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ON THE ROLE OF STRATEGY IN NONVIOLENT
REVOLUTIONARY SOCIAL CHANGE:
THE CASE OF IRAN, 1977-1979

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Abstract

Are revolutions made or do they come? This question is at the heart of revolution theory and has received plentiful attention from scholars. In this paper I suggest that adherence to this traditional dichotomy may not be the most useful to approach the study of revolutions. Therefore, I argue that theorists of revolutions are well advised to examine the role of the strategic decisions made by revolutionaries in their struggles against the state. Drawing empirically on the nonviolent revolution of Iran in 1977-79, I show that the strategic decisions made by the opposition movement not only allowed them to capitalize on a political opportunity, but that their strategic choices in fact helped bring that opportunity about in the first place.

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Introduction

One of the central theoretical arguments in the study of revolutions concerns the question of structure versus agency – do revolutionaries actively bring about the breakdown of the state, or do they simply respond passively to structural changes in their social contexts? Overwhelmingly, scholars have come down on the side of structural explanations of revolutions. Echoing Wendell Phillips's famous assertion, most commentators thus seem to agree that "revolutions are not made, they come" (Skocpol 1979:17). Theda Skocpol (1979) is often seen as the torch bearer of a generation of structuralists that include some of the most accomplished theorists of revolutionary social change (Foran 2005; Goldstone 1991; Goodwin 2001; Tilly 1978; Wickham-Crowley 1992). While some of these scholars have managed to include non-structural factors into their arguments, the dominance of structural explanations is almost total. Among the exceptions to the rule, Selbin (1997; 2010) stands out as an important voice. Nonetheless, what Skocpol refers to as "voluntarist" approaches to revolutions have been largely unsuccessful in contributing to the development of revolution theory.

Perhaps contrary to what is now expected, this paper does not amount to another passionate call to "bring agency back in." Instead, the theoretical argument made below suggests that structures are immensely important to our understanding of revolutionary outbreaks. However, that does not mean human agents are inconsequential in stories of revolution. Therefore, this paper focuses on the strategies of revolutionaries, and, most importantly, how those strategies continuously interact with structural contexts in an ongoing iterative process through which structures shape strategies and strategies in turn reshape structures.

Scholars of contentious action have long been aware of the importance of strategy. Bill Gamson's (1975) early contribution marks an important milestone, as does Jim Jasper's (2004) more recent article on the topic. Despite important contributions like these, the nature of strategy tends to be perceived of as a response to some significant political opportunity. Only once a structural opportunity has presented itself, the argument seems to go, do activists' strategic choices appear to matter. As one scholar points out, "the concept of 'opportunity' inherently signifies something to be sought, desired, seized, enjoyed, valued, and maximized" (Buechler 2004:61), in other words something imposed on passive agents. Although the political process model (McAdam 1982; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly 2001) was created to be a dynamic concept, the primacy of structure is fairly clear: the "job" of activists is to make the best possible use of opportunities thrown their way (see Goldstone 2004). The opportunities themselves are seen as created by forces beyond the agents' control, and thus strategic choices temporally follow structural changes. In the pages to come I show that revolutionary strategy may be less dependent on structural contexts than we tend to assume, as actors can create their own opportunities prior to the existence of favorable structures through shrewd strategizing. I construct this theoretical critique of the political process paradigm with the help of empirical evidence from the Iranian Revolution of 1977-79.

This paper is based on a larger comparative-historical project on "nonviolent revolutions" – revolutionary social movements that intentionally eschew violent tactics in favor of nonviolent ones, such as strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts. The recent wave of nonviolent revolutions that has swept the world since the late 1970s, and continues to do so in 2011, is an especially useful universe of cases. Elsewhere referred to as "self-limiting, evolutionary, carnation, velvet, singing, rose, orange, negotiated, electoral, peaceful, or even non-revolutionary revolution[s]" (Garton Ash 2009:376), nonviolent revolutions bring the centrality of strategy to the foreground of analysis. Protesters armed only with posters, slogans, and their own creativity must rely more heavily on their strategic shrewdness than is the case with their violent counterparts. Nonviolent struggle requires its protagonists to carefully consider the political, social, and cultural contexts in which the conflict takes place (Sharp 1973; 2005; Ackerman & Kruegler 1994; Zunes, Kurtz, & Asher 1999; Ackerman & DuVall 2000; Helvey 2004; Schock 2005; Roberts & Garton Ash 2009; Ritter 2010; Nepstad forthcoming). Consequently, we may with some confidence assume that if strategy is a useful concept in collective action research, a study of nonviolent revolutions should make for an excellent point of departure.

