

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT FOR “THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION”

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On-screen text:

**The Iranian Revolution
a discussion with Dr. Abbas Milani**

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Dr. Abbas Milani

Director, Hamid & Christina Moghadam Program in Iranian Studies, Stanford University

Abbas Milani: Greetings—or, as we say in Persian, *salām*. My name is Abbas Milani. I direct [the] Iranian Studies Program here at Stanford. I teach courses on politics in Iran, the history of Iran and its encounter with the West, U.S.–Iran relations, and the culture and literature of Iran as a reflection of its political reality. I’m going to try to compress all of that in the next 15 minutes. If you watch this and you have any questions about what I have said, please feel free to write to me at Stanford (amilani@stanford.edu), and I’ll be absolutely delighted to answer your questions.

On-screen text: Why is it important to learn about Iran?

Abbas Milani: First, why should we worry about Iran and particularly the Iranian Revolution of 1979? I think we should learn about Iran, we should teach about Iran because Iran is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. It was one of the earliest empires. An Iranian religion called Zoroastrianism, led by Zarathustra, has had a profound influence on the development of Abrahamic religions. Many of the ideas we tend to think of as Abrahamic ideas actually come from Zoroastrianism, including the idea of paradise, the idea of hell, the idea of a virgin birth, the idea of a messiah. If that’s not enough, Iran has been an absolute essential part of the Middle East for the last century. Virtually everything that has happened in Iran has prefigured the developments in the region. Iran, Egypt, and Turkey are three countries that were a country before the 19th century. They weren’t a concoction of colonialism. They weren’t rapidly made up on a map because England needed to create a kingdom for someone who, for example, it had promised a kingdom to. So it’s a serious country with an old culture and an old civilization.

It was a central pillar of U.S. policy in the postwar period. In the Cold War period, Iran was one of the staunchest allies of the United States. And since 1979, Iran has been one of the staunchest foes of the United States. So historically we need to understand Iran and essentially we need to understand Iran if we are to understand what is happening in the Middle East and what has happened in the Middle East in the last 40 years.

On-screen text: What was the significance of the Iranian Revolution?

Abbas Milani: The Iranian Revolution just celebrated its 40th anniversary. In 1979—February 1979—Iranian monarchy fell. Monarchy that had been the form of government in Iran for more than 2,500 years suddenly gave its place to a new form of government that calls itself the Islamic Republic of Iran but is not a republic in any traditional sense of the word. I will try to explain that in a minute, because—again, understanding that helps [us] understand the evolution of this revolution.

What happens in 1979 has been considered by many scholars as one of the most consequential revolutions in history. If you look at the modern histories of revolution—compared to China,

Russia, the French Revolution—the Iranian Revolution seems to have been more popular in the sense that about 11 percent of the population actually participated in the election. In the other elections, we have 7 percent, 5 percent. Revolutions—although they seem like mass movements—often don't involve everyone in the society. But in Iran, about 11 percent participated.

Not only [was it] a very unusual revolution in terms of how “popular” it was, but it's also—again, by virtual scholarly consensus—one of the most consequential revolutions. Virtually everything that has happened in the Middle East since 1979 is in some way, either directly or indirectly, related to the 1979 moment.

To give you a couple of very important examples, there is good archival evidence that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan would not have happened if the Shah had not fallen. When the Shah fell, the Soviets were afraid that the U.S. would try to infiltrate into Afghanistan, and they entered Afghanistan to their great, disastrous result as a preemptive effort. The war with Iraq, between Iran and Iraq, would certainly not have happened if Khomeini had not come to power. The Hezbollah in Lebanon that has been created, directly funded, amply by Iran, would not have been created. And Hezbollah has been a very important actor. Iran's role in the region would not have caused so much concern amongst the Sunnis that they decided to create their own radical versions to fight Iran. You could certainly argue that without the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's activities in the region, without Hezbollah becoming so powerful, ISIS might not have been created with the help of some of the Sunni governments. So it is a very consequential revolution in terms of the region, and it completely changed the nature of U.S.–Iran relations. As I indicated before, Iran went from being a staunch ally of the United States to being its most staunch foe, and that animosity began with the egregious act of some students who took over the American Embassy in November of 1979 and kept American hostages for 444 days. That cast the die in terms of U.S.–Iran relations. That certainly helped embolden Iraq to attack Iran, and then everything else that I told you about in terms of the regional consequences began to unfold.

