KING OF KINGS

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION: A STORY OF HUBRIS, DELUSION AND CATASTROPHIC MISCALCULATION

SCOTT ANDERSON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LAWRENCE IN ARABIA*

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Doubleday | *New York*

FIRST DOUBLEDAY EDITION 2025

Published by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Anderson, Scott, 1959– author.
Title: King of kings : the Iranian revolution : a story of hubris, delusion and catastrophic miscalculation / Scott Anderson.
Description: New York : Doubleday, 2025. | Includes index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024047164 | ISBN 9780385548076 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593315668 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780385548083 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran, 1919–1980. | Iran—History—Revolution, 1979. | United States—Foreign relations—Iran. | Iran—Foreign relations—United States.
Classification: LCC DS318.81 .A54 2025 | DDC 955.05/3—dc23/eng/20241213

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024047164

Ebook ISBN 9780385548083

Cover images: (throne) by Sviatlana Lazarenka/Getty Images; (flags) Kagenmi/Getty Images

Cover design by Oliver Munday

penguinrandomhouse.com | doubleday.com

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, https://eu-contact.penguin.ie.

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To Natasha, of course

PREFACE

The Shah will be an active participant in Iranian life well into the 1980s.... There will be no radical change in Iranian political behavior in the near future.

—secret CIA report, "Iran in the 1980s," August 1977, five months before the start of revolution

At about 10:20 on the morning of November 15, 1977, two Sikorsky Sea King helicopters came in low across the Potomac River and made for the flat grassy expanse at the southern base of the Washington Monument. The green-and-white helicopters with their military insignia were part of the presidential fleet known as HMX-1, and on board the lead aircraft was the shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, together with his wife, Farah, and a small royal entourage. The primary purpose of the trailing helicopter was to serve as a decoy.

Waiting alongside the helipad were half a dozen black limousines, along with several Secret Service vehicles and a phalanx of motorcycle police outriders. For security reasons, only a handful of officials knew which limousine would transport the shah to the White House, a mere half a mile away. It was the Iranian monarch's twelfth visit to the United States since assuming the imperial throne thirty-six years before. Over the course of those visits, he had met at the White House with six different American presidents, beginning with Harry Truman. He was now about to meet his seventh: Jimmy Carter.

The shah had been apprehensive about this trip, and for two good reasons. In winning the presidency the previous year, Carter had campaigned on a reformist, clean-government platform. This included, the

former governor of Georgia promised, a new emphasis on protecting human rights around the world and a critical reexamination of American arms sales to dictatorial regimes. Both these promises cast an uncomfortable spotlight on Iran. In recent years, a number of organizations had harshly assailed the shah's regime over its human rights record, and Iran was far and away the largest purchaser of American weapons systems, accounting for nearly half of all such sales in recent years. Senior Carter administration officials had quietly offered the shah reassurances that these high-minded pledges did not apply to him, but the Iranian leader was understandably anxious to hear this from the president personally.

This was joined by a more immediate concern. By 1977, some fifty thousand Iranian students were studying at colleges and universities in the United States, and in recent days a sizable portion of them—as many as four thousand, by some reports—had begun converging on Washington to protest his visit. While overwhelmingly young leftists, their numbers were augmented by a smattering of older Iranian dissidents and exiles, as well as American human rights activists, and they had vowed to give the shah a noisy and embarrassing reception. In fact, they had already put the monarch on notice the previous day, when he had stayed at the preserved colonial village of Williamsburg, Virginia; during the night, the royal couple's sleep was interrupted by chants from several hundred anti-shah demonstrators gathered a short distance away. Lending their appearance a disquieting quality, many concealed their faces behind paper masks, necessary protection, they claimed, against identification by the shah's secret police.

In anticipation of the unpleasantness likely to play out in Washington, the Iranian government had reportedly arranged for hundreds of pro-regime members of the Iranian American community to be flown or bused into the capital, including Iranian air force cadets undergoing training at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas. Along with banners extolling the shah's leadership and U.S.-Iranian friendship, the pro-shah organizers had distributed two-sided solidarity flags: the U.S. emblem on one side, the Iranian on the other. By midmorning, a forewarned D.C. police force had isolated the two factions

on either side of the Ellipse, the great lawn stretching just below the White House, but it made for a tense scene; penned behind flimsy strips of snow fencing about five hundred feet apart, the two groups hurled insults at each other through megaphones, their volume and intensity growing as the time for the shah's scheduled arrival at the White House drew nearer.