The article is divided into two parts. The first half of the paper shows how Iranian students living abroad, along with exiles, employed specific strategies that helped create a structural context that proved difficult for the shah and the Iranian state to handle. The second part then describes how Iranian revolutionaries nonviolently took advantage of the structural context the foreign-based part of the movement had helped generate.[1] This design is meant to highlight the iterative relationship between structure and strategy, and how structures of political opportunity are sometimes less structural than they may appear.

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[1] For the purposes of this paper a nonviolent revolution is defined as a transformation of the political and/or social order of society, carried out through mass mobilization that relies overwhelmingly on the noninstitutionalized use of strikes, demonstrations, boycotts, and similar nonviolent methods, while deliberately eschewing violence. Implicit in this definition is the fact that the

Creating the Structural Opportunity: Iran, the U.S. and Human Rights

One of the most popular "explanations" of the Iranian Revolution's success, especially among its victims, is that the United States and President Jimmy Carter wanted to see the shah replaced on the Peacock Throne. Although this sort of historical revisionism can be dismissed as conspiracy theorizing, the special relationship between Iran and the United States played an important role in the revolution that unfolded in 1977-79. In particular, numerous scholars have convincingly incorporated President Carter's commitment to human rights into their discussions of the Revolution's causes. One common argument suggests that the American president's human rights agenda put pressure on the shah to liberalize, and that the sudden liberalization of Iran's polity in turn contributed to the breakdown of the state by providing would-be revolutionaries with an important political opportunity (Abrahamian 1982; Amjad 1989; Amuzegar 1991, Arjomand 1988; Bakhash 1984; Baktiari 1996; Bill 1988a; Cottam 1988; Daneshvar 1996; Falk 1980; Foran 1993; Gasiorowski 1990; Grayson 1981; Heikal 1982; Kamrava 1990; Keddie 2003; Matin-asgari 2002; Menashri 1990; Milani 1988; Moaddel 1993; Parsa 1988; 1989; Seliktar 2000; Sick 1985; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994; Stempel 1981; Strong 2000; Wright 2001). However, a crucial question that is rarely asked, is why Carter's human rights agenda had such a detrimental effect on the Iranian government while other, equally repressive states supported by the United States fared much better. In other words, why did the president's human rights agenda constitute a political opportunity in Iran, but not in many other countries? To solve that puzzle it is necessary to examine the oppositional strategies employed by exiled Iranians and students residing in the West in the decades leading up to Carter's election and the revolution.

Carter's commitment to human rights represented the political opening Iranian activists had been waiting for, and it would be quite reasonable to assume that it constitutes a structural explanation à la Skocpol of the timing of the Revolution. However, such an assumption would not be rooted in the historical record. What appears to be a structural opening was in fact the result of a deliberate and strategic process through which foreign-based Iranians lobbied the world for its attention. Among them, students living abroad

> played the most important role in portraying the shah's regime as a repressive dictatorship, *thereby undermining its international legitimacy and support*. Through vocal demonstrations and publicity campaigns, it was instrumental in *drawing the attention of the international media, human rights organizations, political groups, and foreign governments to repression in Iran*, thus restraining the government's otherwise arbitrary treatment of its political victims [emphasis added]. (Matin-asgari 2002:1)

The revolutionary role of the abroad-based Iranian students has been significantly underestimated by scholars and frequently left out of discussions of resistance to the shah. Nonetheless, a few insightful researchers have placed students at the center of their studies. For example, Matin-asgari (2002), perhaps the most important chronicler of the Iranian student movement, has suggested that "university students (including seminarians) provided the main social base of opposition to the shah's regime during the two pre-revolutionary decades" (Matin-asgari 2002:4). This point is echoed by Menashri (1990), who, while seemingly downplaying the students' role, has noted that in the period from 1963 to 1976, when the opposition was unable to muster a meaningful challenge to the shah inside Iran, "its most conspicuous manifestations were among Iranian students abroad – an embarrassment, but certainly no danger to the shah" (18). While largely sympathetic, Menashri's evaluation of the student movement is incomplete; students played an immensely important part in the pre-revolutionary period as they helped direct the world's attention to Iran and the shah's human rights record.

