The Hidden Middle East:
Reasons for America's Misconceptions about this Region

An Honors Thesis (HONS 499)

by

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May 2, 1992
Abstract

Our society and educational system promote a definition of the Middle East that relates exclusively to American self-interest, thereby ignoring the also important diverse cultures and people of this area. This situation is not likely to change radically at any time in the future. The prevailing patterns of thought that America has about the Middle East are so deeply ingrained that change will only come about with conscious effort. Our government, media and scholars, as a whole, do not recognize the significance of this problem, further diminishing the likelihood of it being fully addressed.
Introduction

The Middle East remains a veritable mystery in the minds of most Americans. This situation, however, has not arisen out of a conscious ignorance about this region. The way that we, as Americans, think about the Middle East has been fashioned within a frame of reference spanning the history of Western intervention in affairs pertaining to the economics and politics of the different countries in the Middle East. Stereotypes and cliches about the people, culture, and religion of the Middle East have pervaded the American mind in a repetitive cycle over the years, preventing a broader understanding of this region. Our government, media, and even our scholars compound this problem in their dealings with and research of the Middle East.

This thesis focuses on how misconceptions about the Middle East are perpetuated through the politics, foreign policy decisions, media flaws and limitations, and intellectual elite of the United States. The bulk of the research involved in this work concentrates expressly on the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. Throughout the history of Iran, there is significant historical data that can be related to the ultimate consequences resulting from the overthrow of Mohammed Reza Shah in 1979. However, most Americans believe that these events stemmed from the leadership of the "fanatical" Ayatollah Khomeini. Our media, through governmental sources, emphasized the role of Khomeini when it provided the American public with information about the unrest in
Iran. The figure of Khomeini dominated the headlines and news articles presented to the American public, while many more important factors in the broad history of this country were neglected. More recently, similar tendencies relating to coverage of the Middle East have been demonstrated through the American-led Operation Desert Storm against the actions of Saddam Hussein.

The way that Americans view the Middle East needs to be challenged at its root. Those who claim to be "informing" continually reinforce the narrow images of the Middle East that dwell in the minds of the American public about the Middle East -- the media and our government. These misguided preconceptions must be addressed before one can attempt a careful analysis of any aspect of these countries, religions, or leaders.

A Focus on the Problem

Certain guiding images arise automatically when we think of the Middle East. Screaming fanatics who periodically kneel and pray to a god called "Allah", bomb-packing terrorists who blow up jumbo-jets full of innocent people, and oppressed women clad in a mysterious dress-like garment that covers their bodies from head to toe are only a few general images that bombard the minds of Americans today. This onslaught, unconsciously processed, affects how we understand the people, culture, and politics of the Middle East.

The only glimpses that most Americans have of the Middle East come from the television media. Without even visiting this
region or meeting someone from one of the countries, Americans believe that we know what the Middle East looks and feels like based on the images that CNN or NBC conveniently display for us every evening on their various news programs. They presented us with footage that focused on only a fraction of the totally encompassing people and their cultures.

The Western world's perceptions about this highly politicized group of countries are based largely upon stereotypes and cliches that are reinforced through the generation of foggy images, brought to us through our media, intellectuals, and political leadership. This situation is extremely unfortunate, preventing the American people from understanding what is happening in the Middle East.

America's knowledge about the Middle East finds its roots in orientalism and ethnocentrism. Orientalism places all history within a context of Western thought patterns and values, generally patronizing and degrading the characteristics of cultures outside of this structure. Many instructors and professors in our nation's colleges and universities perpetuate orientalist thinking in the way that they describe Middle Eastern culture and history. The Crusades against the Muslims, the Saracens, or sometimes the "Turks" in the 1100s are viewed as unquestionably justified on account of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Unfortunately, professors "forget" the significance of Palestine to the Muslims, thus depriving their students of a complete understanding of these historical events and
perpetuating religious antagonisms.

Ethnocentrism is a "we're the best and the rest of the world is backward" attitude that is highly prevalent in the West, especially regarding the Middle East. The dominant Middle Eastern religion, Islam, is looked down on by many Americans as violent or heretical. This opinion is based on images and interpretations often derived from television, that do not reflect expertise or first-hand knowledge about Islam. However, many uninformed people think that they thoroughly understand the Prophet Mohammed and the rise of Islam. Their definition of the religion of Islam might include ideas of polygamy, oppression of women, long and sharp swords used to slit Christian throats, or an irritating guy screaming out the call to worship at some unimaginably early hour of the morning.

Together with the perpetuation of stereotypical attributes, orientalist and ethnocentric thinking places all new knowledge about Islam, and consequently the Middle East, within a narrow framework which contributes to this "monolithic" attitude. Over and over this process is repeated as new events surface relating to the Middle East, preventing an understanding of this highly complex region. By defining this region in these terms, American objectives in relationship to the Middle East are too swiftly and often tragically defined.

Our society and educational system promote a definition of the Middle East that relates exclusively to American self-interest, thereby ignoring the also important diverse cultures
and people of this area. This situation is not likely to change radically at any time in the future. The prevailing patterns of thought that America has about the Middle East are so deeply ingrained that change will only come about with conscious effort. Our government, media and scholars, as a whole, do not recognize the significance of this problem, further diminishing the likelihood of it being fully addressed.