That morning found me on the Ellipse as well, strolling among the police and the handful of reporters occupying the no-man's-land between the two sides. I was eighteen years old and employed at the Treasury Department headquarters building, immediately adjacent to the White House, as a special aide to the secretary of the Treasury. The nice-sounding title notwithstanding, I was essentially an errand boy, and because the secretary at the time, W. Michael Blumenthal, required very little in the way of erranding, I spent most of my working hours strolling about the city in search of something interesting to do. On the morning of November 15, 1977, nothing looked quite so interesting as the spectacle unfolding on the Ellipse.

At about 10:30 a.m., the shah's motorcade swung through the iron gates of the White House and came up its semicircular drive, an occasion marked by the start of a twenty-one-gun salute. In hindsight, this customary honor for a visiting head of state might have been a mistake, for the anti-shah protesters on the eastern side of the Ellipse seemed to interpret it rather like the firing of a starting gun. In an instant, hundreds broke through the snow fencing holding them back and began a charge across the great lawn for their opponents. While some of the pro-shah supporters started to flee in panic, a number of the younger men in their midst—the military cadets, judging by their builds and crew cuts—grabbed up whatever potential weapons lay close at hand and similarly rushed forward to battle. Suddenly no-man's-land, rapidly shrinking as it was, didn't seem such a great place to be.

For the next two or three minutes—it felt longer at the time—the Ellipse was the scene of a kind of massive street brawl, fists and feet flying, people sent tumbling or running or crawling, such that it was quite impossible to determine who was getting the better of whom. Nor could I be certain of the affiliation of the demonstrator who struck me across the back with a wooden

stave with such force it sent me momentarily to the ground, although the power of the blow led me to suspect one of the more physically fit military cadets over some leftist graduate student. When finally the police rushed in with tear gas and billy clubs, there were already a good number of injured scattered about the lawn.

For the ceremony welcoming the shah to the White House, a rostrum had been erected on the South Lawn, before which several hundred invited guests were gathered to hear his and the president's opening remarks. In hindsight, this tradition, too, was probably a mistake, for no sooner had the two leaders, along with their wives, mounted the stage than the first wafts of the tear gas discharged on the Ellipse began to envelop them. In a famous series of photos taken at the time, both couples try to maintain dignified poses as tears stream down their cheeks.

Concluding the embarrassing display on the South Lawn as quickly as possible—Jimmy Carter would later joke that it was one of the shortest speeches he ever gave—the two couples retreated to the healthier air inside the White House. As Rosalynn Carter led Farah and her entourage off for a coffee reception and traditional "ladies' tour" of the White House, the two heads of state proceeded to the Cabinet Room, two doors down from the Oval Office. For this meeting, the shah was joined by only two advisors, in contrast to the array of American officials who sat opposite: President Carter, Vice President Walter Mondale, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, along with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and several other senior State Department officials.

Also seated at the table was the chief National Security Council (NSC) officer in charge of Iranian affairs, a forty-two-year-old navy captain named Gary Sick. Although he had carried the Iran portfolio at the NSC for two years, Sick was seeing the shah for the first time. "My first thought was how delicate he seemed," he recalled. "Very elegant, very refined, with this ramrod-straight posture, but the overall impression was of someone rather delicate. From all I'd read about him, all the newsreels I'd watched, I don't know that I was quite prepared for that."

There is often a platitudinous quality to these preliminary White House meetings with foreign heads of state, pleasantries combined with an overview of matters to be addressed in more detail later. While the November 15 meeting contained an element of this, it also proved unusually substantive. Several times President Carter stressed that he not only appreciated America's "special relationship" with Iran but wished to find ways to strengthen it further, a tacit sign that the shah would hear few concerns from the new administration over Iran's human rights record or profligate arms purchases. For his part, the Iranian king repeated a promise not to seek an increase in oil prices at the upcoming meeting of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), welcome news from the man who'd long been the chief agent of such hikes.

