak transportation. At the same time, rapid economic change does not

correspond to concurrent political development in the region. Therefore, the narrative maintains that these events gradually led to economic decline, resurfacing by 1978. Meanwhile, the new American President, Jimmy Carter, already had stated that the United States would avoid arms sales to countries with poor human rights records. Subsequently, this increased the pressure of international human rights groups on the Iranian government and the Shah. On the other hand, a series of military developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which the Soviet Union played an important role, presented new threats for the Shah, whose military budget had reached $7 billion by 1978. Therefore, a combination of economic crisis, corruption, and international political pressures on the Shah forced him to implement a series of changes, the most notable of which was replacing his long-serving prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveida. Only in this politically highly charged situation did an article published by the daily *Ettelaat* on 17 January 1978 attack Ayatollah Khomeini and subsequently spark the revolution.

The episode also refers to both the religious opposition and the left in the years preceding the revolution. It broadcast the Shah's several interviews in which he regards the Communists and Marxists as the main enemies of the state, while he sees the clergy, except for some “isolated priests”, as loyal to the state. The Shah's short-sightedness is evident when we consider, as the episode goes, that the clergy, unlike other forces such as the left, were enjoying a vast social network and were becoming integrating channels for the 5 million peasants who had migrated to the cities because they failed to receive any land under the 1960s land reforms program (Hooglund, 1982). The clergy was inculcating subversive thoughts in the population through thousands of newly built mosques and religious centers and ten centers of cassette production, which distributed revolutionary speeches made by religious figures and activists, including Khomeini. However, the episode only mentions the lack of political freedom as a passing comment.

The background episode in question quite professionally and interestingly covers many years of change and transformation that Iran experienced during many decades preceding the revolution. Nevertheless, it remains descriptive and unanalytical most of the time. It creates the impression that the ambitious Shah, who seems not to have paid sufficient attention to Iran's limited development capacities, gradually faced mounting pressures from all sides. Therefore, one might conclude that a less ambitious or autocratic monarch in much better circumstances and without such opposition would have prevented a disastrous revolution. The subsequent episodes of the documentary on the revolutionary events follow the same approach. For example, while they blame— in retrospect partly rightly— the “left” for failing to see a religious dictatorship in the making, the narrative does not guide the viewer to see how anti-

imperialism had become the attribute of the revolution for the reasons which are only comprehensible in the international context of the anti-colonial struggles of post-Second World War. The episodes make a constant generalization about the Iranian left, which was diverse, and not all of them fell for the new regime's anti-imperialism.

Therefore, such treatments of the events serve the acquittal of the Pahlavi state and the Shah for the consequences of the revolution, i.e., a brutal religious dictatorship. This pro-Pahlavi stance also resurfaces when the episodes cover the revolutionary events in the peripheral regions such as Khuzestan, Kurdistan, and Turkman Sahra. Each of the ethnic movements is treated as a "crisis" for the provisional government led by the liberals, using the familiar vocabulary of discourses of power. Shaped in and inherited from the Pahlavi era, such discourses always have depicted the ethnic movements for cultural and political rights as attempts to disintegrate Iran or *tajzieh talabi*. Although the sources for the events in such regions, e.g., Kurdistan, during the revolution are abundant, the coverage is quite insufficient, inevitably biased, and symbolically violent because of using such a vocabulary (see Cabi 2020).

Meanwhile, it is crucial to note the background episode's non-analytical approach for two reasons. First, it effectively hinders the identification of the root causes of the revolution. Shaped implicitly by highlighting certain events, the narrative leaves the viewers speculating about the significance of the events for the outbreak of the revolution. It remains highly uncritical of the politics of the Pahlavi state and its authoritarian modernization between the 1950s and 1970s; factors which occupy a crucial place in the modern histories of Iran. Furthermore, several significant political and socioeconomic developments of the 1960s and 1970s are mentioned to confirm the progressive image of the country, implicitly presenting them as initiated by the state and the Shah. However, the rights of women to vote and the expansion of the women's movement and their organizations in Iran, covered by the background episode, were the outcomes of many years of social and political endeavors on behalf of many individuals and movements (Afkhami 2003; Firouz 1360 [1981]; Nashat 1983; Iran 1994). The White Revolution's principles, too, e.g., the Literacy Corps, were not new but had roots in past movements. Besides, the expansion of the private sector, exemplified by the emergence of industrial centers, had the mark of many industrialists. *Enqelab-e 57* contrasts these developments with the regressive religious opposition to modernity, which culminated in the Khordad Uprising of the early 1960s under the leadership of Khomeini. As an agent of change, the state and the Shah played a significant role in all of these. However, this needs to be understood in conjunction with such developments.