Student activities abroad first became an element of the opposition movement when three separate student organizations (based in Europe, the U.S., and Iran) joined together in Paris in January 1962, to create the Confederation of Iranian Students/National Union (CISNU). The new student organization was almost immediately called into action. On January 21, just days after CISNU's founding congress, the shah approved a military attack on unarmed students demonstrating on the campus of Tehran University. CISNU's response was near instantaneous as it issued the following statement:

> The Confederation of Iranian Students, representing 13,000 students in Europe and 6,000 students in the United States, hereby informs government authorities of its demands, letting them know that unless we receive a response by Friday, 26 January, *we shall employ every means available abroad to show the Free World the true face of those in charge in Iran* [emphasis added]. (Matin-asgari 2002:57)

(Contd.) ———————————

presence of state violence does not affect the nonviolent status of the revolution. Based on this definition, most scholars agree that the Iranian Revolution was indeed nonviolent (Abrahamian 1982; Amjad 1989; Arjomand 1988; Bakhash 1990; Burns 1996; Cottam 1988; Daneshvar 1996; Dorman & Farhang 1987; Fischer 2003; Foran 1994; Green 1982; Hoveyda 1980; Keddie 1983; Kurzman 2004; Milani 1988; Parsa 1989; Parsons 1984; Shivers 1980; Sick 1985; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994; Stempel 1981).

In the eyes of the shah's regime the last part of the statement might have appeared an empty threat. However, over the next decade and a half the students undermined the Iranian state by doing exactly what they had promised to do, and thereby helped bring about a structural context that would prove favorable to Khomeini and his collaborators.

The students' strategy was as simple as it was effective. By taking any opportunity to protest against the shah and his regime, they were able to attract the attention of the international media, human rights organizations, and foreign politicians. The strategy of advertising the shah's human rights abuses eventually caused several human rights organizations and news outlets to publish scathing criticisms of the Iranian leadership, criticisms that in due course made the shah's relationship with his key ally tenuous at best and impossible at worst.

The earliest student demonstration against the shah outside of Iran occurred in the United States in 1959. The shah himself suspected that the demonstration was a CIA-coordinated response to his decision two years earlier to sign an agreement with ENI (the Italian state oil company) at the expense of several American companies (Bill 1988a). Whether the shah's suspicions were indeed well-founded we may never know, but what is clear is that the 1959 demonstration was not to be an isolated occurrence. In January 1962, in response to the massacre at Tehran University, approximately 500 students protested against Prime Minister Amini when he visited London, and in the early spring those scenes were repeated in Bonn (Matin-asgari 2002).

In April of that same year, the shah made an official visit to the United States. When he arrived in New York he was greeted by student demonstrators and forced to leave the airport via a back exit. The demonstrations then continued outside the Waldorf Astoria where the shah was staying. In connection to these activities the students published an open letter to President Kennedy in which they criticized the shah and his human rights record. When the king traveled to Washington to meet with the president, the protesters were on hand to receive him there as well. In May 1967 the shah visited Cologne, unaware of the fact that local Iranian students had already distributed over 100,000 leaflets all over Germany. Consequently the shah was met by protesters in Aachen, Bonn, Düsseldorf, and Munich. In August of the same year, students wearing face masks in order to avoid identification by the SAVAK[2] clashed with the police as the shah once again visited the United States (Matin-asgari 2002).

These and many other similar expressions of student dissent would probably have had a very minor impact on Iranian history had they not been accompanied by an extensive propaganda campaign. Milani's (1988) excellent summary of the chain of events that resulted from the students' efforts (and those of other opposition elements living abroad) deserves to be quoted at length:

> The Shah was exceptionally sensitive to his image in the international community as a benevolent ruler. A vulnerable aspect of his regime was its ignominious human rights record. The exiled opposition to the Shah in Western Europe and North America in the sixties and the seventies, including the Confederation of Iranian Students, adroitly manipulated this weakness by contacting human rights organizations and providing them with exaggerated and sometimes fallacious information about the so-called political holocaust in Iran, a country alleged to have more than 100,000 political prisoners. The human rights organizations in turn denigrated the Shah: In 1972, a United Nations panel found Iran guilty of consistent violations of human rights; and, in 1975, Amnesty International conferred on Iran the notoriety of having the world's most terrifying human rights record. (180-1)