We must recognize this strange twist in the thinking that dominates our knowledge of the Middle East in order to understand the conflicts and relationships that the countries and leaders in this region have had with the United States. The images that dominate this mentality are a powerful tool for those who know how to manipulate them. Specifically, images of Iran during the Revolutionary years of 1978 and 1979 were implicit and central in the West's and especially America's definition of "Islam" as a whole. ¹ Iran, because of its oil-producing capabilities, America's support of the shah, and the hostage crisis, has become uniquely a focal point by which the American media and intellectual circles have involved themselves in the "study" of the entire Middle East until recent times. Today, this point has shifted; we see Saddam Hussein in the light that once shone on the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Many of the images associated with Khomeini are easily transferable to Saddam Hussein, yet these men had very different

objectives and reasoning behind their motives. These profound differences are lost in America lost in its all-encompassing image of a monolithic Islam. The Revolution of 1978-79 relates to the history of Iran and various events that affected the populations of this country, as well as Iran's place in the international arena. There were many factors that influenced this situation, not just the deeds of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The long tradition of Shi'ism and the history of societal struggles in Iran are two central factors.

Historical Background about Iran

The evolution of Iran into a "modern", theocratic state traces a path many centuries long. Shi'ism was declared the official religion of Iran in 1501, during the rule of Ismail, the founder of the Safavid dynasty. This "Twelver" Shi'ism soon thoroughly permeated the culture of Iran. It is based on the notion that leadership within the Muslim community passed down from Mohammed through a blood line of specific imams. However, the twelfth imam, the mahdi or Messiah, somehow disappeared during the ninth century. This "Lord of the Age" will return, according to the Shi'ite tradition, to create a government and establish a leadership for the people of Islam.

The entire structure of Iranian life evolved in a way

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that provided the Shi'ite clerical leadership a prominent and integral position. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Iranian clerical powers went through a process of consolidation. The result was to clarify religious doctrine and centralize their hierarchical leadership. This transformation further strengthened the role of the Shi'ite clergy in Iranian society under the Safavids by increasing the ulama's political pressure on the government. The growing strength of the Shi'ite clergy as a religious authority related directly to its increasing political role in Iranian society. The ulama was important to the Safavids, but not in an independent sense. Within the Safavid hierarchy there were appointed religious officials who allowed the government to exercise a great deal of control over the religion.

From this time, the religious clergy and the secular leadership became increasingly polarized over how to approach the political, social, and economic affairs of Iran. In the late Safavid period, many of the high Shi'ite religious leaders, as a result of their steadily growing power at the expense of the Safavid Shahs, began to believe that the people should look to them for authority.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the mujtahids or

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4 Arjomand, The Turban for the Crown, 12.
6 Ibid., 92.
the high Shi'ite clerics in Iran were claiming more and more legitimacy over guiding the community. At the time of the unpopular Qajar Dynasty of the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, the clerical structure took a leadership role in many of the protest movements against growing economic strife. The Qajar government's practice of increasing the importation of foreign manufactured goods threatened many urban handicraft workers' livelihoods. This trade influx combined with food shortages and price rises, greatly injured the large population of artisans and small shopkeepers. One must understand this situation is crucial because of the Shi'ite clergy's traditional role as spokesmen for the bazaris or urban merchants. More importantly, the ulama began to grow more and more independently wealthy, thus becoming less dependent on the shahs for support.

Throughout the two centuries prior to the Revolution of 1978-79, there are specific indications of societal unrest over government practices, as well as a marked rise in the prestige of the clerical powers among the population in Iran. The media in our country failed or "refused" to understand this past. There are causes for this inability to understand. The Iranians with

7 Nikki R. Keddie, Religion and Politics in Iran (New Haven: Yale UP.), 89.

8 Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand, (eds), Qajar Iran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.), 48.

9 Ibid., 49.

10 Keddie, Iran: Religion, Politics, and Society, 93.
whom our media interacted concerning interpretations of the problems in Iran were from the ranks of the "Westernized elite." These Iranians had been educated in a way that discredited the religious emphasis in their country. These individuals ignored the centrality of the Shi'ite religion and culture in most Iranian's lives, which was an acceptable and comprehensible stance according to the U.S. government. American journalists only heard and saw the political interpretations of these elite Iranians, which seemed perfectly rational from a "Western" point of view. An "average" Iranian from Tehran would have probably expressed to the media a much different view about the political, economic, and societal situations in Iran. Such a perspective would have emphasized the Shi'ite clergy as a legitimate body of power. Unfortunately, American reporters did not have access to such people.

During the nineteenth century, the ulama also became increasingly political, focusing on the negative, Westernizing reforms perpetuated by the Qajar Crown Princes under the pressure of Great Britain. The British did grant "progressive" reforms, many of which were largely unrealized, such as tighter control of the state purse and taxpayer.

Opposition to the Qajars culminated with the constitutional crises that occurred between 1905 and 1911. This period also

11 Keddie, Religion and Politics in Iran, 94.
contributed a significant turning point for the ulama with regards to their participation in state politics. The clergy were not the driving force in understanding constitutional implications, yet they recognized the popular feelings of nationalism and injustice that had penetrated into the Iranian population.\textsuperscript{13} The Qajars were unable to compete with the respect within the population that the ulama had cultivated through their deeply-believed Shi'ite religious philosophy.\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps, the ulama recognized in these events a situation where they could grasp a few more bits of political power within the Iranian community.\textsuperscript{15} It was important for the clergy to support this popular movement in order to maintain its growing prestige in the Iranian community as a whole.\textsuperscript{16}

In the twentieth century, a dual leadership structure between the Shi'ite clergy and the dynastic leaders slowly emerged. An understanding of the dualistic system between the leadership hierarchies of the Shi'ite clergy and the dynastic secular rulers, combined with the wide-spread government dissatisfaction with the government, could possibly answer some questions about why the Shi'ite clergy under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini was able to take power after the Revolution of 1978-79.