Second, the background episode's descriptive approach leads to contradictory assertions. For example, while the energy crisis of the early 1970s in European countries is believed to have forced the superpowers and the oil cartels to regroup in the face of oil becoming a political weapon, the documentary, seemingly accidentally, rules out that event as a cause of the revolution by stating that the Western countries' respect for the Shah increased as a result of the Shah's enhanced position among the OPEC countries. Moreover, highlighting other events, such as the oppositional activities of the Iranian students abroad, which was a routine political activity, and a brief account of the urban guerrilla warfare in the 1970s are not very illuminating either. The regime effectively had suppressed the urban armed struggle by the middle of the 1970s, which ruled it out as a significant cause of the revolution (Rahnema 2021). On the other hand, there is no evidence that the superpowers worked to undermine or replace the Pahlavi state either (see below). By 1978, no one did or could predict that a revolution was around the corner. The economic decline and corruption could spark political unrest but not political change on that scale. Therefore, a combination of factors led Iran to a situation in which a seemingly trivial article sparked waves of demonstrations. For this, not merely the extraneous factors or internal opposition, but the state itself was greatly responsible. And this is what *Manoto*'s documentaries avoid underlining by describing the selected events. It avoids many other events, such as the formation of the secret police, SAVAK; the 1953; coup; the expansion of the prison system and introduction of brutal methods of torture and forced confessions, the ideological radicalization of the state, and the Cold War (Abrahamian 2015, 1999). Interestingly, the documentaries do not engage with the coup of 1953, seemingly because the event presents strong evidence against the notion of the Pahlavi state as a "progressive" modernizing force. As Abrahamian (Abrahamian 2015, 176) rightly explains, the coup reinstated but also delegitimized the Shah. After all, Khomeini invariably referred to the Shah as "Shah-e Amrikai" (The American Shah). In fact, if any factor "interrupted" Iran's evolution, it was the 1953 CIA coup, by several orders of magnitude, which went against, to borrow from Mirsepassi (Mirsepassi 2011), a democratic modernity pursued by various movements and individuals as an alternative to authoritarian modernity. Indeed, as historians of Iran have shown, the factor of state politics tops the list of the causes of the revolution. And this is what such broadcasters attempt to avoid, i.e., placing the state at the center of their historical narratives.

Roots and Consequences of the Revolution

Although inspired by the consequences of the revolution, most scholarly works do not seek merely to redeem the Pahlavi state or to find the culprits who did not seem to have appreciated change and transformation. Historians of revolutions engage with the long-, medium- and short-term factors in a historical process to present a more comprehensive analysis of revolutions (Abrahamian 1982; Keddie 2003; Martin 1989; Dabashi 2006; Ansari 2007); they seek to highlight the importance of, and the interaction among, the political, social, economic, and cultural causes of a revolution. This approach cannot be compromised because of the undesirable consequences of a revolution. In fact, consequences are inextricable parts of a historical process – and make sense because of it – a context in which historians ought to explain phenomena. As Richard Evans argues, "historical explanation is not just about finding causes for discrete events like a car crash or world wars. Historians are just interested in what events or processes decide, what they mean, in what causes them. Consequences are often more important than causes" (Evans 1997, 135). This is because ""Why?" is far from being the only question historians ask. Categorizing past societies or political systems or structures of belief is no less legitimate than inquiring into the causes of past events" (Evans 1997, 135).