Throughout the ninety-minute meeting, Gary Sick was struck by the shah's commanding manner. "On our side of the table, there was a lot of informal discussion back-and-forth, but I can't recall the shah even looking at the two guys he was with; they certainly didn't have speaking parts. But this was his element: the planned meeting, the laid-out agenda. I found him very impressive, just thoroughly prepared on whatever topic came up."

Despite the wariness with which the shah had approached this state visit and the chaos accompanying his arrival, it quickly became evident that he and Carter enjoyed a personal rapport, so much so that by the time he and the *shahbanou* left Washington the following afternoon, the king was in an ebullient mood. To an American diplomat he remarked that the visit could not possibly have gone better, while to a palace advisor he allowed that it was one of the most fruitful trips he had ever made to the American capital. Back in Iran, the state-controlled media carried banner headlines extolling the King of Kings' triumphant foray abroad, while the consensus in Carter's White House was that the two days of meetings had been a tremendous success, a further strengthening of the long-standing American-Iranian alliance.

Yet the occasion posed a couple of troubling questions should anyone have chosen to take notice. The violent demonstrations of November 15 had

left well over a hundred injured, including twenty-nine policemen, making it the worst day of civil unrest in the nation's capital in nearly a decade. Fistfights between the warring factions had extended even into the city's emergency rooms, requiring hospital security guards to segregate pro- and anti-shah demonstrators awaiting medical treatment. Many of the estimated four thousand Iranian students who had come to Washington to denounce the shah were drawn from their nation's middle and upper classes, and if this was the outlook of those who had most greatly benefited from his rule, what might it say about those inside Iran who lacked such privilege? And while most of the anti-shah demonstrators identified as leftists, they had been joined by members of several conservative Muslim religious groups, so that interspersed with the placards decrying the monarch as a right-wing fascist and American lackey were others accusing him of betraying Islam. Some of those in this latter category carried placards bearing the likeness of one of the shah's bitterest critics, an aging cleric virtually unknown outside Iran named Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. When was the last time that Washington, or any nation's capital, saw secular leftists and religious fundamentalists march together in common cause?

But no one did take notice—at least no one in a position to do something about it. Instead, no sooner had the shah departed Washington than White House aides set to planning President Carter's reciprocal visit to Iran, scheduled for a mere six weeks later, the better to capitalize on the progress being made. At this second meeting, Carter repeated the praise he had showered on the king at the White House, noting that "thanks to the leadership of the shah, Iran is an island of stability in a troubled region."

Once again, it was almost as if some psychological starting gun had been fired, for within days of Carter's fulsome tribute there occurred inside Iran the first significant anti-shah protests in over a decade. Initially, these demonstrations were small and easily scattered, but within a few weeks they had metastasized and turned violent. Still, few took notice. By the spring of 1978, protesters had taken to the streets of almost every Iranian town of any size, their cause now imbued with a distinctly religious tilt, but it was only

then, six months after his likeness had appeared on demonstrators' posters in Washington, that *The New York Times* thought to identify the shah's chief nemesis, Ruhollah Khomeini, for the first time while managing to get his first name wrong. But still it got worse, and still very few grasped the extent. By that December, with Iran paralyzed by strikes and sliding toward civil war, the death toll from its street battles now reaching into the thousands—into the tens of thousands, according to the opposition—President Carter could still profess full confidence in the shah's ability to right the situation and persevere. And then, just weeks later, the once unimaginable: After thirty-seven years, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, King of Kings, Light of the Aryans, Shadow of God on Earth, was simply no more, cast into a wandering exile as his regime was engulfed by a revolution few saw coming and none knew how to stop.

Earlier in my teen years, I'd spent some six weeks traveling through Iran with my father, part of an extended father-and-son road trip through the Middle East and central Asia. That experience, joined to my gadfly presence at the Washington demonstrations in November 1977, led me to take an intense interest in the drama that unfolded in Iran over that year of revolution. I think my fascination was heightened by an element of disbelief. I shared the amazement, expressed by others far more knowledgeable about such things, that a sophisticated police state appeared utterly incapable of restoring order despite all the instruments of repression at its disposal, that as a sign of protest the women of one of the most Westernized nations in the Middle East would willingly return to the veil discarded by their grandmothers half a century before. Like so many others, I never thought the future of the Pahlavi dynasty was truly in doubt until suddenly it was, never imagined that a royal lineage purporting to date back twenty-five hundred years would simply crumble until suddenly it did. And I certainly never suspected the Iranian Revolution would take on the profound significance that it has, that its legacy would mark it as one of the most important political developments of the modern age.