\textsuperscript{13} Bosworth and Hillenbrand, \textit{Qajar Iran}, 51.
\textsuperscript{14} Keddie, \textit{Iran: Religion, Politics, and Society}, 97.
\textsuperscript{15} Bakhash, "Iran," 1481.
\textsuperscript{16} Bosworth and Hillenbrand, \textit{Qajar Iran}, 52.
The Pahlavi dynasty, beginning with Reza Khan in 1924, provided the last polishes that ultimately led to the Iranian governmental structure of today. After World War I, disillusionment with the work of the constitutional regime, which was largely under the influence of Great Britain, led to a desire among the leadership hierarchy and the Iranian population for stiffer governmental control from the Shah. Reza Pahlavi Shah took the initiative, yet did so in a way that troubled the Shi'ite clergy. By concentrating on "material Westernization", Reza Pahlavi brought a great influx of Western capital and investments into Iran. This action proved detrimental to the Iranian working and middle classes as Western imports crippled more and more of their traditional work niches. In a mirror image of the last days of the Qajar dynasty, further alienation of these populations allowed the Shi'ite clergy to gain legitimacy in the minds of these Iranians.17

Reza Pahlavi worked to drastically reduce the ulama's political power by restricting it to the private religious sphere. His government changed many institutions previously dominated by religious authority, especially modern court authority and schools. This mass process of centralization the 1940s, modeled on the work of Ataturk in Turkey, contributed to the growth of the Shi'ite clergy's power by forcibly bringing into the cities people previously dispersed in rural, tribal areas.

17 Zabih, The Mossadegh Era, 5.
The basic and most important level of Iranian political and religious organization is localized within the village or small town. The actions taken by Reza Pahlavi thus served to alienate much of the lower and middle class population. Western programs that ran counter to the Shi'ite tradition, coupled with mass centralization, shook the foundations of Iranian society. In addition to this, during World War II, British and Soviet troops invaded Iran to secure oil fields and safe routes to the USSR. They deposed Reza Pahlavi and installed his twenty-two year-old son, Mohammed Reza, under whom the leadership in Iran was once again to demonstrate to its people its insensitivity to their needs and wants. The influx of Western ideas and influences ran counter to what most of the population in Iran desired. The clergy was able make substantial gains in authority and legitimacy as the working and middle class Iranians turned away from the government under Reza Pahlavi and his son, Mohammed Reza.

Mohammed Reza's appointment of Mosaddeq as Prime Minister in the Iranian Parliament is of the utmost importance. It was the "culmination of popular nationwide struggle to eliminate the politico-economic influence of Great Britain, as a means to reassert national independence and improve the material lot of the Iranian people." The young shah appointed Mosaddeq as the new prime minister in the early 1950s to combat the increasingly

18 Ibid., 17.

19 Ibid., 3.
nationalist revolts against foreign intervention, not realizing the true political struggle in store.

The power and legitimacy of the Shah came under new fire by Prime Minister Mosaddeq from one side, and by the clergy on the other. Nor could these two authorities cooperate. Mosaddeq was a strictly secular liberal politician, creating problems for the increasingly politicized ulama. Mosaddeq believed that the ulama could play an important role in mobilizing the masses, but could not accept the possibility of the clergy seeking executive power. Thus, three recognizable leadership structures each struggled to assert their own authority: the ulama, Mosaddeq, and the Shah.20 The ulama, fearful of secularism, leaned toward the power of the Shah in the early 1950s, as opposed to Mosaddeq, yet they still remained a separate authority.21

Between Mosaddeq and Mohammed Reza there was a great controversy over who had the right to be the primary influence over national affairs including diplomacy, the military, and especially the nationalization of oil.22 The Shah's increasing use of the army as a political tool to reinforce his political power in Iran incited Mosaddeq to attempt to restore the army to its "purely non-political function as a subordinate body to the government".23 In 1953, however, the British and U.S.,

20 Ibid., 14.
21 Ibid., 15.
22 Ibid., 71.
23 Ibid., 72.
recognizing the possible negative consequences of Mosaddeq's challenge to the Shah, the supposed internal "threat" of Communism from the Tudeh Party, and ultimately the security of Western interests in the region of the Middle East, organized Operation Ajax to oust the prime minister. 24

From this time onwards, Iranians no longer regarded the U.S. as "innocent." The Iranian people, the Shi'ite clergy, and the leadership realized that they would now have to figure the vested interests of yet another Western power into their country's political agenda. More importantly, they viewed the American involvement in the overthrow of Mosaddeq as imperialist and interventionist. America has become the USSR and Great Britain of the past. 25 Even without the purported involvement of the CIA in this event, nationalism and the power of the clergy were on the rise -- precursors to the revolution to come twenty-five years later.

Nevertheless, our media, specifically the newspapers that we read each day, did not explain to us this situation. The New York Times ran two short articles concerning Iran and Mosaddeq on August 15 and 16. A story three inches long on the bottom of page five entitled "Mossadegh Charges Distortion on Iran" was the only acknowledgment of the crisis in Iran. The August 15 article expressly emphasized a statement made by the "Cold Warrior",


Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles:

...the Mossadegh Government's tolerance of the Communists increased the difficulties in the way of United States economic assistance.  