Therefore, there is a strong link between the causes and the consequences of, in this case, a revolution. This is the case with the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions and many other significant upheavals or ruptures in history (McMeekin 2017; Service 2009; Figes 1996; Hobsbawm 1962; Smith 2017; Skocpol Jan. - Mar., 1979; Evans 2003). From this perspective, the Iranian Revolution and the ascendency of religious radicalism are parts of a longer historical process. They should not be regarded as an "interruption" or "deviation" from the course of "progress" represented by the Pahlavi state. It is this approach which must shape the foundations of historical documentaries and visual studies of modern Iran.

Despite the interactions of many factors, this article focuses on state politics as one of the main factors for the outbreak of the 1979 revolution. It is precisely the factor of the state and the Shah's increasing authoritarianism that the documentaries disguise by misleadingly covering many events to exonerate the monarch for a disastrous outcome of his authoritarian modernity. This approach, adopted by most scholarly works on modern Iran, is far from demonizing the Shah but demands placing the state at the center of the historical narratives of the revolution. Although the historical studies on modern Iran have provided an in-depth analysis of why that should be the case, the Pahlavi state's central place in Iran's modern history can be shown by a simple calculation. Seven decades separate the Iranian Revolutions of 1906 and 1979. Except for a total of two decades of foreign interventions, world wars, an abdication, and a coup, the Pahlavi dynasty ruled over Iran for five decades during that period. Mohammad

Reza Shah enjoyed 37 years of that period as the "Aryamehr", imposing a dictatorship for the best part of that time. Therefore, a historical narrative of the 1979 revolution has to evolve around the state and the extent it determined the historical trajectory of modern Iran.

Indeed, the reign of the second monarch witnessed the profound socioeconomic transformation of Iran on an unprecedented scale. This fact understandably provides solid foundations for historical narratives such as those of Iran International and Manoto to appear more convincing and shape popular perception. However, authoritarianism was the flip side of the state-led socioeconomic, cultural, and educational modernization encouraged by post-Second World War development and modernization theories. The theories desired to impose all over the world the capitalist values and practices that advanced Western countries had followed. The political form of these economic practices was an elitist democracy (Gilman 2003, 47-56), in which "Ideally, a self-disciplined and politely competitive elite would complement an ovine populace" (Gilman 2003, 50). Therefore, becoming "modern" was politically possible by the competition of the elites, defined as democracy, and stifling "the impulse toward foolish and irrational [political] hopes" by extending the welfare state (Gilman 2003, 57). Such a state would make communist and Marxist alternatives irrelevant and deter revolution from below. It seems to be no coincidence that the Shah, who was highly informed and followed the ideas around political and economic developments, explained the aim of his Great Civilization program in the 1970s – by then, his autocratic rule had been firmly established – as "the creation of a welfare state in which everyone would enjoy every kind of social insurances from birth to death" (Manoto, 2015). Moreover, as Shah's writings (Cf. Pahlavi 1991, 132-169) testify, he and those who wrote for him were informed by the ideas circulated by such theories.

In much of the first Pahlavi era, the state endeavored to fulfill the requisites for a modern, centralized nation-state as the institutional condition for the realization of the long-standing will to reform, constantly interrupted by the presence and the rivalry of the great powers in Iran and political instability (Atabaki 2006, 6). Indeed, its efforts, however oppressive, also were dictated by historical facts–a prolonged instability since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and indirect colonialism–as well as by the need for a modern state to function effectively. Ultimately, however, both Pahlavi eras witnessed the concentration of political power in the monarch. In contrast, many Iranian intellectuals had stipulated a progressive (*erteqayi*) constitutional system to tackle "the unsteadiness of the central government, the chaos of the central administration, political instability and insecurity" against a "regressive" (*qahqaraiy*) administration under previous Qajar kings who ruled Iran

until 1925 (Taqizadeh 1921: 3; Atabaki and Zürcher 2000; Cronin 2003). Instead, except for the period between the outbreak of the Second World War, which entailed severe financial and political crises with paralyzing effects, and the Coup of 1953 against Muhammad Musaddeq, the state turned into a powerful, centralized authority surrounded by a cult of personality (Azimi 1989; Afkhami 2006, 61-207). Therefore, Reza Shah purged those who had been pivotal in the formation of the Iranian nation-state, and Muhammad Reza Shah (1941–79) sidelined planners and gathered around himself uncritical statesmen, legitimizing his political involvement on the grounds of "the deficiency in the political system" (Pahlavi 1991, 220-221).