Regardless of their veracity, the shah was forced to deal with the atrocious human rights statistics attributed to him and his regime. Although no longer the insecure ruler of his youth, he still displayed an obsession with the world's opinion of him. This fixation resulted in the bizarre scenario in which "a major and continuous assignment of [the Iranian ambassadors to London, Washington, and the United Nations] was to review Western press coverage of Iran and to do whatever they could to prevent or minimize negative publicity about Iran and its supreme leader" (Dorman & Farhang 1987:24). Yet despite severe allegations from Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, the International Red Cross, and other human rights organizations, "the humanitarian efforts of these organizations were by and large inconsequential," as they were "devoid of effective leverage within the Iranian regime" (Milani 1988:180-1). This absence of leverage would soon be remedied by the emergence of two new actors on the Iranian human rights stage: the international media and President Carter.

The European media had been paying some attention to its Iranian student populations' activities aimed at the shah's regime since the 1960s, and its curiosity now increased thanks to the human rights organizations' reports. In the early 1970s, encouraged by visiting Iranian students, publications such as Germany's *Der Spiegel* and *Frankfurter Rundschau,* France's *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur,* and England's *Times*, *The Economist*, and *The Guardian*, all began to report on alleged torture and political repression in Iran (Matin-asgari

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[2] The Iranian secret police

2002:122). These journalistic efforts culminated in a special report published by the *Sunday Times* of London on January 19, 1975, that confirmed "the systematic use of torture in Iranian prisons," including "the worst allegations, such as the burning of victims on an electrically-heated metal table" (Matin-asgari 2002:151).

Perhaps shamed into action by its European counterpart, and egged on by its own Iranian student population, the American media eventually began to address Iran's human rights situation in the mid-1970s. While in the previous decades American news outlets had been content to simply echo the sentiments of the aligned American and Iranian governments without paying close attention to conditions on the ground, the mid-1970s represented a renaissance for American journalistic interest in Iran. "The mainstream press for the first time began to raise troubling questions about the shah's regime, especially concerning his quest for military power, method of rule, and repression of human rights" (Dorman & Farhang 1987:131). Iran's human rights situation was still at this point only one of several factors deemed problematic by American journalists and politicians. The latter group was particularly concerned with the shah's rapid military buildup, which was made possible by American arms sales.

The shah's repression of human rights was finally addressed head-on when the *New York Times* published an article on the topic in September 1974, and the king's reliance on the secret police was the target of a report in *Newsweek* that same year (Dorman & Farhang 1987:108; Halliday 1979). *Washington Post*'s Jack Anderson devoted a May 1976 column to "the shah's 'rule by torture and terror' and [the reality] of SAVAK spying on Iranians in the United States." Three months later, in August 1976, "*Time* magazine published a special report on torture as government policy, naming Iran and Chile as the most frequently cited examples." Also in that same month, the *New York Times* criticized the close U.S.-Iranian relationship, lambasting the shah's method of rule as "militaristic and dictatorial" (Matin-asgari 2002:154).

The mid-1970s thus represent a brief period of time in which the U.S. media began to seriously examine the shah's regime, with the result that "by 1976 references to human rights abuses had become routine in press coverage" (Dorman & Farhang 1987:108). Matin-asgari (2002) elegantly captures the monumental shift that took place in the second half of the 1970s by arguing that

> a definite publicity breakthrough had occurred, with the international news media viewing Iran as having one of the world's most repressive governments. Years of adverse publicity by the CISNU (Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union) was the most direct and important cause of this situation" (148).

While the students deserve significant credit for bringing the Iranian political situation to the media's attention, they did so indirectly, with international human rights organizations serving as midwives. Far from a fortuitous fluke, this development was the result of deliberate strategy choices made by Iranian students and exiles (Matin-asgari 2002; Zonis 1991). The fact that American media outlets were oblivious to Iran in the repressive 1960s while increasingly active in reporting on the nation a decade later is perhaps best explained as a reflection of the world's newfound interest in Iran due to the nation's reputation on human rights. It is difficult to imagine that such interest would have been awakened without the contributions of Iranians living abroad.