With the recent conflicts in Korea, communism could be used as a scapegoat in any political situation, as Dulles illustrated in this article. Our media could easily concentrate on the "communist" aspect of any foreign policy decision, ignore other aspects of the Iranian situation, and find approval from both the American public and government.

Yet communism and the Communist Tudeh party played a relatively minor role in Iranian affairs at this time. Furthermore, these political aspects were not even particularly "Iranian". Despite this, the American media's orientalist tendencies caused our newspapers to focus on this issue and neglect the other forces working in Iran. Our media, working within a Western mindset, disastrously interpreted the events happening in the Middle Eastern country of Iran in this way and observed it through Western definitions.

The next day, a confusing article, "Mossadegh Terms Majlis Dissolved", was positioned on page thirty of the New York Times. The ideas expressed in the article tend to support Mosaddeq, while hinting about what had actually happened to him. It is doubtful that anyone could really know what had taken place in Tehran based upon this half-hearted attempt at information:

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The Iranian Majlis, the lower house of Parliament, which last month threatened to oust Premier Mossadegh with votes of no confidence, was declared today to have been dissolved as the result of the referendum completed this week, in which 99.94 per cent of the voters using non-secret ballots took the Premier's side in his quarrels with his chamber.27

This lack of information however is quite understandable considering the Iranian government's crackdown on "anti-state" publications until almost ten years after Mosaddeq's defeat.28 The Iranian government's control over the press concerning this event is comparable with major U.S. newspapers' lack of a broad coverage concerning the actual events surrounding the ouster of Mosaddeq. Perhaps, our government played a role in suppressing information about the role of our CIA in this entire fiasco. Our newspapers sent their reporters to find information about what was going on in Iran. The best place to gather information about the transitions in Iran was assumed to be from U.S. government sources.

The U.S. Government and the Media

The government plays a crucial role in the news coverage of the mass media. Economics largely dictates newspaper coverage. In other words, newspaper corporations can not possibly afford the costs involved in maintaining a reliable flow of raw news material. Financial concerns force news agencies to concentrate their resources in places where news and important rumors and


leaks are likely to abound. The Pentagon, the White House, and other places in Washington D.C. are central to such activity. This situation has many advantages, but it tends to create news that has been fashioned in a way that suits the needs of the bureaucrat or lawmaker who is supplying the information. Information released from government agencies has to appease many different interests. These interests mold the "news" in a way that is strikingly unobjective. The press is not entirely guilty: who better to get foreign policy news from than the foreign policy makers? Yet the approach severely limits the channels of information. In general, the U.S. media:

... permits -- indeed, encourages -- spirited debate, criticism, and dissent, as long as these remain faithfully within the system of presuppositions and principles that constitute an elite consensus, a system so powerful as to be internalized largely without awareness.

Regarding Iran in the 1950s, the U.S. government had a few things that it wanted to say in a way that would reinforce the United States' position in the Middle East. The press's dependency on government agencies for a steady flow of news tainted the "whole story" surrounding Mosaddeq in Iran.

After Operation Ajax (wiping Iran "clean" of the likes of Mosaddeq) in 1953, the United States became increasingly involved with the political and economic policy of Iran. While the people

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30 Ibid., 22.

31 Ibid., 302.
of Iran became sensitized to the United States role in their country, most Americans remained ill-informed. The economic results of the United States' involvement in the political upheaval in Iran was felt by all Iranians as their lives began to be affected by Mohammed Reza's policies into the 1960s. Could Americans have known about Mosaddeq or the growing U.S. interests in Iran in 1953?

The Korean Conflict and "Reds", which were on the minds of most Americans, were the focus of the U.S. media, instead of the significance of the problems in the nation of Iran. The actions of our CIA in preserving our nation's self-interest in Iran would not have "sold" in 1953. The economic limitations of the press forced them to print what would bring in profits to their corporations. Communism was selling; who would have cared about our interests with "Muslims?" On the front page of the August 15, 1953 New York Times, the three main articles are "U.N. Demands Foe Return All P.O.W.'s Who Wish Release", "Allied Split Likely to Leave Korea Parley Bids Up to U.N.", and "First Steps Taken by Non-Red French to Settle Strikes", demonstrating the press's economic and consequent journalistic priorities.

From 1953 until the late 1960s, Mohammed Reza Shah became obsessed with the need for military strength. The United States helped quell this "need" by selling him most of the arms that he wanted. His acquisition reached almost scandalous levels. The United States complied with the Shah because of interest in oil and the fear of Soviet intervention in the region. The Shah "saw
the need for a strong military and the danger of permitting a rival (like Mosaddeq) close to the seat of real power".32

By the early 1960s, the figure of Khomeini began to play against the Shah's wishes by encouraging a series of revolts against what he termed "Westoxication," that is, the increasing western economic and societal reforms and ideologies promoted by Mohammed Reza. These revolts went virtually unreported in the United States.33 Issues surrounding communism in Cuba and other parts of Central America (i.e. "The Bay of Pigs" and "The Cuban Missile Crisis") obsessed our policymakers, and thus were heavily reported in the press. Opposition to the Shah in Iran was mounting, yet the American government and the American press followed Mohammed Reza's lead in ignoring how his reforms affected his people.

