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To the Tehran Airport

Since its explosion in late 1978 the Iranian Revolution has raised a storm of controversy over the question of Islam. Western commentators have probed the intricacies of Shi'ite doctrine, the vagaries of the "Muslim mind", the alarming possibility of an "Islamic Revival." Perhaps because the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini was so unexpected and his popular appeal so great, most observers have seen the Revolution as peculiarly religious; fewer commentators have chosen to interpret recent events in Iran as specifically revolutionary, that is, involving the overthrow of an established government by a mass movement committed to the political and social transformation of Iran. The future of an Islamic Revival is, after all, uncharted territory, while past revolutions have been studied and their examples might shed light on the prospects of the still undecided Iranian case.

Would it be far-fetched to compare the Iranian Revolution, with, say, the Russian Revolution? At first glance these two cases seem to share a number of striking parallels. Both Russia and Iran were multi-ethnic empires with imposing imperial bureaucracies and strong but subservient landlord classes. Before the deluge both governments attempted ambitious land reform programs designed to break up essentially communal agrarian structures and introduce capitalism into the countryside. In the decades preceding each revolution, both countries enjoyed high rates of economic growth which led to the emergence of a sizeable industrial proletariat. Even the actual events of the

two revolutions exhibit suggestive similarities. In both, the fall of the monarchy was followed by the brief and ineffectual rule of a liberal democratic government. And in each case the collapse of the army and the power of the proletariat played important roles in shaping the course of events.

But these similarities should not obscure critical differences. The contribution of the peasantry to the two revolutions provides one such contrast. While the Russian Revolution was preceded by sporadic but recurrent rural rebellion, the Iranian peasantry remained curiously quiescent before the revolution. Widespread upheaval in the countryside after 1917 gave the Russian Revolution as a whole an irreversible momentum and confronted the Soviet leadership with urgent and difficult choices. An analagous situation does not seem to be taking shape in today's Iran, although one should not ignore the wave of spontaneous expropriations of large rural estates which has occurred ^{over} ~~in~~ the past year in the country.

At least one crucial factor will prevent the Iranian Revolution from taking the road its Russian antecedent paved with such vengeance and sacrifice. The existence of readily available oil revenues, a state resource ^{much} ~~is~~ abused by the late Shah, will save Iran from the kind of economic destitution that provoked the harsh measures adopted by Joseph Stalin. But in the years ahead Iranians may well face hardships of the kind which confronted the Russian people after 1917. Military intrusions by foreign armies, commodity scarcities and run-away inflation, a growing power struggle between competing groups of the Iranian leadership--there is a danger that this familiar scenario will

lead an emerging elite to sacrifice, in the name of order and prosperity, the very real popular gains made in the course of the struggle. Already, a revolution dedicated to the overthrow of the oppressively intrusive regime of the Shah has nationalized numerous banks and private enterprises and has also imposed price and commodity supply controls.

Political leadership, organization and ideology are of course crucial factors to consider when analyzing the character and possible outcome of any revolution. It is here that the Iranian Revolution offers the most obvious contrasts to its Russian antecedent. No doubt Shi'ite Islam, and those Iranian statesmen who look to it for political inspiration, will insure for this revolution a truly Iranian destiny. One keen observer has noted the seniority of the Iranian leadership which represents a radical departure from the "young Turks" and junior officers who have dominated coup d'etats and revolutions in other Third World countries. It is suggested that if the Iranian people look to a group of aged clerics for political guidance, it is because they yearn for a return to a happier, more pious past. Pressed by difficult and very immediate challenges, will Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors recreate a by-gone era or will they instead forge a brave new future?