The strategy of Iranian students and exiles helps us answer the question posed at the beginning of this section, namely, why human rights became such an Achilles heal for the shah while other repressive regimes were less affected. Previous scholarship, cited above, has assumed that Carter's commitment to human rights in itself became a problem for the shah. But if this was the case we would expect virtually all U.S.-supported dictators to suffer equally due to Carter's human rights agenda. Alternatively, Carter may have put special pressure on Iran, but as Kurzman (2004) has shown such an explanation is not supported by the historical record. The reason why the Iranian state became so vulnerable was because the human rights question was already on the table by the time the new president received the keys to the White House. What appears to be a structural opening, what Foran (2005) calls a "world-systemic opening" is only structural as far as the actual election of Carter is concerned. The Iranian students and exiles played no role here, but they turned out to be fortunate enough to have the American people elect a president who by virtue of his own campaign rhetoric could not easily dismiss the case they had made against their king. By publicly articulating a human rights policy in the course of his presidential campaign, Carter inadvertently legitimized and concretized the conceptual frame the foreign-based opposition had utilized for the last decade (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford 1986). The strategy of the students and exiles had been to show the world, and especially the United States, the "true face of those in charge in Iran." I argue that the implicit objective was to make the West realize that it was unbecoming for its leaders to support a ruler who obviously had little respect for the human rights framework so central to the West's value system. With the election of Jimmy Carter the opposition received a gift from Lady Fortuna that no strategy in the world could have provided them with.

Exploiting the Structural Opening: The Military, the World, and Nonviolent Tactics

The strategic decision to focus on the shah's poor human rights record allowed the Iranian opposition to create a structural opportunity for itself. Now that opportunity had to be exploited. This section analyzes the strategies used by Iranian activists to weaken the state once a revolutionary situation (Tilly 1978) had been established. I show that Iranian activists identified two supporters of the shah's regime that had to be neutralized: the military and the United States. By maintaining the human rights frame that had dominated its discourse for the past 15 years, and complementing it with an explicitly nonviolent repertoire of collective action, the opposition set out to weaken both "pillars of support" (Sharp 2005).

Beginning in 1977, shortly after Jimmy Carter moved in to the White House, Iranian activists began to test the boundaries of their new political reality. They did so through nonviolent tactics, such as letter-writing campaigns and other mild forms of dissent. By January 1978, demonstrations were becoming a regular occurrence in Iran. The shah responded indecisively. Knowing that in the wake of the human rights organizations' stinging reports the world was watching him through the seemingly omnipresent eyes of the media, the king bemoaned "the treachery of the American Press" (Zonis 1991:235-6). He was painfully aware that "other countries would look with horror at mass violations of civil rights" (Stempel 1981:136). The only way he would have felt comfortable about attacking the unarmed protesters that threatened his rule would have been if the United States' had explicitly approved of such action. As his most important ally, the shah hoped that the U.S. would consider him essential enough to its interests to do whatever was necessary to keep him on the throne. Thus, throughout the unrest of 1978 the shah looked for signs that the U.S. would endorse an "iron fist" strategy. However, the Carter administration, trapped by its own human rights rhetoric, never furnished such an endorsement (Milani 1988).

Trapped by the human rights framework of the opposition and President Carter, the shah felt forced to issue "impossible orders" to his troops, with the result that soldiers were prohibited from opening fire on protesters unless violently attacked. Once activists realized that the armed forces had been instructed to exercise restraint, they would test the limits of this restraint by seeing how far they could push the soldiers without drawing fire. Although this tactic of playing cat and mouse games with the armed forces proved somewhat successful for the opposition as it severely frustrated the military, the main strategy was not to antagonize the troops but rather to win them over (Stempel 1981; Arjomand 1986).

Partly in response to the military's "hold your fire" policy, but also based on their past experience of military intervention in Iranian street politics, revolutionary leaders reacted shrewdly. Khomeini implored his followers "that under no circumstances were they to clash with the armed forces" (Heikal 1982:145). While the ayatollah's pleas sometimes fell on deaf ears, most demonstrators embraced his call to "talk to the soldiers, have a dialogue with them" (Heikal 1982:155). It is worth emphasizing that Khomeini's nonviolent approach to the military should not be confused with an idealist commitment to pacifist principles. Instead, like most of the senior revolutionary leadership, the ayatollah still recalled the army's successful repression of the Muharram uprising in 1963. As Stempel (1981) explains,

> The extensive program to propagandize the military was undertaken because the older mullahs remembered how the army had ended unrest in 1963 by shooting down the demonstrating mobs. The Liberation Movement agreed that the army, and labor union members and small businessmen as well, should be neutralized or won over. Throughout the summer and fall [of 1978], the Liberation Movement and the religious dissidents worked together very closely. Their goals were identical: to undermine the Shah through the army and thereby destroy his support. (110)

In other words, the decision to "demilitarize the military" (Satha-Anand 1999:170) was based exclusively on strategic concerns.