Mohammed Reza Shah introduced a series of land reforms and more "western" reforms, including women's right to vote and various capitalistic schemes. These programs (the "White" Revolution) show how the strengthening of the Shah's personal power went hand in hand with the entire structure of "reform". During the early 1970s, Iran experienced tremendous economic growth. However this "super growth" was almost exclusively due to oil and other advanced investment projects including turbo trains and nuclear power plants. The "high-tech" focus of Iran's domestic spending left agriculture and urban investment virtually

32 Sick, All Fall Down, 9.
33 Ibid., 10.
stagnant. The agriculturally-based rural population of Iran fled into the cities by the millions creating urban problems and widespread dissatisfaction towards the government of Reza Pahlavi. 34

People in Iran, mostly in rural agricultural settings and urban working class niches, cramped by the domestic spending emphasis espoused by Mohammed Reza, noticed their country's problems in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the U.S. government encouraged these actions, as well as the role of American interests in this scheme. Our government simply did not consider the implications that these measures had on millions of people in Iran.

As a result of growing tensions, the Shah used the SAVAK, the secret police force of the government, to "quell" problem areas. The SAVAK (a Farsi acronym for the National Security and Information Organization), became increasingly active, and the disgruntled populations in Iran learned to hate it during the 1970s. 35 His own people regarded the behavior of Mohammed Reza Shah as an insult. Further, the steadily increasing wealth of the Shah's court sharply contrasted with the wide-spread poverty among the poor and working class people of his country. 36

In this light, the Revolution of 1978 should not have been a surprise to anyone in Iran or America. It was a revolution of

34 Ibid., 12.
35 Ibid., 23.
36 Ibid., 34.
outraged people against a repressive regime. But, this rebellion was a shock to many Iranians and virtually all Americans. We did not know about Khomeini or why he hated America so much. Why did the U.S. media remain silent about this reasonably accessible information?

The Revolution of 1978-79

All of this political and social upheaval, as well as the dissolving power of the Shah's regime, created a situation in which the clerical hierarchy could gain support among the poorer Iranians feeling the brunt of the Shah's oppression. In 1977-78, the urban poor became the dominant force in the explosive discontent. Since the Shi'ite clergy had traditionally been the most effective and popular among the poor, religious leaders were able to direct the course of events. As the political state under Mohammed Reza Shah crumbled, the Shi'ite clergy, epitomized in the person of the Ayatollah Khomeini, became stronger than ever.

Throughout 1978, the U.S. press approached this complex situation by asserting that the revolt was guided by anti-modern forces, including the Ayatollah Khomeini who then living in exile in France. The Revolution in Iran was reactionary, from the point of view of the U.S. press, because the entire situation was

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38 Bakhash, "Iran," 1495.
viewed from a "Western" standpoint. It was incomprehensible that religion could play a significant role in a future government in Iran. Our government knew that unrest was a problem there, but continued to reaffirm its commitment to the Shah. The Shah's power base was crumbling, yet American interests were rooted in the perpetuation of his regime. The Shah was an economic and military "friend" of the United States and an espouser of Western economic values in his country. In order for the United States to continue its "progressive" role in the Middle East, specifically in Iran, the Shah or leaders like him needed to be supported. Khomeini, not fitting America's definition, was portrayed as an evil man, motivated by the heretical religion of Shi'ism. Few realized that Khomeini had some persuasive and even legitimate ideas -- considering the past centuries of Shi'ite influence in the lives of the Iranian people -- about the future of Iran.

Khomeini fused the ulama in Iranian society and led them in a new direction. This formulation advocated Islamic political activism on the part of the Shi'ite clergy as a means of achieving "justice" in Iranian society. This tendency had long been present within the Iranian governmental structure; however Khomeini envisioned a need for a concrete application of Shi'ism as supreme law.39 "Fundamental" Shi'ism, with Khomeini as its chief interpreter, became the ideology that harnessed troubled Iran in 1979:

39 Ibid., 1482.
Khomeini's personality, ability to be all things to social groups, and astute management of the protest movement allowed him to capture the leadership of the revolution.\footnote{Ibid., 1495.}

In the end, Khomeini became the symbolic leader of the theocratic state of Iran.

\textbf{The U.S. Newspapers and Iran}

Many journalists emphasize the Ayatollah Khomeini as a "strong man" who acted alone in his determination to dissolve the regime of Mohammed Reza. Such characterizations are common. There is a great tendency among our journalists to see the politics of the "Third World" as "revolving around and synonymous with a strongman".\footnote{Dorman and Farhang, The U.S. Press and Iran, 161.} From a ethnocentric point of view, the people living in the countries that comprise the Third World can be ruled in no other way. For the U.S. media, Khomeini had "made the Revolution, instead of the other way around".\footnote{Ibid., 160.} For example, the February 1, 1979 issue of the \textit{New York Times} reported that:

\begin{quote}
Khomeini, the man who brought down the Shah and has called for a new Iranian Islamic republic, left here (Paris, France) today to return to his country.
\end{quote}

The paper thereby personalized and reduced absurdly a complex and important event.

The deterioration that plagued the Shah's regime, the charisma displayed by Khomeini, and the overall evolution of
Iranian society together with widespread legitimate societal and political grievances spawned the "revolution" of 1979. Did the American media portray this development as anything less than abrupt and senseless? According to a majority of U.S. journalists, the Iranian Revolution represented the work of "turbaned religious zealots", not the culmination of disgust with the Shah by a vast majority of Iranians and the ushering in of a new and potent ideology.\(^4\) The press had not provided the tools by which the American public could have understood the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 based on the variety of forces at work in Iran.