Furthermore, political instability and the fear of revolution from below inspired the Shah's White Revolution. It was the outcome of the fear of ominous perils of internal forces and thus intended to preserve the monarchy (Ansari 2001). Although the ideas that embellished its principles were already in circulation and the will to change Iran through an overarching reform process widespread, the state and the Shah provided platforms for implementing reforms. Meanwhile, domestic and international political developments in the 1970s, just like the pressure from the Kennedy administration, continued to shape the plans and affect their outcomes. In effect, the uncertainty over Iran's oil reserves and the Shah's hubris further hindered reforms in the service of politics. As studies have noted, all projects became a "means to an end, the fulfilment of the Shah's dream of the Great Civilisation" (Afkhami 2006, 233). Moreover, the Shah sidelined those with a more critical mind as the White Revolution advanced (Afkhami 2006, 233).

Concerning political participation, no means of political participation was promoted as modernization and urbanization accelerated, shaping new political and cultural desires. In contrast, during the 1970s, the state became increasingly personified by the Shah, who stopped listening to critiques or proposals. At the same time, more capable individuals were sidelined in favor of uncritical acolytes, thus undermining collective efforts to modernize Iran more democratically. For example, uncritical Amir Abbas Hoveyda replaced Mansour, assassinated in 1965, as prime minister, while Abdulla Entezam, the chairman of National Iranian Oil Company, "who appreciated different opinions [and] a wise administrator [. . .] of which there were too few in Iran", was dismissed in the aftermath of June 1963 religious uprising (Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian 1997, 54 and 382) – he had advised in the presence of the shah that "the will of people ought to be respected" (Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian 1997, 370). Ideologically, based on historical myths, an exclusively radicalized national perception of "Iran" was being promoted by grand gestures such as the outrageously expensive

2,500 years Celebration of the Iranian monarchy in 1971. Radical nationalism, in turn, encouraged further linguistic purification in favor of Persian, leading to the sudden change of the calendar in the mid-1970s to reflect a historical monarchy. As a result of such processes, the Shah had become saye-ye Khoda or God's shadow on earth, a Persianized form of *zel-Ollah* used for the previous Qajar Kings (1789-1925) (Farmanfarmaian and Farmanfarmaian 1997, 395-401).

Simultaneously, the expansion of the prison system reflected ideological radicalization laying or consolidating the foundations of the inhumane modern political prison. By the 1970s, torture and execution were more frequently used effectively to eradicate political opposition to the state. In 1947, dozens of the leaders of the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan Republics were executed, followed by the executions of the Tudeh officers following the 1953 coup, which marked a new phase of Iran's prison system. However, by the end of the 1950s, extreme torture practices were rarely used until later years witnessed the reintroduction of torture and executions (Abrahamian 1999, 88). Accompanied by the formation of the SAVAK, the new secret police, which left an indelible mark on collective memory, this radicalization led to prolonged imprisonment, torture by beating, pulling out nails, raping female prisoners, and forced recantations (Dehqan 2004, 71). Indeed, women's prison was also a striking feature of the transformed system. In her aptly entitled memoir, *Hamase-ye Moqavemat* (*The Epic Resistance*), written after she had escaped from the SAVAK prison in the 1970s, the Fadayyan revolutionary Ashraf Dehqan recounts grotesque acts of torture against her. To extract a confession and force her to divulge the safe houses, she was severely beaten up, sexually abused, thrown snakes at, had (her own) excrements smeared on her face and body, and hit by a taser baton, an ordeal going on for many weeks (Dehqan 2004, 67-77). The regime which replaced the Pahlavi order only has augmented such a cruel prison system and torture methods.