One representative instance of mass appeal to the armed forces coincided with demonstrations marking the end of Ramadan on September 4, 1978. In an apparent effort to follow the revolutionary leadership's advice, and "far from being violent, the demonstrators made a special effort to establish rapport with the soldiers who lined the demonstration area" (Cottam 1988:175). Two French reporters vividly describe the events unfolding before them:

> Two trucks full of soldiers, with a machine-gun battery, are at their posts. The procession, which has grown, it appears, roars and dances in the sun: "Soldier, my brother, why do you shoot your brothers?" A spray of flowers falls on the machine-gun barrel, the crowd touches the tarpaulins and the poles of the trucks. Emboldened, it shakes the hands of the soldiers, kisses them, covers them with bouquets. In a whirlwind of shouts, the first guns have been conquered, the soldiers are in a state of shock, bewildered. Some of them cry,

their machine-guns henceforth useless. The officers of the convoy speak up: "We belong to the people, but
we are in the service, do not commit any violence, we do not want to shoot." (qtd. in Kurzman 2004:63)[3]

Although the two journalists may have embellished the scene they witnessed, their account reveals both the
revolutionaries' strategy and its outcome. That presenting soldiers with flowers, which was to become a tactical
mainstay of the revolution, was indeed a coordinated and deliberate scheme is evidenced by the fact that "florists
gave the demonstrators bunches of flowers" (Cottam 1988:175). It is difficult to see what other uses for the
flowers the florists might have had in mind for the demonstrators.[4]

      For the armed forces, the situation quickly became untenable: at the height of the revolution the soldiers
were faced, on a near-daily basis, with demonstrators who urged them to join the people. Unauthorized to attack,
the conscripts were forced to listen to the crowds' pleas to its "Moslem brothers" to lay down their weapons
(Amuzegar 1991; Heikal 1982, Kurzman 2004). The eventual result of this popular pressure was that military
morale plummeted, and "commanders began doubting the unquestioned loyalty of draftees and enlisted men"
(Amuzegar, 1991: 286).[5] In the face of these conditions, military officials urged the shah to either unleash the
military on the people or withdraw the soldiers to their barracks. The shah refused to accept either proposal, and
the soldiers remained on the streets where they were battered with opposition propaganda (Hoveyda 1980;
Kurzman 2004).

      The combined tactics of general strikes on the one hand, which required the army to step in and do the
work of some economic sectors (Kurzman 2004), and demonstrations that nonviolently propagandized the
military on the other, proved too much for the armed forces to handle. By the time millions of Iranians, on
December 9 and 10, participated in "impressive, superbly organized, and massive" nonviolent demonstrations
throughout Iran to celebrate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain on Tasu'a and 'Ashura (the ninth and tenth day of
Muharram), the army's usefulness had already been exhausted (Milani 1988:216). In Tehran alone, the two days'
demonstrations are estimated to have attracted as many as three million marchers. On 'Ashura, approximately
five million Iranians – out of total population of less than 40 million – protested against the government,
numbers that quite possibly represented the largest protest in world history at the time.[6] Several scholars (Fischer
2003; Kurzman 2004; Stempel 1981) have expressed their amazement over the peaceful nature of the massive
protests that "marked the end of the Shah" (Arjomand 1988:121).