American reporters neither understood nor correctly interpreted what was going on in Iran. Using shallow and highly ethnocentric stereotypes and frameworks perpetuated by their dependency on governmental sources, they portrayed the revolt instead as a kneejerk religious reaction. The media, intern, could not have interpreted this situation in any other way considering the strictures that the U.S. government forced upon them. They entirely missed the significance of Shi'ism as a cultural force. According to Dorman:

...Iranians, although not particularly pious... nevertheless turned to the traditional value system represented by Shi'ism as a means of expressing their profound rejection of the Shah's repression and mindless pursuit of things Western.\(^4\)

Americans were only was allow to know enough about this region to

\(^4\) Ibid., 166.

\(^4\) Ibid., 174.
accommodate the U.S. government's interests and growing economic involvement in the Middle East. The lack of context by which to judge the situation in Iran caused Americans to interpret the forces in Iran in 1979 as reactionary, abrupt, fanatical, and profoundly dangerous.

The tendency for our news to trickle down from self-serving government sources is clearly evident throughout the newspaper coverage of the return of Khomeini to Iran in early February of 1979. The Chicago Tribune, the Indianapolis Star, and the Muncie Star basically communicate the same information about Khomeini and Iran, much of it highly ethnocentric and biased, from February 1-4.

The Chicago Tribune's lead article on February 1, 1979, entitled, "Khomeini in Iran: 'Oust all foreigners'" is a good example of ethnocentric journalism. The article strictly concentrates on the words and ideas of Khomeini, deeming them largely unreasonable:

Khomeini said foreign advisers in Iran are trying to restore Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to the throne and install a government that "will obey the imperialists'.

In this statement, the meanings of the words, "Pahlavi," "throne," and "imperialists" are translated by the U.S. press in a way that does not communicate what Khomeini actually meant. For the press, "Pahlavi" represents legitimacy and order; the "throne" stands for security; and "imperialists" is a exaggeration of America's role by the illegitimate Khomeini. The meanings in the Iranian context were quite different, however.
The Ayatollah Khomeini viewed the "throne" as a Western vice used by the "imperialist" Americans to further their national interests in the Middle East through the puppet leadership of "Pahlavi". He knew that many Iranians would see the words in this light and respond accordingly. In further descriptions of Khomeini's entourage, security factors are emphasized:

Iranian air force officers carrying submachine guns surrounded the auto and ran along side it as Khomeini was driven to a ceremonial pavilion to receive his followers.45

The specific association of the Ayatollah Khomeini with violence, terrorism and insecurity, a highly ethnocentric and narrow parameter of judgment, is woven into the rest of the article.

The Chicago Tribune's headline articles from February 1-3, all make a point of describing the Ayatollah Khomeini as "white-bearded". Perhaps he is just a "crazy old man," the articles seem to imply, which implicitly refutes any legitimacy in his efforts to change the government in Iran.

In the Indianapolis Star, the use of similar descriptions and emphases serve to perpetuate the same images of Khomeini. On the front page of the February 2, 1979 issue, a large-lettered headline proclaims, "U.S. 'Tricked' Iran: Khomeini," with a sub-headline which read, "Vow to Kick All 'Foreign Devils Out'". Instead of "oust," as used in the Tribune, the Star decided to use the word, "kick... out," in describing Khomeini's intentions to root out foreign influences. The use of this word

45 The Chicago Tribune 1 February 1979.
adds a flicker of childishness to the cause of Khomeini. Leaders of countries do not "kick" out the "bad guys"; they negotiate through democratic means. Khomeini is portrayed as totally unreasonable, much like a spoiled child. Further in this article, the use of the words "screaming" and "swarming" to describe the followers of Khomeini is extremely degrading and offensive. Are these people human beings, or just children? Perhaps they are bumble bees? The orientalism that seeps into our press tends to view people from "non-Western" regions as brainless and almost non-human.

In the Muncie Star of Muncie, Indiana, the same sentiment reverberates. The headline article on February 1, 1979 is almost identical to the one used in the Chicago Tribune. Fear of terrorist retaliations stemming from the arrival of Khomeini is the main theme of this Associated Press article:

Security men appointed by the local opposition leaders sealed off Tehran's international airport as the 78-year-old ayatollah disembarked from his chartered Air France jetliner accompanied by some 50 of his followers . . .

The use of the words "local opposition," "78-year-old," and "followers" in this sentence convey certain images. The local opposition refers generically to the supporters of Khomeini and do not explain why these people are in opposition to the Shah. Again, the extreme old age of the Ayatollah Khomeini is emphasized, deeming him more ready for retirement than a revolt. The word "follower" likens the supporter of Khomeini to sheep,

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again perpetuating the orientalist, "non-human" image of Iranians.

The recurrent themes of fear and terrorism stemming from the actions of an illegitimate old man are just as blatantly described in this local publication as its larger competitors in Indianapolis and Chicago. All employ the same words and similar themes. Altogether, there is a steady outpouring of ethnocentric, "pro-American-foreign-policy-interests" attitude that seeps out from each assertion or idea.

The New York Times presented a wide variety of articles during the crucial revolutionary years of 1978 and 1979. Nevertheless, the range of subjects, in general, seldomly curbed the overall tendency to misinform. In the December 13, 1978 edition, an article entitled "Carter Deplores Agitation Against Shah From Outside" by Terence Smith is a perfect example. President Jimmy Carter is interpreted as saying that the Shah ".. would be able to ride out the current difficulties". By late 1978, the Shah was in dire straits politically, as uprising after uprising shook the fragile foundation of his regime. Despite this unrest, Carter chose to tell the press that things were getting better, when in statements made the week before, in which he asserted that the ".. Shah's future was in the hands of the Iranian people" seeming to predict doom and disaster.

