

The Shah: What Israel should learn from Iran (and Egypt and Syria and Lybia)

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have recently read "The Shah" by Abbas Milani 2011, and certain significant parallels strike me as very relevant today.

As a senior army officer, Reza Shah Pahlavi ousted the old Qajar dynasty in 1925. He modelled himself on Kemal Ataturk and wanted to drag Iran out of the medieval grip of the Shia mullahs and transform Persia into a modern state called Iran. He banned the old religious dress imposed on women in public and doubled the number of schools and universities. In particular, he wanted to limit the power of the reactionary mullahs. During the Second World War, Britain and Russia combined to force his abdication, because they thought he was soft on Germany. Ironically, he was particularly and effectively protective of his Jewish subjects, who were amongst the Pahlavi's staunchest supporters.

Reza's son Mohammad Reza replaced him in 1941, almost accidentally, because there was no alternative. Mohammad Reza had a tendency to vacillate and play one side off against the other. But unlike his father he compromised with the religious leaders and returned much of their power. Concessions on one side were balanced by a highly repressive secret service. In the end he even exasperated his allies who pulled the rug from under him, allowing him to fall in 1979. Everyone was blindsided by Ayatollah Khomeini into allowing him to return from exile, gain power, and turn Iran back to its fanatical Middle Ages.

During the post-war period, America and Britain were very busy jockeying for power in the Middle East (amongst other places, of course). It was not just a matter of controlling the oil supplies, important as that was. After all, the halt of Hitler's campaign in Eastern Europe was to prevent him gaining control of the Baku oil fields. The Cold War saw Russia in Azerbaijan on Iran's border and gaining control of the Caspian oil. Iran's southern Gulf oilfields were very significant in the struggle, which in American eyes was to prevent Russia taking over Iran at all costs.

This was one of the main reasons the CIA intervened in the Kim Roosevelt-led Operation Ajax to get rid of Mossadegh the unpredictable prime minister in 1953. They feared he was soft on Moscow, and he nationalized the oil industry. The Western powers feared the political as well as the financial consequences. This constant meddling in Iranian affairs is why there has always been a strain of paranoia in Iran against the Western powers.

In Iran itself the communist Tudeh party, was well entrenched, and there was a genuine fear that it would take the country over. Indeed I remember in 1978

a conversation with Chimen Abramsky, the brilliant neo-Marxist, mercurial, academic son of the great scholar Yehezkel Abramsky (and Head of the London Beth Din), in which he confidently predicted the Tudeh would displace the Shah and gain control.

A recent book, "America's Great Game" by Hugh Wilford, documents the interventions of Kim (Kermit) Roosevelt, the archetypal Christian, anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist mandarin near the top of the CIA. In addition to his covert political role, he also managed to benefit personally from the Iranian oil industry. And these are the sort of people, of course, who complain about the influence of Jewish money.

Now I come to my main point. Mohammad Reza was so concerned to play sides against each other that, in contrast to his father, he courted the ayatollahs and restored a lot of their power. He mistakenly thought that he could ride the tiger. In the end, it was the tiger that turned rabid and destroyed him and most of what he had hoped to achieve for his country.

He seemed, not unlike Obama, to be unaware of the concept of Taghieh. This is a Shia Muslim theological principle that it is not only permissible, but even laudable to lie and deceive to achieve religious ends. The Shah was deceived. The West was deceived. The merchant and intellectual classes who wanted more of a say in running the country were deceived. They all miscalculated the true intentions of religious fascism.

How sad it is that religions, supposedly the standard bearers of honesty and purity, time and again end up being the poster boys of deviousness and deception.

Exactly the same happened in Egypt. Morsi and the Brotherhood presented themselves as a moderate religious alternative to the Mubarak's fascism. Instead they used the infant democratic process to blind the Army into giving them a free hand and the West into praising them for their "Moderate Islam." By now we know what that means.

Israel made a similar mistake in supporting the Islamo-fascist Hamas as a counterbalance to the secular PLO. In 1987 the supposedly brilliant analysts argued that the way to Divide and Rule the Palestinians was to give tacit and underground encouragement to the religious militants in order to contain the secular PLO. It worked for a while. But then it too used the political process to get hold of Gaza and promptly destroyed what fragile democracy there was.

This is the fear in Syria. The fascism of Assad is challenged by extreme Muslims who, if they got power, would squash democracy in favor of a theocracy. Having displaced the moderate rebels, they are now courting Western opinion by claiming they will not be as fanatical as the West currently fears.

I love my religion. But I can see all too clearly how dangerous political religion is everywhere in the world. Vast hordes of unemployed youth are attracted to what appears to be a genuinely religious and social

organization. But they are then easily turned into a murderous rent-a-mob. The siren music of moderation is a sham, a front to gain power, and then that power will be turned against freedom.

I fear for Israel. More and more politicians, industrialists, and wealthy nomenclatura are courting pseudo-mystical rabbis in search of money, blessings, and votes. The demographics favor the religious extreme. That is why it is so important not to allow religious fanaticism to infiltrate the mechanisms of power any more than they have so far. Sympathetic, holy rabbis soon turn into damning furies when their wishes are denied. Interestingly, the vote for religious parties in Israel is well below the number of potential voters in the Charedi community, and it has not risen in tandem with the birthrate. I take this to mean that many of the religious community are intentionally not voting for religious parties.

This is very hopeful. It means that they may be loyal to the religion and love it as much as I do, but they know the dangers of trusting religion in power. We should accord religious leaders respect, but fear the abuses. As the lovely Hebrew proverb goes, "Kabdeyhu, VeChashdeyhu." Honor him, but be on your guard.