      If the military had been an inefficient tool for dealing with the revolutionaries throughout 1978, its
usefulness deteriorated even further after the Tasu'a and 'Ashura demonstrations. Meanwhile, the opposition
continued its outreach to the soldiers, and desertion rates increased rapidly in December and January (Arjomand
1988; Heikal 1982; Kurzman 2004). On January 15, one day before the shah left Iran for good, a high-ranking
commander proposed that soldiers should be kept away from the demonstrators:

> We should round up the units and send them some place where [the demonstrators] won't have any contact
> with the soldiers. Because yesterday they came and put a flower in the end of the rifle barrel, and another on
> the [military] vehicle... The soldiers' morale just disappears. (Kurzman 1996:164)

It is difficult to imagine more concrete evidence of the success of the revolutionaries' strategy of nonviolently
engaging the military. "Figures from Iranian military intelligence show the desertion rate rose from 3 percent per
week to 8 percent in September-December 1978, and by February 1 the rate was up to 20 percent" (Stempel
1981:151).

      If the military was the primary target of the opposition's strategy, the world community, and the United
States in particular, was its secondary objective. As we have seen, Iranian student groups abroad had employed
this tactic for the last two decades, and Khomeini had clearly understood its potential. As early as the fall of
1977, the ayatollah urged his followers that just like secular oppositionists, they "too should write letters" and
"inform the world" of the situation in Iran (Khomeini qtd. in Kurzman 2004:22). It appears that Khomeini's
supporters either heeded his advice or had reached a similar conclusion on their own, because following the
unrest in Qom, which according to most accounts triggered the Revolution in January 1978, it took the

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[3] For other accounts of the same event, see Cottam (1988:175), Foran (1993:381), and Moaddel (1994:160).

[4] According to Abrahamian, "florists distributed carnations so that demonstrators could hand them out to soldiers" (Abrahamian
2009:170)

[5] Part of the problem was that "more than 90 percent of the four hundred thousand army personnel were conscripts who served for
only eighteen months; they remained closely tied to the civilian population and became unreliable instruments during periods of
massive conflicts" (Parsa 1989:247).

[6] For details about the Tasu'a and 'Ashura marches, see Abrahamian (1982), Amjad (1989), Arjomand (1988), Fischer (2003), Foran
(1993), Hoveyda (1980), Kurzman (2004), Milani (1988), Seliktar (2000), and Stempel (1981)

opposition only one month to produce press kits about the three days of government repression, that were then distributed to visiting foreign correspondents (Stempel 1981:92).

Throughout the revolution, activists sought to keep the world informed about their activities. By October 1978, the exiled Khomeini was no longer welcome in Iraq, and moved to Neuphle-le-Château in the suburbs of Paris. The Iranian regime had pressured the Iraqi government to deport the ayatollah so that he would no longer have access to large Shi'i crowds (Stempel 1981:124). While this decision might have made some sense at the Iranian government's security meetings, it turned out to be an enormous policy blunder. Once in Paris, Khomeini found himself surrounded by Western media outlets itching to tell his story (Ansari 2003; Foran 1993; Milani 1988; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994; Stempel 1981). With near unlimited access to Western journalists, Khomeini and his aides began their campaign to convince the world that an Islamic Iran would constitute no threat, as it "would become a reliable oil supplier to the West, would not ally with the East, and would be willing to have friendly relations with the United States" (Abrahamian 1982:524).

Khomeini's task was made easier by the fact that "sufficient numbers of the Western intelligentsia were sympathetic to the revolutionary movement" and saw Iran as a potential "model for transition from authoritarian rule that could be copied elsewhere" (Ansari 2003:9). Once he had overcome his initial suspicion of the Western media (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994), Khomeini "skillfully exploited the modern communication system to spread his attractive gospel of freedom, independence, and Islamic government in Iran and the rest of the world" (Milani 1988:202). Not wholly unlike Gandhi in the first half of the century, Khomeini, thanks in part to his charisma and asceticism, became a European media darling of sorts and fully exploited this opportunity by chastising the shah's regime and pacifying the West's concerns about an Islamic Iran. In his first two months of Parisian exile, Khomeini generated "458 pages of… messages, speeches, and interviews" (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994:134-5).

