

## About the Author

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## Key Points

- ◆ Iran's experience in 1978–1979 and after highlights key factors that could shape the outcome of the political struggles defining the Arab spring of 2011: the quality of regime leadership; the nature of civil-military relations; the training, equipment, employment, and cohesion of regime security forces; and the extent of foreign support.
- ◆ The Shah's military was the main pillar of his rule but failed to quash the Islamic Revolution in 1978–1979. Reasons include the Shah's weak leadership, a military incapable of acting coherently to counter opposition demonstrations and propaganda, and the Shah's belief that the United States no longer supported him.
- ◆ The leadership of the Islamic Republic has avoided repeating the many mistakes of the Shah. It has acted resolutely, created specialized security forces and employed them effectively, calibrated the use of force to prevent escalating violence, and cowed much of the opposition through a campaign of intimidation.

## Iran's Islamic Revolution: Lessons for the Arab Spring of 2011?

by Michael Eisenstadt

The Islamic Revolution surprised senior U.S. policymakers as well as the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. On the eve of revolution, Iran—a key U.S. ally—seemed relatively stable despite bouts of urban terrorism in the early and mid-1970s. At the first signs of escalating unrest in early 1978, neither Iranian nor U.S. officials considered the possibility that Iran's armed forces, the largest and most modern in the region (next to those of Israel), would prove unable to deal with whatever trouble lay ahead. The fall of the Shah a year later, therefore, raised searching questions regarding the role of the armed forces during the crisis and its failure to quash the revolution. The recent emergence of popular protest movements that have overthrown authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt—and that are challenging similar regimes in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria—has revived memories of the Shah and his fall. These developments have again raised questions regarding the role of armed forces during revolutions and whether Iran's experience during the Islamic Revolution and after holds relevant lessons for current developments in the Middle East.

### The Shah and Armed Forces

Both the Shah and his father, Reza Shah, owed their positions and survival to the armed forces.<sup>1</sup> Reza Shah came to power in a 1921 coup that eventually toppled the Qajar dynasty that had ruled Iran for more than a century. In 1941, British and Soviet armies occupied Iran and forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza. The new Shah also owed his political survival to a 1953 coup engineered by the United States