If at first glance this seems a tad hyperbolic, consider what that revolution has wrought.

In the forty-six years since its success, the Western and Islamic worlds have engaged in what many on both sides regard as an existential confrontation, one marked by revanchist religious fundamentalism and state-sponsored terrorism on one side and by paranoia and ultranationalist bigotry on the other. It has colored almost every political and economic development in the Middle East during that time, a gamut that spans everything from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to international trade and energy policy.

While the effects of the revolution have obviously been most profoundly felt within Iran itself, they have been only slightly less so in the United States. The collapse of the Iranian monarchy brought an abrupt end to one of the most important economic and military alliances the United States had established anywhere in the world. Its aftershocks led to the fall of an American president and the advent of a new administration intent on re-exerting American influence abroad through massive rearmament and the sponsorship of proxy wars. The radically altered Middle Eastern chessboard created by the revolution has led directly to some of America's greatest missteps in the region over the past four decades—to name but two, the 1983 intervention in Beirut that left nearly three hundred American servicemen dead and the early embrace of Iraq's despotic Saddam Hussein—and it has been a crucial contributing factor in most others: the disastrous 2003 American invasion of Iraq, its ham-fisted approach to the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS. Today, the specter of revolutionary Iran continues to drive American foreign policy in such disparate corners of the Middle East as Lebanon and Yemen and Israel; remains a point of division between Washington and its European allies in how best to deal with Iran's ongoing and highly contentious nuclear energy program; and poses a chief complicating factor in Western efforts to aid Ukraine in its fight against Russian invaders.

On a personal level, the effect of the Iranian Revolution on my own journalistic career has been everywhere evident. In my nearly four decades of covering conflicts around the world, one crucial feature animating much of the violence has been a spike in religious militancy. This term is not, as some would have it, synonymous with Islamic militancy. In Sri Lanka in the mid-1980s it was ultranationalist Buddhist monks who promoted a war against the nation's Hindu minority. In the Balkans in the 1990s, it was Serbian Christians who launched an ethnic cleansing campaign against Bosnian Muslims, and in Israel it was the extremism of Jewish settlers that helped spark a Palestinian uprising. As these words are written, attacks by Hindu militants on the Muslim minority threaten to carry regions of India into open conflict, while in Russia, Orthodox Christian priests stand in church pulpits to bless Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine as holy war. Nor can Americans find comfort in dismissing such religiously justified violence as the province of "the other." In the United States, white Christian nationalists are responsible for a string of mass shootings that have left scores dead, and were in the vanguard of the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

None of this can be directly attributed to the Iranian Revolution, obviously, but the groundswell of Islamic protest that swept the shah from power in 1979 marked the modern world's first successful religious counterrevolution against the forces of secularism, the beginning of an international resurgence of sectarianism that continues to reverberate today. Indeed, if one were to make a list of that small handful of revolutions that spurred change on a truly global scale in the modern era, that caused a paradigm shift in the way the world works, to the American, French and Russian Revolutions might be added the Iranian.

Yet for all its importance, the Iranian upheaval is also marked by a curious paradox: The closer one examines it, the more mysterious and implausible it all seems.

One of the great conceits of history writing is promulgating theories of cause and effect, of suggesting that one thing happened because of

something else that happened before. In this way, for example, it can be posited that the root cause of World War II was the crippling peace terms imposed on Germany at the end of World War I, or the global misery brought on by the Great Depression, or the tectonic shifts of empire and colonialism. The study of history then becomes a weighing of these different explanations, a debate over which cause produced the greatest effect. One by-product of this measuring process is that a quality of inevitability tends to take hold, the sense that however one chooses to weigh the competing factors, the end result—in this example, World War II—was all but bound to occur.

Yet the more one delves into the mechanics of the Iranian Revolution, the less this construct appears to hold. To the contrary, one is apt to be struck by its seeming haphazardness, the notion that, far from any kind of inevitability, if events had played out just a little differently, if certain decisions had been made sooner or more forcefully, the outcome might have been completely altered.