In addition to utilizing the Western press for their revolutionary purposes, Khomeini and his colleagues directly targeted the U.S. with their propaganda. Ibrahim Yazdi, the coordinator of the Muslim Students Association in the United States and a close Khomeini collaborator, "was dispatched on a tour to reassure the public and the administration about the reasonableness of his boss" in the late fall of 1978 (Seliktar 2000:63). As Sick (1985) explains,

> [Yazdi's] themes were simple. The revolution was peaceable, employing the techniques of nonviolence against the murderous assaults of the shah's forces. The objectives of an Islamic republic, once the shah was gone, were fully compatible with U.S. ideals of personal freedom and human rights. Iran was in no danger of being taken over by Communist elements, and an Islamic republic would not be interested in aligning itself with the Soviet Union. On the contrary, nothing would prevent the continuation of mutually satisfactory relations with the United States. Since the fall of the shah was now virtually certain, he argued, the United States should give up its fruitless policy of support for his regime and make peace with the new revolutionary leaders who were about to take over. (112)

These carefully weighted words seemingly hit home with the many Americans who were concerned about their country's alliance with a repressive and militarily addicted dictator (Albert 1980). The result of Yazdi's PR tour was that "many came away convinced that Khomeini was being unfairly maligned in the West and that the Revolution offered the best hope in fifty years for the triumph of human rights and free political expression in Iran" (Sick 1985:112). At the same time as Yazdi was convincing Americans in the U.S. not to fear an Islamic Iran, opposition politicians employed similar tactics in Iran by lobbying both the American and British ambassadors (Parsons 1984; Stempel 1981). The revolutionary strategy seems clear – give the West, and the U.S. in particular, a revolution it cannot oppose – a nonviolent revolution fought in the name of human rights (Westad 1992).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that attention to strategy may be a productive way forward in the study of revolutions. I have shown that Iranian activists, prior to the revolution, contributed to the creation of the structural openings that made a nonviolent revolution possible. By bringing the world's attention to the shah's human rights record, the activists forced the king to show restraint and even undertake some liberalization of the political sphere, particularly after the election of Jimmy Carter. The important point here is that it was not the ascension of Carter in itself that was problematic for the Iranian government, but rather the fact that the rhetoric of the opposition movement and Carter's own rhetoric resonated with one another. Hamid Algar (1983) has similarly argued that the revolution was deliberately molded to fit the West's concern with human rights:

> We find, for example, that as one consequence of President Jimmy Carter's hypocritical election propaganda concerning human rights, *people decided that this was a useful instrument to employ against the Iranian regime*. It is sometimes said in America in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution that Carter somehow

undermined the Iranian regime by promising people human rights and that people, encouraged by President Carter, therefore took to the streets. This is an absurdity. *A more accurate version of the situation is that it was seen as a useful tactic to demand human rights, not that the regime was deemed capable by its nature of giving human rights, but simply that given this apparent verbal change in American policy, the slogan of human rights was a useful one to be used for tactical purposes against the regime* [emphasis added]. (100)

Almost overnight following Carter's election victory, numerous Iranian human rights groups were created. According to Keddie (2003),

> interviews and statements do indicate… that professionals and intellectuals were determined to utilize the American human rights policy to wedge an opening by publishing their grievances, hoping to widen the crack in order to change government policies. (215)

What both Algar and Keddie seem to overlook, however, is the point that has been made throughout this paper: human rights was not chosen as a tactic once Carter had been elected. It had been a central component of resistance to the shah for the preceding fifteen years. The campaign rhetoric of the new president made the structural opportunity easier to exploit, but it would be wrong to assume that Carter single-handedly created it. Instead, the revolutionaries' strategies and the structural international context of the 1960s and 1970s interacted with one another in an iterative process that set the stage for a revolutionary showdown.

Nonviolent tactics, the revolutionaries preferred response to the "human rights opportunity", was also a strategic decision. Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression" and "everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association" (United Nations 1948: Sections 19 & 20), the shah could not easily repress strikes and demonstration without making himself guilty of the opposition charges he was desperately trying to escape. In short, the revolutionaries strategically chose a method of struggle appropriate for the structural context in which they found themselves.

Employing the notion of strategy in studies of revolutions may prove very useful. In contrast to both agency and structure, strategy allows the researcher to view collective action as the process it is. Instead of focusing on a polar relationship, the emphasis on revolutionary strategy forces us to analyze a dynamic, iterative relationship in which structure and agency constantly transform one another. Structural conditions do shape human action, but human action can also shape structures. If we want to understand how revolutions both emerge and succeed, we are well advised to examine how strategic agents both shape and respond to their contexts.

More research is necessary in order to determine the utility of a strategy-based approach to revolutions. In this paper I have focused on the role of strategy within an international/political context, but strategy may also play an important role in cultural, social, and economic contexts. The bottom line is that attention to strategy may constitute fertile ground for scholars of revolutions.

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