Parallel to the state's ideological radicalization was that of the revolutionary forces which aimed to overthrow the monarchy. This, however, makes sense in the rapidly changing socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts of the period following the Second World War, but especially during the era of the White Revolution. Regarding the Iranian Left in general, the state's aversion to political reform encouraged violent forms of resistance to dictatorship. During the 1960s, Kurdish activists, including university students, used the adjacent Kurdish movement in Iraqi Kurdistan as a space for overt political activities by arming themselves (Khezri 2003). Concurrently, by the middle of the decade, several emerging organizations published treatises which stressed armed struggle as the only remaining method to combat dictatorship. The main factor behind the technique was explained as “absolutist despotic

monarchism" (Rahnema 2021, Ch. 2). This culminated in the urban armed struggle at the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, represented by the Fadayyan, the Muslim Mujahedin (1965), and the Marxist-Leninist Mujahedin (1975) (Behrooz 1999, 70-73.). The literature aptly reflected the political situation of Iran at the time. Samad Behrangi's (1939-1967) *Little Black Fish*, the story of a fish searching for the vastness of the oceans, was an allegory of the suffocating life under dictatorship (Hooglund 1987).

Significantly, authoritarian modernization and the state's ambiguous "secularism", which nevertheless offended the religious opposition, created the conditions for an Islamic alternative to the state. This occurred in an international and regional context, wherein religious resistance to colonialism and the modern states' political oppression gradually radicalized. Therefore, the White Revolution era witnessed the emergence of new political forces, including a religious opposition which targeted the monarchy for the first time in Iranian history and aimed at an Islamic Government (Arjomand 1988, Ch. 5; Sahabi 2009, Ch. 2). The idea of an Islamic government in the Middle East is "rooted in major contemporary processes of social and political change in the second half of the twentieth century" (Arjomand 2010, 173). Since the 1940s, "an intellectual breakthrough from an orthodox reformism to Islamic ideology" had taken place, pioneered by Mawláná Sayyid Abu'l A'lá Mawdudí (d.1979), the founder of Jamaᶜat-i Islami in Lahore (Arjomand 2010, 180).

The Shah's contribution to Shiᶜi radicalization is striking (Amanat 2017, 566-571). His conservative secularism aimed for rapprochement with the pro-state clergy, but it empowered them to attack other religious minorities and enjoy their expanding networks of religious activists. For the Shah, the appeasement of the Shiᶜi clerical establishment in the aftermath of the 1953 coup "required the public disowning of a "heretical" Other" (Amanat 2017, 568). The Other was the Baha'i community, which became the target of a ferocious campaign in 1954 during the holy month of Ramadan. The state endorsed the campaign by broadcasting live the lunchtime sermons of the preacher Mohammad Taqi Falsafi in the city of Shiraz, who, with the backing of Ayatollah Borujerdi, the sole Marjaᶜ (supreme exemplar), demanded the confiscation of properties and businesses and restriction of the employment of the Baha'is in the state institutions (Amanat 2017, 568). The campaign led to discrimination against the Baha'is and acts of violence, creating precedence for the post-revolutionary violent oppression of the Baha'is in Iran.

Indeed, conservative secularism was a characteristic of the modern states of the Middle East throughout the twentieth century. For example, the Egyptian state encouraged and supported Sufi orders against the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, for fear of religious