The Carter Administration did not know how to react to this crumbling ally's woes. It could only see the catastrophic impact that a "loss" of this country's political and economic position
in the Middle East could warrant for the United States of America. The press listened to Carter's words and unquestioningly wrote them down for the American people to read, illustrating how the media and the political elite of America are linked in a way that hinders the quality of our press coverage.

It is interesting that the New York Times closed its bureau in Tehran in early 1977, just as this major story began to break! The Iranian Revolution was covered from Washington, Beirut or Cairo, or via short "fact-finding" missions to Iran for specific stories. Absentee journalism could be accepted from a smaller newspaper, but from the New York Times? The stories that the larger newspapers supposedly investigate more thoroughly trickles down through the Associated Press or the United Press International to the more low-budget, local presses. The New York Times perpetuated the simplistic and distorted theme that "a religious reaction and not a quest for participation and equity explained events in troubled Iran". 48

The news that reached the American people portrayed the entire situation in a way that misconstrued the reasoning behind the Iranian population's uprising and the actions of Ayatollah Khomeini. From an American point of view, any type of "religious" revolution is deemed reactionary. This ideology stems from our liberal roots in religious toleration and the perceived need for a "separation of church and state". A

47 Dorman and Farhang, The U.S. Press and Iran, 154.
48 Ibid., 155.
movement towards a "theocratic" state, specifically one based in Shi'ism as in Iran, runs contrary to the supposed American view of religion and politics. This image was easily perpetuated in the press and accepted as intolerable by most Americans. In American society, progressivism involves democratic notions that would be interpreted far differently when related to most Islamic religious/political doctrines, especially in Shi'ism. Politics and religion are meshed together in a unique way in "Islamic" countries that would not easily be transferable into a "Western" thought structure. The American Revolution was based on the progressive, Enlightenment idea that our "rights as Englishmen" had been violated.

According to Hannah Arendt in On Revolution, a revolution is reformist, at first, and only becomes revolutionary when new events change the goals. Revolution occurs, says Arendt:

...where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government.\(^49\)

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 dealt with interpretation and ideology from within an evolving historical framework that spanned three centuries. The Revolution in Iran was clearly reformist, in varying degrees, until the poorer, urban (and thus innovative) Iranians became more actively involved in the uprisings in the late 1970s. These circumstances caused the "revolution" to begin, with Ayatollah Khomeini and others directing future events by seizing an opportunity to turn things

in their direction. Khomeini's position and prestige in Iranian society allowed him to ultimately to represent the Revolution of 1979:

Khomeini did not cause the revolution, but it is no exaggeration to say that he single-handedly transformed a . . . reform movement with limited objectives into a genuinely revolutionary experience with its own unique ideological content.\(^{50}\)

There is no doubt that the Revolution of 1978-79 in Iran would not have ended the way it did without the figure of Khomeini. The problem, however, was that our media continually portrayed Khomeini as the "Revolution". Recent questioning of the U.S. media's coverage of the Iranian Revolution is not based solely on the fact that the reporters knew so little about "Islam"; quite to the contrary, it lay in the media's:

pretending that a great deal was known and in presenting a view of Iran's revolution that was dictated more by official Washington than by reality.\(^{51}\)

The financial and personnel limitations of the media prevented it once again from telling us the "whole" story. If only it had admitted its limitations.

The press encouraged Americans to doubt whether the Iranian people were capable of authentic interest in freedom or whether they were capable of achieving political stability without a dictator or foreign influence.\(^{52}\) Our entire way of viewing

\(^{50}\) Sick, *All Fall Down*, 158.

\(^{51}\) Dorman and Farhang, *The U.S. Press and Iran*, 179.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 180.
"freedom" or "stability" could not be used in the same context as a description of "Iranian," "Shi'ite," or "Islamic" freedom or stability. Ethnocentrism, orientalism, and a fierce suspicion of the religion of Islam soaked into the American mind, putting blinders on us when we thought that we were seeing a wide spectrum. Even though America's relationship to the Middle East is more important than ever, these blinders remain in place. The way in which our country perceives the region of the Middle East supposedly reinforces our national interests in this region; however, it seems to be pulling America farther away from these countries, separating us from crucial resources and strategic areas.

Conclusion

The resurgence of interest in the Middle East has recreated the unfortunate association between things unpleasant, unamerican, and undemocratic and things "Islamic" or "Middle Eastern." Of all major Western countries, America has had the shortest tradition of interaction with the Middle East, yet its media and intellectuals are writing more about this region than the writers of any other nation. This proliferation brings about the frequent occasion for generalizations and secondhand sources in published articles and essays. Islam and the Middle East, in all of their diversity, are reduced to "a special malevolent and unthinking essence."53 All of this so-called new and exciting

53 Said, Covering Islam, 8.
knowledge pouring from the souls of Americana is bound within "an inverted or culturally determined ideological framework filled with passion, defensive prejudice, (and) sometimes even revulsion."54 This multifarious information is molded in a way that reinforces U.S. government policy, which is at the root of America's perceptions about this region.