On the eve of the shah's 1977 state visit to Washington, which also means on the eve of the revolution that would destroy him, a highly classified CIA analysis concluded that his hold on power was so absolute that he would continue to rule Iran for many years to come. That conclusion is obviously risible in light of what came, yet at the time it would have seemed the height of foolishness to suggest otherwise.

On the international level, the King of Kings enjoyed the unwavering support of the United States, but he had also forged a close enough relationship with his superpower neighbor, the Soviet Union, to ensure there would be no Kremlin destabilization efforts against his throne. He did have his regional rivals, notably the Baathist regime in Iraq and radicals like Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, but the Iranian military, the fifth largest in the world and equipped with the most sophisticated weaponry obtainable, dwarfed those of all the Arab nations in the Middle East combined. The shah also had close, if discreet, ties with the other principal military power broker in the region, Israel. If it hinged on the actions of the outside world, a safe-

seeming bet in 1977 would have been that the twenty-five-hundred-year reign of the Iranian monarchy might last a thousand more.

There looked to be even less reason for concern on the domestic front. Over the span of the shah's rule, per capita income had increased a phenomenal twenty times over, the literacy rate had quintupled, and the average lifespan of an Iranian had more than doubled from twenty-seven to fifty-six. During his reign, half a million Iranians had obtained college degrees abroad, while the network of universities within Iran ranked among the finest in the region. Socially, women enjoyed greater freedoms than almost anywhere else in the Islamic world and filled a number of important —if still mostly second-tier—government positions, while the special protections given Iran's ethnic and religious minorities, its Jews and Armenians and Assyrians, ensured these groups were among the shah's greatest defenders. To be sure, there were fissures. There were gross disparities between rich and poor, between urban and rural, and corruption was an endemic problem. The majority of citizens, and especially the deluge of young men who had recently left the countryside for the cities, led grinding lives of low-wage labor with little hope of advancement. Even so, very few Iranians could honestly look to their situation in 1977 and argue they were worse off than before Mohammad Reza Pahlavi came to the throne.

Which wasn't to say the shah didn't have domestic opponents. He surely did, but he also appeared well on his way to muzzling or mollifying them to the point of near oblivion. The indigenous communist party had long since been crushed, with just a few dead-enders carrying on the struggle through underground guerrilla groups—of no serious threat to the regime, but useful for the shah to invoke whenever his American benefactors balked at one of his more extravagant weapons requests. Conservative clerics had always chafed against his modernization efforts, especially his empowerment of women and his open embrace of Western culture, but the monarch had adopted a policy of casting his most implacable religious opponents into exile while operating a patronage system that kept the rest of the clerical

hierarchy quiescent, if not exactly happy. On a darker note, over the previous twenty years, his secret police, SAVAK, had cultivated such a pervasive informant network across the nation that it would seem all but impossible for a serious antigovernment movement to develop at any level of society without their knowledge. Even from the standpoint of personal protection, the shah appeared untouchable. Whereas an American president was guarded by a security detail of Secret Service agents numbering a few dozen at any given time, the King of Kings had a personal bodyguard of thousands of soldiers, the Javidans, or Immortals, who took an oath to die in his defense. If anything, the 1977 CIA briefing book describing his grip on power seemed almost to undersell.

And something else rather peculiar about the Iranian Revolution: This sanguine view of the shah's future was shared by virtually everyone, including his enemies. In almost all successful revolutions, there are those true believers who are confident of victory from the outset—or at least so they claim after the fact—but such believers were in exceedingly short supply in Iran. Of the many former revolutionaries I've spoken with, nearly all expected their insurrection to end with some kind of compromise measure—a coalition civilian government; a continuing monarchy but with vastly reduced powers—until very late in the contest. None professed to have foreseen the actual outcome until shortly before it occurred.

This was also the experience of Michael Metrinko, a foreign service officer who spent eight years in Iran, including fourteen months as one of the American embassy hostages. In the mid-1980s, Metrinko met with a conservative Iranian cleric who had been one of Ayatollah Khomeini's closest confidants during the revolution. Metrinko questioned the man on the strategies the Islamists had employed to overthrow the shah, the rationale behind one course of action or another, but found his answers consistently wanting. Picking up on Metrinko's frustration, the cleric finally asked, "Michael, do you think we actually *planned* to have a revolution? We were just as surprised as anyone."