On-screen text: What were the domestic causes and effects of the revolution in Iran?

Abbas Milani: What happened inside Iran as a result of the revolution is also very interesting. The notion of “Islamic revolution” is, in a sense, an oxymoron. Islamic state, Islamic government—certainly the Islamic government created in Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic—is based on the idea that power must rest with the clergy, and that the legitimacy of this power is divine in origin. People have no say in it. Ayatollah Khomeini is very clear in a book that he has written on this subject, where he says even if not a single person accepts me as the leader, I am the *de facto* leader of this nation because I know Islamic *sharia*, and the only way for salvation in this world and salvation in the other is for a government to be ruled by *sharia*.

This notion is very incommensurate with the very idea of revolution, because the idea of revolution is actually a very modern idea. Before the rise of the renaissance, before the rise of the modern age, revolution was a concept that didn't have a political connotation. Revolution referred to stellar movements in the skies. Now [it's] the notion that people have the ability, people have the right to overthrow a government. We the people—as the preamble of the Constitution says—have the right to decide who is ruling over us. In the modern notion of governance, citizens have rights and government serves at the behest of the people. Government is a social contract. It is not a divine right given to people.

So the notion of revolution is very modern in origin, and very modern in connotation. The Iranian Revolution was, in this sense, modern, because many, many, many, many thousands of people participated in it. And the goal of the revolution was initially, as I indicated, a democratic Iran. People rose against the Shah not because the Iranian economy was in a bad state. The Iranian economy in the '70s, in the decade before the revolution, was a roaring economy. The only country in the industrializing world that compared to Iran at the time was Taiwan, was South Korea. Turkey was a distant follower of Iran. Those countries are now economic juggernauts. Iran is in a deep economic crisis. That has been the price that Iran has paid for this revolution. So it wasn't economic discontent. There was discontent about inequality, but Iran had almost full employment in 1975, and [on almost every measure] was a very thriving economy. But people were angry at the corruption that existed, people were angry at the authoritarianism that existed, and they opted for a more democratic Iran.

But scholars now know, and Iranian people have now learned, that in order to have a democratic transition, there's a lot of prerequisites. You need a middle class. You need a culture of tolerance. You need women to be incorporated into the political process. You need a civil society that can act as a buffer between the state and the people. And you need an organized, mobilized alternative. In 1979, the only organized and mobilized part of the opposition were the religious forces. And those religious forces then took over the revolution and created an Islamic Republic of Iran, where it is a republic mostly in name, and in reality it is rule by the clergy. Increasingly over the last 40 years, you can see that at the political level, the government has tried to chip away at the republican aspects of this revolution by making the clergy more and more responsible for deciding who can run in the election, who can stay in office. But because it was a democratic revolution, because people rose for democracy, you've had a constant battle for a more democratic Iran over the last 40 years.

On-screen text: What should people know about Iran?

Abbas Milani: I think one of the most important things to know about Iran today is that beneath the veneer of this authoritarian, clerical, septuagenarian regime, there is a vibrant, youthful society that is very internet-savvy, and its movement for democracy is led—I think more than anyone else—by Iranian women. Iranian women have been the force that has fought the most systematically, the most prudently against clerical authoritarianism. They have I think organized what is clearly in my view one of the most successful movements of civil disobedience against the forceful imposition of *hijab* on Iranian women. Iranian women are not against the idea of anyone having a *hijab*. They're against the idea of being forced to wear a *hijab*. They're asking for a choice. And they have made remarkable strides in becoming now more than 65% of college graduates in Iran. More than 60% of all STEM students in Iran are women. There are more published women writers in Iran than there are men. So in spite of the efforts by the clergy to force a very traditional role on women, women are making a revolution of their own. Within that revolution, Iranian women are I think helping Iran become what this revolution was initially meant to create: a democratic Iran where there's pluralism, where there's acceptance for diversity, where there's equality between religions, and equality between genders. I don't think that dream is an impossible dream for Iran.

The short-term prospects are a bit rocky, but in the mid-term and the long term, I'm extremely optimistic that a democratic Iran will finally... After 40 years of struggle in this revolution, and in a sense, after a 105-year struggle—because the first revolution Iran had was in 1905, trying to create a democracy—that dream has continued. That dream is yet to be realized. But I think we are closer to it now than ever in the past 100 years or in the past 40 years.