The government of the United States of America and her media are woven together like a tightly knit sweater. Because of America's obsessive, growing interests in the Middle East, the media projects news from a "Manifest Destiny" mentality that projects the United States as the modernizer, legitimizing her right to rescue the backward, childish Iran. Enter the Revolution of 1978-79. . . WHY is Iran not grateful for the United States' efforts in supporting the "modern" regime of Mohammed Reza? Because of America's ingrained thought process regarding the Middle East, and as a result of the perpetuation of false notions, we could not understand. We were prevented from understanding. The American public will probably never understand the Middle East in a broader sense because of its ethnocentric and orientalist perceptions of this region and overall apathy about these issues.

All of this goes much farther than just misconceptions. As a result of misinformation, often directed, the entire spectrum of Western (American) political thought has been polarized against "Islam" and the Middle East. In other words, two worlds

54 Ibid., 6.
have been created . . . OURS AND THEIRS. But there are many different "worlds" within the spectrum of this obvious generalization. Americans are subject to an almost unconscious ideological framework in regards to the Middle East that generalizes this entire area. This framework prevents our people and government from taking an in-depth look at how a broader knowledge of these various countries could affect the way in which the Middle East and America interact with one another.

What might the tragic history of Iranian-American relations teach us about current U.S. relationships in the Middle East? One thing is that we must look beyond the pages of newspapers in order to more fully understand the Middle East. It also should teach our government that in order to preserve America's vested economic interests in the region of the Middle East, drastic measures need to be taken. The U.S. government, specifically the Bush Administration, realized in early 1991 that in order to preserve our interests in the oil of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq, something had to be done. The government decided to approach the situation in a more direct fashion, considering Carter and Reagan Administrations' past relationships in the Middle East.

The U.S. presidencies of Reagan and Carter did not have a good record in political and economic dealings with the Middle East. While Carter "succeeded" with the Camp David Accords, he ignorantly denied what was happening in Iran in 1977-79. While

55 Ibid., 63.
Reagan bombed Libya, George Bush took a different approach. In truth, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Operation Desert Storm can be viewed as a carefully laid out means of gaining political support.\textsuperscript{56} The U.S. media aided the administration's ploy. Reporters all but ignored the United States's past relationship with Iraq and the subsequent military expenditures given to the government under Saddam Hussein.

During the 1980s, the U.S. supplied billions of dollars worth of arms to both Iran and Iraq, via both legitimate and questionable means. During his vice-presidency, Bush was relatively silent about the Middle East and later, during the beginning of his presidency, he mentioned nothing about Iraq. As in the past, the news media failed to inform the U.S. public about this all-encompassing issue:

\begin{quote}
The news media did much to befog the atmosphere . . . defining the issues . . . as the White House framed them for the press.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Just as the media did not tell us about all aspects of the Iranian Revolution, in the case of the Gulf War reports, again was limited by lack of expertise and what the Pentagon would allow them to tell the public.

Relating to this issue, the \textit{New York Times} cover-story on January 15, 1991 (the eve of Operation Desert Storm) had absolutely no first-hand accounts from journalists in Kuwait or

\textsuperscript{56} Stephen Graubard, \textit{Mr. Bush's War} (New York: Hill and Wang), introduction.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., xii.
Iraq, not to mention the entire Middle East. The entire account was presented from Washington sources, "officials" as they were called. Perhaps "officials" were the only sources to which the New York Times or any other newspaper had access.

It is interesting that neither Reagan nor Bush had professed "outrage" over the Iraqi invasion of Iran as they did over the invasion of Kuwait. The Ayatollah's problems were conveniently called as all of his own making, not worthy of U.S. concern. Again, as with the Iranian Revolution, the White House and the media cooperated to produce myths, although they were rarely recognized as such.58

On top of the self-imposed limitations of the media, the government works to organize the press in a way that limits its capacity for quality, investigative reporting. Before and during Operation Desert Storm, there were an unprecedented number of journalists covering the war. Of the 1400 reporters, editors, photographers, and technicians, however, only 192 news people were scheduled to be out with the combat forces.59 All of the media attention surrounding the Persian Gulf was carefully organized into Pentagon "press pools" that further limited the scope and range of reporting:

Pentagon organized pools use the U.S. media as unpaid employees of the Dept. of Defense, on whose behalf these media figures prepare the news of the war for the outer world.

58 Ibid., 197.

59 Debra Gersh, "War Information Hearings," Editor and Publisher 7: (July 1991) 10.
The pool system was used in the Persian Gulf not to facilitate news coverage, but to control it.\textsuperscript{60}

In addition to the limitations that the media puts upon itself, whether conscious or unconscious, the government works to control the media and use it for its own propaganda. The mass media also serves to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity of America.\textsuperscript{61}

The factors of governmental foreign policy objectives, ingrained misconceptions and stereotypes, media misleadings, and general apathy continue to dominate America's attitudes toward the Middle East. The relationship between all of these problems is quite complex, leading to feelings of confusion and hopelessness by those who understand the implications of this ignorance. However, a conscious realization of these factors is a first step in chipping away at the layers of stone that hide the diamond inside -- the truth about the people, the religions, and the diversity of the Middle East -- from us all.

Our media and our government, together, perpetuate unfair images of the Middle East. The recognition of this tendency is important if relations between this region and the United States are to improve, thus creating positive economic and political linkages. By putting aside our ethnocentric and orientalist thought structure in regards to the Middle East, these linkages can grow stronger. We can then perhaps understand the region of

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{61} Herman and Chomsky, \textit{Manufacturing Consent}, introduction.
the Middle East for what it is -- in all facets of culture, religion, economics, and religions.
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