backlash, the Shah was not among the first politicians or activists who advocated the rights of women to vote and attempted to change the family laws. (Afkhami 2003) His opposition to the secular left and its more violent suppression is similarly striking (Afkhami 2003). In this regard, a reference to the scholarship reveals the documentaries' lack of sufficient engagement with scholarly works or unwillingness to stare back at the evidence. The scholarship includes valuable research on the Pahlavi era and the history of the Iranian left. They reveal that under a state-led, authoritarian modernization, Iran experienced profound socioeconomic, cultural, technological, and intellectual transformations during the few decades preceding the revolution. However, the state became authoritarian, preventing political participation from taking shape. This observation is crucial as millions of people migrated to urban centers integrated, to borrow from Arjomand, into society through religious channels (Arjomand Apr., 1986). The lack of mechanisms of political participation also encouraged violent modes of political activities. While the state's policies created the conditions for the ascendency of the idea of an Islamic government, it also suppressed a kind of democratic modernity for which the left and other national-secular and progressive forces were indispensable agents of change. Therefore, the Pahlavi state's politics created the conditions for a revolutionary culture and made the revolutionaries, to borrow from Trotsky in the case of the Russian Revolution, "hospitable to the boldest conclusions of revolutionary thought" (Trotsky 1932, 8). The state's majestic failure in political reform was epitomized by its obstinate adherence to its archaic vision of autocracy or ambitious dream of the Great Civilisation (Cf. Pahlavi 1991; Pahlavi 1977).

Regarding the Iranian left, we learn from historiographies of Iran that embarking on urban armed struggle in the 1960s and 1970s is explained by authoritarianism and an international context (Rahnema 2021). However, many other parts of the same left rejected violence and committed themselves to working among the toiling classes and creating networks of activists. The state did not only fight the guerrillas, whom it defeated by the middle of the 1970s, ruling them out as the factor for sparking the revolution. It imprisoned individuals for reading banned books for many years. However, this part of the picture is perhaps intentionally ignored by the documentaries to be able to present a more convincing case against the left. In any case, the state suppressed many other forces, including the left and the ethnic movements – which stood for social justice, democracy, and universal values the state was so alienated with – more than the religious opposition.

Finally, the question of the inevitability or avoidability of the revolution casts further light on the role of the Shah and the politics of the state. The historical narratives imply that

the actions of the big powers, the left, and the religious opposition during the Pahlavi era directly led to the outbreak of the revolution. This explanation is ahistorical. The contradictions produced by the state-led, authoritarian modernization did not make revolution inevitable, nor is there any evidence that the superpowers, above all the United States, were plotting or had the desire to replace the Shah with someone who supposedly would sell oil at a lower price. The revolutionaries indeed aimed at the revolutionary change of the regime. However, the left-wing groups believed that revolution required, as they termed it, for objective and subjective conditions to be ripe. By the same token, the religious opposition did not seem to have the means and the plan to overthrow the regime despite their increasing advocacy of an Islamic government and expanding religious networks.

Moreover, such a seismic event cannot be explained by "blaming" specific individuals or forces when the outcome is unexpectedly terrible. Therefore, the visual narratives lack satisfactory engagement with the Iranian Revolution's long-, medium- and short-term causes. Instead, their selective approach to historical facts guides the reviewers to focus on specific points, as discussed above, which strengthens the belief that the progressive modernization of the Pahlavi order was abruptly interrupted by the actions of specific unappreciative forces.

Conclusion

It is imperative to emphasize rigorous reading and research on the causes of the 1979 revolution for two main reasons. First, as this article attempted to show, the Pahlavi state tops the list of the causes of the revolution. It is historically naive to think that the revolution was the work of one or two groups which were responsible for what replaced the monarchy. Historians tell us that the revolution was not inevitable, but the conditions for it existed by the mid-1970s. It was the Pahlavi political order which created the conditions for the cultural and intellectual hegemony of the religious opposition. This development explains why the religious opposition could assume leadership of the revolution and then seized power.

The second reason is the question of political alternative. The Islamic Republic of Iran has continued to face increasing political unrest, highlighting the question more than ever. However, any political alternative inextricably is linked to our historical perception of the formation of modern Iran. Any profound change in this regard needs to target and transform Iran's contemporary political, socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, and gender structures, whose foundations primarily were formed under the Pahlavi state. Therefore, serving historical awareness and based on the advance in historical scholarship, critical and in-depth analysis of the past constantly has to be stressed. This includes an objective analysis of four decades under

the Islamic regime because the television channels' critique of the regime remains superficial and does not address such structures, for which a historically aware democratic alternative is desired.

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