

Observation no: 175

Country-year: Iran 1979

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No

The Islamic regime came to power in 1979 through popular revolution. The military did not defend the regime, but it also was not the instigator of the regime's overthrow.¹

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes

The country's previous leader, Mohammed Reza Shah, had come to power through a U.S.-backed military coup in 1953.²

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No

The Ayatollah Khomeini was a lifelong Muslim cleric who had been exiled from Iran for many years.

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

No

The legacy Iranian military, known as the Artesh, incorporated minorities.³

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes

The legacy military required strong personal allegiance to the Shah. The revolutionary military (known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) that

¹ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: a Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), pp. 216-224; and Mark Roberts, *Khomeini's Incorporation of the Iranian Military*, McNair Paper 48 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, January 1996).

² Ward 2009.

³ Ward 2009.

began to form in 1979 required strict dedication to the ideals of the revolution, over and above the demonstration of military skill.⁴

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

No

Khomeini did form the Islamic Republican Party in an effort to solidify his control of the revolution, but histories of the armed forces offer little discussion of its impact on the officer corps.⁵

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes

Particularly in the Guard and the Pasdaran, training was heavily ideological. There was a strong belief that soldiers with appropriate revolutionary zeal could triumph over materially superior opponents on the battlefield.⁶

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes

During the 1960s and 70s, the military's role was primarily internal, focused on implementing the Shah's reform and modernization programs and quelling opposition.⁷ Under the Shah, "senior officers were assigned to run provinces, important government ministries and large state enterprises, particularly major industrial installations."⁸ After the revolution, large segments of the Guard were focused on local policing and enforcement of Islamic laws and regulation, the defense of the regime against counterrevolution, the protection of government buildings and installations, the collection of internal intelligence, the sponsoring of pro-regime rallies, publication of pro-regime literature, and other mobilization of the population in support of the regime.⁹ The Guards also put down ethnic revolts during this period by nearly all the major non-Persian groups in Iran, including the Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Baluchs, and Azeris.¹⁰

⁴ Ward 2009; Roberts 1996; and Nikola Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1987).

⁵ Afshon Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution: Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power (1979-2009)," Ph.D. Dissertation (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2009), p. 72.

⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 228, 230, 245; Zabih, *Iranian Military*, pp. 143-6.

⁷ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 13.

⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 202.

⁹ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 75.

¹⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 26; and Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 233-4.

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

Yes

Under the Shah military officers had been directly involved in provincial governance (see question 8). After the revolution, the Guard took on a similar role. Although the country was never a military dictatorship, the military clearly had a large domestic role both before and after Khomeini came to power.

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

Yes

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was formed essentially for this purpose in May 1979. Although the Artesh's return to the barracks had been instrumental in the Shah's demise, it was not exactly a hotbed of support for the new clerical regime.¹¹ Schahgaldian, who interviewed dozens of exiled Iranian officers in the 1980s, notes, "From the very beginning of the Islamic regime, the ruling clerics were intensely aware of the potential threat that the Shah's military posed to their own political survival."¹² Guard units had been immediately stationed at the exits to Artesh garrisons, ensuring that these units did not move without permission from Khomeini.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes

The Shah "used multiple organizations, including SAVAK, his own secret intelligence bureau, and military intelligence, to watch the armed forces and each other, ensuring that officers could not confidently make alliances with each other or regime opponents."¹³ The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps essentially performed this same function with respect to the regular military after the revolution.

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

Yes.

¹¹ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 101, 225.

¹² Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 28.

¹³ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 209; and Zabih, *Iranian Military*, p. 8.

The Shah regularly purged officers he deemed disloyal.¹⁴ Khomeini initiated massive purges once he came to power as well. Schahgaldian reports that “by the end of 1979 almost all of the hardline pro-Shah officers and those who had been known for their pro-American views were eliminated, regardless of rank, in one way or the other. These reportedly included all of the 14 army division commanders, the eight commanders of the independent army and army air command brigades, and all the military governors.”¹⁵ “The Iranian officer corps may have lost as much as 40 percent of its strength by the eve of the war with Iraq,” Ward estimates.¹⁶

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

No

Sources do not discuss the existence of such a forum.

¹⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 209; Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 202- 209; and Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, pp. vi, 14.

¹⁵ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 21.

¹⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 229. For more background on the purges, see Zabih, *Iranian Military*, chapter 5.